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I Corinthians 6.12-20 RCL

Spiritual Symbiosis

When I was first learning to be a Christian, all those years ago (no, wait, I'm still very much in a learning mode!) – when I was a new Christian, I was more than little puzzled by the Christian concept of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Reared with our standard American individualism, I thought of myself as my own person, dwelling in splendid isolation, emerging at my own volition to be a part of whatever community I was in. You know the I-am-master-of-my-fate-I-am-the-captain-of-my-soul illusion.

How strange was the idea that my life was not my own, that I was not alone in the deep recesses of my soul, that the Spirit of God lived with me and within me.

In biology, that is called symbiosis, that is, the intimate living together of two kinds of organisms, especially if such association is of mutual advantage. There are strange and exotic examples of symbiosis throughout our magnificent world, but we human beings are also a part of several symbiotic relationships; several microbes live in the human gut and make possible the digestion of foods not otherwise available to us. In return, the microbes get a safe, hospitable place to live and flourish. Both organisms benefit from the relationship. It took awhile for me to get used to that idea in biology class. It took even longer to get used to in a theological sense: God lived within me in a symbiotic relationship. Wow!

Actually, there was more and worse to come. For there is a type of symbiosis in which only one organism benefits and the other is either unchanged or is wounded in some way by the relationship. That is called parasitism, like mistletoe growing on oak trees. It gradually occurred to me that when God lives within me, God gets no benefit from the association; after all, what can I, finite creature that I am, give to an infinitely wise, infinitely powerful Creator? I get all the benefit. Chillingly, according to definition, that makes me a spiritual parasite. Yuck! Talk about a humbling idea! One might even say that the entire universe is a parasite in relationship to God, since creation gets all the benefit and the Creator, being perfect, gets nothing in return. Truly humbling.

But then the life of the spirit is about love, not biology. When people love one another, within families or churches or nations or communities of other sorts, when people love one another, we do not count the cost and make adverse comparisons. We feel enriched when we love, whether or not that love is completely equal on all parts. Our most heroic

stories come out of relationships of love, and true lovers do not count the cost, do not tally up tit for tat; see First Corinthians chapter thirteen for a compelling description of what true love is all about. So, when love enters the equation, it tends to throw ideas of justice out the window; what is loving is not always what is fair. Love unbalances the equations of justice. Like most human beings, I am quite accepting of a relationship unbalanced in my favor.

So, then, we can re-visit Saint Paul's ideas in today's reading from First Corinthians: "... Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body." (6.19) We have to discipline ourselves to get over the idea that we are our own masters, that what I do is my own business and no one else's. I am not alone, says Saint Paul. God's Spirit, in a completely non-coercive, non-invasive way, lives with me and within me. God's Spirit living within me is a constant invitation to greater life, the life that God lives within Herself. But if God's indwelling in you and me is not coercive, it is certainly real. What I do, God does, in some sort of mystical fashion. That is why Paul speaks so strongly about sexual sins, but it is no less true in a more general sense. If I ignore my friend's need, I make God a party to my indifference. If I strike another, either physically or verbally, I make God a party to my anger. No less is it true when I do the good stuff, the things I am proud of. When I love someone, God loves along with me. When I sacrifice for another, God is sacrificing as well. What God did in Jesus is once again incarnated in human life. Isn't that a marvelous way to go about living our threescore years and ten? A bit scary, I admit, but glorious, nonetheless.

It's certainly a sobering thought that we have to be careful not to get too spiritual in our spiritual life. That is, our body is part of our spirituality and what we do with it, for good or ill, is an important part of who we are. Christian theology has a great respect for the unity of body and soul, for the person that is beautifully and complexly made. Not only our minds and spirits, but our bodies of hormones and tissues are what God values, what God saves, what God brings into eternal life with Himself.

That is part of the message of Jesus. The incarnation of divinity into humanity in Jesus in Bethlehem is not just a sentimental story or an abstract, dry construct of the theologians. It is the powerful reality that God is in Christ re-making the world (2 Corinthians 5.19). In Jesus Christ, God takes humanity out of the bleachers and puts us on the playing field. We are not spectators but players in the important energies of the universe. What we do with what seems our ordinary life is part of what God is doing in re-making the world. What we do with our day is of infinite importance, because the results of our activity will live in those persons we touch, and each and every one of us will live everlastingly. Nothing we do is unimportant; everything we do has implications. In a sense, that is a bit scary, but from another perspective is it magnificent and glorious. Has anyone ever really told you that you are that important, that significant, that powerful in changing the world? Me neither. But God says that to us in Jesus and in the way

that She gives Himself to us at the very foundation of our souls. “...Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...”

How then should we live? It seems to me carefully, joyously, thoughtfully, hopefully, lovingly. For we are of immense importance in what God is doing in the world. God lives with us in the very foundation of our souls and bodies just as surely as God lives in Jesus and in the Persons of the Holy Trinity. That is what is so important about the symbiosis of God living with us and within us. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you.