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RCL

The Foundation of Loving-Kindness

I went to college at a Jesuit university in Seattle in the early 1960s. I had the benefit of four years of strict intellectual training. The Society of Jesus, to give the Jesuits their formal name, has for centuries treasured a tradition of rigorous intellectual pursuit, as well as deep training in the ways of the spirit. That is how they train the members of their respected order, and that is how they educate the young men and women committed to their care for their education. One of the things I treasure from this education is a fearless questioning of all things, including matters of faith. Jesuits taught us that God was the God of both faith and the mind, and that God had nothing to fear from the mind's inquiry into all things. In fact, God rejoices when Her children exercise their intellectual abilities, as well as other talents that are seated in that mysterious organ, our brain. Art, music, invention, games, science, technology, psychology, family life, love, and much, much more – all are fields of play laid out for the exercise of human abilities.

With all their respect for the mind and intellect, the Jesuits also taught us one of the most important intellectual elements, the limits of the rational. There is more to reality than pure reason can explore. The horizons of reality extend beyond the field of vision, the depths and heights of reality invite us to a never-ending exploration. Jesuits taught us that there is mystery in the universe, not the mystery of what-has-not-yet-been-discovered but rather the mystery of what-underlies-it-all. It is not the mystery of how stars are born, storms rage, lightning is generated, hormones regulate, dinosaurs lived, cancer is cured, evolution makes new life from old. All of this type of unknown we will come to know. The ultimate mysteries, which will engage us for all eternity in an ever-widening perimeter, are why and who. Why is there what is there? Who is responsible for what is there? Even the atheist is engaged in these questions, for he replies that there is no why and there is no who; all is accident. The believer replies that there certainly is a who and therefore there is a why. Both the believer and the non-believer start with statements of faith. The non-believer is confined to the magnificence of this universe of space and time, which will end in the death of universal entropy. The believer includes the universe into a larger picture, a picture which engages our attention beyond the material into the spiritual.

I suppose I have been thinking of my education and its consequences as I near the end of the full-time calling that it prepared me for. As you might guess, reflection and evaluation are part of my inner landscape now. What has it all meant? What does it all still mean?

This sort of reflection led me to focus on a phrase out of this week's collect, or prayer for this Sunday: the sure foundation of your loving-kindness. Though I am no Hebrew scholar, I do know that loving-kindness translates a word that runs through the Old Testament, *hesed*. *Hesed* could be defined as the consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly-pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained, furious love of our God. It is the basis for healthy Jewish and

Christian spirituality alike. It certainly is the basis for my own spirituality, as I have become conscious of it throughout the years. I have usually called it love, but *hesed* and loving-kindness work, too.

The foundation of your loving-kindness. This phrase led to the question (ah, here is that Jesuit training!): what is the foundation of my spirituality? That is a good question for each of us. And it is a question that we should ask ourselves throughout life. The answer changes as we grow older and grow spiritually, or at least it should. Sometimes, when I talk with people, I discover that their answer to this question hasn't changed since they were six or ten or fourteen – not a good orientation for an adult.

My answer to that question now is *hesed*, the loving-kindness of God, a good, solid, biblical concept. Let me share with you a few foundational Bible passages that undergird my sense of *hesed*:

One of them is from the Old Testament book of *Job*, from which our Old Testament reading today is a partial rendering. Job has questioned God's purposes for 37 chapters. God finally answers in chapters 38 through 41, asking sarcastically for Job to explain the wonders of the world, wonders which God has created. God confronts Job with the mystery of what-Job-does-not-know. Job jumps to the larger issue of who-and-why-he-doesn't-know (42.1-6): "I'm convinced. You can do anything and everything. Nothing and no one can upset your plans.... I admit I once lived by rumors of you; now I have it all firsthand – from my own eyes and ears!" (*The Message* paraphrase.) Job is forced from his prickly, arrogant demand that God conform to Job's ideas of right to the much more comfortable humility of knowing that God will always be beyond our complete knowing. I get the same sense of humble wonder when I read the Old Testament creation narrative in *Genesis 1 - 3*. That sense of humble wonder is reinforced by the New Testament creation narrative in *John 1.1-18*: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... All things came into being through him,...The light shines in the darkness..."

Another one of my foundational understandings of God is best expressed in the New Testament book of *First John*: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." (4.16) Whatever is going on in my life, or in others' lives, or in scripture, the guideline that I employ is God's unchangeable love for all of us.

Another foundational understanding is this, from John's creation narrative: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,..." (1.1, 14) Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God into creation creates an intimacy with God. God is one of us, understands us, loves us, in order that we might become more like God, more like life, more like light, more like holiness, more like love. Jesus is the glue that binds us to God.

Another understanding is that God gives us work to do and the means to accomplish it. Jesus Himself said, "...the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father (John 14.12). Saint Paul added this coda, "My grace is sufficient for you..." (2 Corinthians 12.9) We have work to do. Our lives and our deeds are important. We have help, the very power of God Himself (grace).

And perhaps finally, there is this, a culmination for all that we are doing and living. From the New Testament book of *Revelation* we hear this: "And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'" (21.5) "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for these first things have passed away.'" (21.1-4) What we are living in and through has a purpose beyond ourselves. It comes to a holy climax that incorporates us into God's eternal joy. It's hard for us to understand and accept. I suppose in a sense we are right back with Job in that. But God's answer to us is unwavering: You are my beloved children and in you I am well pleased.

We've come a long way from my college days, haven't we. But you see how a solid spiritual foundation comes from the kind of questioning that my Jesuit tutors taught me. God is always pleased with the exploration of His children. May your questioning and exploring be similarly blessed.