

Compunction, Unction, What's Your Function

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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4th Sunday in Lent - March 14, 2010

I.

One of the primary challenges of our Lenten series has been to wonder what, if any, relevance, the writings of the mystics have for us. Our first three mystics - Origen of Alexandria, Evagrius Ponticus, and John Cassian - dedicated the whole of their life to pursuing the presence of God. Keep in mind, they were not married. They did not have to worry about commutes, computers, or colonoscopies. Their life was their work and their work was their life, the goal of which was, if not *union* with God, deep communion with God. Much of their time was spent in solitude, not in committee meetings. Much of their energy was directed toward ascetic practices, not a low-carb diet, but fasts that lasted days and weeks. Much of their concentration was directed inward, not toward the television or laptop screen. Given the vastly different culture and context in which *they* lived, what wisdom can we modern mystics, glean from their thick, often obtuse, and sometimes salient writings?

Last week, we learned that John Cassian thought that significant spirituality could *only* be arrived at by those who give up the worldly life and dedicate themselves to a life of solitude and prayer. If he was right, then we're only kidding ourselves by reading Cassian or any of the other mystics.

Enter Gregory the Great. He served as pope from 590 to 604. He was the first pope to have come from a monastic background. His hero was Benedict of Nursia, who wrote the Rule of Benedict, the most influential guide describing the rhythm of life in a monastic community. Gregory the Great was also known as Pope Gregory I. His pontificate was stressful, to say the least. He led the church at a time when the Roman Empire was failing. According to Dr. Bernard McGinn, it was a time during which "civilization... was in ruins." Wars raged and life was insecure. There was a serious question as to whether the church would survive the demise of the society of which it was a part.

In that context of chaos, Gregory described the need to cultivate “inner silence.” This can be done, he said, through a process of self-examination that involves what he described as “brushing away the flies of distraction from the mind.” He described this as “call[ing] the self back to the self.” Lest we romanticize this process as a simple “getting in touch with yourself,” Gregory described the process of self-examination as extremely difficult and painful.

It seems to me that we modern mystics have a friend in Gregory. That is, he had lived the monastic, mystical, contemplative life, so he had tasted the sweetness of a life directed solely toward God. But having moved into a vocation of extreme uncertainty and anxiety, he insisted that an “inner silence” was possible for the one who took time to cultivate it. While those of us concerned with the cares and stresses of full and busy lives may not be able to nurture a life of *constant* awareness of God’s presence, if we regularly take time to clear away the flies of distraction, to call the self back to the self, we will experience what Gregory calls “chinks and flashes” of God’s presence. Like two flints creating a spark, God’s presence flashes in the quiet darkness of our interior self, if we have the courage to visit it.

The truth is that we modern people spend a lot of time seeking distraction rather than avoiding it. Consider how much of your day is spent with the distractions of the computer, the cell phone, the television, the radio, people around you talking talking talking, books and magazines and other images. Our culture, it would seem, is so afraid of the interior self that we fill every waking hour with soundbites and images in an attempt to avoid the inevitable - the truth that at the center of our existence is nothingness. And that nothingness is either the nothingness of oblivion or the nothingness of God, who is, in fact, no thing at all.

II.

One of the most significant and abiding of Gregory the Great’s mystical notions was that of “compunction.” When I first heard this term, I couldn’t help but think of the Schoolhouse Rock song and came up with the title to this sermon: “Compunction, Unction, What’s Your Function?”

Compunction, as in punction or puncture, that is, being pierced. He draws the concept from the Book of Acts, chapter 2, verse 37. Those who hear Peter's impassioned sermon are "pierced to the heart." Of compunction, Gregory writes, "the soul thirsting for God is first pierced with fear and later with love."

I imagine that many of you are like me in that we don't willingly equate fear with something spiritually positive. The "fear of God," we are quick to point out, is better translated as being in awe of God. But I wonder whether we're being completely honest with ourselves. I mean, if I really look at my relationship with God, I would have to describe it as often conflicted. That is, the sense of God's presence in my life is rarely as strong or positive as I would like it to be. And I say this because I've had moments of spiritual rapture and ecstasy, moments where I could feel God's breath on my face and God's pure love in my heart. Once, while walking in Monument Valley Park, I sensed God's love for every particle and I felt like I could see with God's eyes, delighting in every blade of grass, every particle of dust, and I said out loud, "My God, this is how you see all things at every moment!"

But mostly, I'm not in that space, and the dark, empty quietness of my soul is something I am too afraid to face. I'd much rather listen to NPR or crank up Green Day on my iPod or watch 30 Rock or linger too long over email. Did I mention I got a new Blackberry a month ago?!? Centuries before the blackberry was something other than a sweet forest fruit, Gregory wrote: "My unhappy intellectual soul, pierced with the wound of its own distraction, remembers how it used to be in the monastery... when all time's fleeting objects were beneath it because it rose high above everything temporal."

III.

In the familiar Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother, we hear an example of Gregory's companion notions of the compunction of fear and the compunction of love. I think it's fair to interpret both of the brothers as beset with distraction. The younger son was distracted by profligate visions of beaches, bikinis, and bong hits. The elder son was distracted by expectations, by doing everything that a good son should.

Living out his particular version of a distracted life, the younger son eventually runs out of money. And, unfortunately for him, this happens at the worst possible time. The national economy is in recession. There are record job losses and he is forced to work as a parking lot attendant. After taxes and health insurance premiums, he has no cash left even to feed himself. He is destitute. The compunction of fear comes in verse 17, which reads, “he came to himself.” This is a moment of spiritual awakening.

I know some of you may disagree. He didn't come to himself as a result of spiritual intention, you would argue. This was about self-preservation. He was afraid of starving to death. But does it matter what brings us to the point of compunction? Don't our own distractions eventually lead to desperation? Isn't burnout a poignant reminder of our own helplessness? Isn't depression a spiritual state? Isn't television a liturgy of longing upon which we project our own need for lives that tell a meaningful story? Isn't constant fiddling with a Blackberry or iPhone in fact a way to mimic our soul's longing to pray without ceasing. All of these activities are not *other* than spirituality, they are spiritual information that can eventually cause you to “come to yourself” and realize that what you really need you can't give to yourself. Better sooner than later, but most of us would just assume wait until we're longing for pigslop to wonder if there is a banquet waiting for us somewhere.

The younger son, experiencing this compunction of fear, brought about by his own actions in concert with the circumstances around him, is led to return home. It's not a moment with a lot of honor, and returning to God rarely is. That's why we must cultivate a practice of confession, that is, a regular practice of honest disclosure to ourselves and to God that, yet again, we have fallen short of whom we are called to be. Verse 20 reads, “So he set off and went to his father.” I read this line as the moment of repentance and confession. The compunction of fear leads to an acknowledgement of our dependence upon God. Apart from God, we are lower than pigs. We wish we were as lucky as pigs.

But what happens if we return home to God? What happened when the prodigal returned? His father caught sight of him still far off. The father must have been scanning the horizon all these days. Recognizing his son's familiar gait, with far less swagger now than when he left, the father

takes off at a dead sprint, finding strength in his legs he has not known in years. The son starts to rattle off his rehearsed confessional line: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and affronted you...” But he is interrupted by a euphoric father, out of breath from running, flinging out his arms and causing them both to collapse in the road, covering his son with an abandon of kisses.

The compunction of love. A gift from God who, like a father *or* a mother, longs for our return with a desire more passionate than our desire to return in the first place.

And the elder brother? What will come of his life, distracted as it is by duties and doing the right thing? We don’t know. He witnesses the compunction of love experienced by his younger brother, but he resents it, perhaps because he himself has not yet experienced the compunction of fear. Will he? We don’t know. Maybe his anger will be the spiritual prompt that will cause him to “come to himself” or maybe he’ll spend the rest of his life trying to do the right thing.

IV.

I know these mystics can be heavy, so, inspired by Gregory’s compunction, I need your help to bring this sermon on home.

Compunction, Unction, what’s your function?

Seeking out sinners and makin’ em function.

Compunction, Unction, what’s your function?

Pope Gregory’s great ‘cause he’s pullin’ no punches

Compunction, Unction, what’s your function?

Says look at yourself and follow your hunches

Compunction, Unction, what’s your function?

Come to yourself, when your life’s a debacle

Compunction, Unction, what’s your function?

Get ready ‘cause here God comes, with a full sprintin’ tackle

Compunction, Unction, what’s your function?

Sweep you off your feet before you know what happened

Compunction, Unction, what's your function?

Come on people, you're...

The elder, the younger,
You're sadder, you're smugger,
No matter your station, our God is your lover,

You think that your life is no matter,
You're wrong though you laugh
'Cause God doesn't make trash

It's time to go back
To the source with remorse
For the ways we waste time
On things less than sublime

So get up off the floor,
Don't treat life like a chore,
Stand up, raise your head,
For once you were dead,

But now you're alive,
And God who is God, only God of the world
Who misses you...
Now kisses you...
Over and over and over again.
Amen.