

Evagrius Ponticus: The Virtue of Apathy

Text: Philippians 3:17-4:1

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I.

Today we continue our Lenten sermon series with the early Christian mystic known as Evagrius Ponticus. The scholarship of Dr. Bernard McGinn will continue to guide us. Evagrius was a well-educated scholar and philosopher who participated at the Second Ecumenical Council in 381. The guy was an up and coming theologian and churchman during a time when the church was becoming more respectable as an institution within the Roman Empire.

At the moment his career was beginning to blossom, he fell in love with the wife of a high official. He tried to control his passions but found himself losing the battle. According to Dr. McGinn: “One night he had a dream in which he was accused in court of a vague crime he had not committed and for which he was going to be punished, and - still dreaming - he swore an oath to leave the city and tend to his soul. Two days later he was on his way to Jerusalem” (*Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Vision of the Spiritual Masters*, p. 42). In Jerusalem, he began to become tempted again. He contracted a serious fever and resolved it was a result of an illness in his soul. Following the advice of his friend, Melania, a wealthy Roman widow who had founded convent, Evagrius went into the Egyptian desert to join “the solitary ones,” monks who had fled the respectable urban centers for a harsh life of solitude, study, and prayer.

In the desert, “Evagrius emerged as a leader among the [] monks” (42). He “learned the desert lessons of humility and silence, and he became known for his life of prayer and heroic ascetical practices.” (43). He was sought after as a person with a loving personality who had the gift of discernment and council. In the years following his premature death at age 55, Evagrius’ followers were persecuted by church authorities as heretics because they followed his teachings on Origen, which included a belief in the eventual salvation of all creation and a belief that Christian practitioners could gain salvation through direct contact with the presence of God without the mediation of the church hierarchy. As Dr. McGinn calls it, a “whiff of heresy” has lingered about Evagrius ever since. My guess is that that whiff has a pleasing scent to many gathered here.

Christian mystics have often had an uneasy history with the central authority of the church. On the one hand, mystics have been regarded as those who take the faith seriously enough to allow their practice to transform the patterns of their livelihood. On the other hand, mystics have claimed to enjoy an intimacy with God’s presence that has threatened the prevailing structures of control.

II.

There are many important aspects to Evagrius' thought. For example, he articulated the eight passionate thoughts that have become known to us as the seven deadly sins. These thoughts or tendencies, Evagrius taught, block the way to God. Evagrius' list included "gluttony, impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, *akedia* (spiritual restlessness), vainglory, and pride." According to Kathleen Norris, in her book *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, later tradition adapted Evagrius' list of passionate thoughts in two major ways.

First, a greater emphasis was placed upon sin. Like a physician of the soul, Evagrius prescribed a practice of prayer or the singing of psalms or other activities to combat and heal the symptoms of these bad thoughts. Later theologians defined these tendencies as sins rather than thoughts. A sin is a symptom of fallen humanity that cannot be cured by anything besides the grace of God and the grace of God can only be finally conveyed through by the action of a priest.

Secondly, sadness and *akedia*, the subject of Norris' book, were dropped from the list, to be replaced by "sloth." Norris' view is that sloth does not fully capture Evagrius' wisdom. Evagrius knew that sadness was not a sin, but that it could be dwelled upon in a way that would separate one from the wholeness that comes from God. Further, Evagrius knew that *akedia* was not merely slothfulness, but spiritual restlessness, the inability to rest assured in the givenness of the present moment. McGinn translates *akedia* as "impatient discouragement or dissatisfaction."

Evagrius outlines the eight passionate thoughts and offers advice on how to overcome them in his work called *Praktikos*, meaning Practice. Perhaps one of his most important and distinctive insights in that book concerns *apatheia*, best translated not as "apathy," as I've done, provocatively, in my sermon title, but as "passionlessness." A line in chapter 81 of *Praktikos* reads: "*Agape* is the progeny of *apatheia*. *Apatheia* is the very flower of *askesis*."

Let's take a moment and try to decipher these Greek terms, beginning with *askesis*. *Askesis* is the word from which we get the English words ascetic, ascetical, and asceticism. According to Evagrius, an ascetic is one who practices Christianity, who cultivates a life of prayer, who contemplates the truth in scripture, and who sits in silent vigil.

For Evagrius, asceticism is the use of "hunger, toil, and solitude... [to] extinguish[] the flames of desire" (ch. 15). Surely, Evagrius practiced a sort of heroic form of ascetical practice. For example, according to Dr. Bernie McGinn, "One striking practice was to stand in a well through a winter's night to combat lustful thoughts." For the most part, an ascetic is one who, through very practical means, gains control over the passionate thoughts that lead away from God, and cultivates virtuous habits that lead toward the love of God and neighbor.

Returning to the line in *Praktikos*: “*Agape* is the progeny of *apatheia*. *Apatheia* is the very flower of *askesis*.” According to Evagrius, the love of God, *agape*, is the goal of the ascetical life. But *agape* is only available to the one who has cultivated *apatheia*, or “passionlessness.” Dr. McGinn describes passionlessness as a state of spiritual and emotional tranquility. When I read about *apatheia*, I am reminded of the Buddhist notion of detachment. In this state, one trains the mind to notice what is without responding out of the passions of the ego. This is an important aspect to what Christians call contemplative prayer: learning to simply notice what is going on in the mind without judging or fixing or seeking distraction. When we have cultivated *apatheia*, or passionlessness, we can fully love in the way that God loves creation, unconditionally and without judgment. This kind of love is called *agape* love.

Hence, returning to chapter 81 of *Praktikos*: “*Agape* is the progeny of *apatheia*. *Apatheia* is the very flower of *askesis*.” Or, turning it around and modernizing it: “Concerted spiritual practice, intent upon cultivating helpful rather than harmful thoughts, grows into a state of mind which is beyond judgment and self-centeredness. This selfless state of mind gives birth to unconditional love.”

III.

During the persecution of his followers as heretics, many of Evagrius’ works were destroyed. I don’t know whether his thoughts on Paul’s letter to the Philippians have been preserved, but it seems to me that passages like our reading today would have formed the scriptural basis of his community. In the closing phrases of the letter, Paul expresses his love for the church and invites them to “join in imitating me.” This phrase can seem audacious and presumptive on first read. Can you imagine a church leader, perhaps one of your pastors, saying, do exactly as I do? What if we were to say, like Paul, “Observe those who live according to the example you have in us”? I’m guessing that wouldn’t go over too well. “Who do you think you are?” you’d say, “Jesus Christ himself?” And you’d be justified in your line of questioning.

But what happens when we read the phrase in a spirit of *apatheia*, that is, without judgment and self-centeredness? When I read it in this way, accepting what is, and groping toward love as the goal, I hear, “Join in imitating me, Paul, a guy you know, a flawed human just like you. I know I may not seem like the best example. I fail every day to love my God and my neighbor as I know I ought, but I keep returning to God, whom I love more than anything. No matter how many times I fail, I do not give up.”

Paul goes on to say, at the point of tears, that there are “many [who] live as enemies of the cross.” He says of them that “their end is their destruction, their god is in their belly, and their glory is their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.” As I read these words, my initial response is defensiveness. The phrase “enemies of the cross” smacks of religious persecutors, inquisitors who judge a person’s loyalty to sectarian doctrine. Then the description of these enemies seems ungracious and self-righteous, especially when followed by these words: “our citizenship is in heaven.”

But what happens when we read these phrases in a spirit of passionless *apatheia*, non-defensively and without assuming threat? When I read it in this way, I hear, “There are those who refuse to believe there is any strength in vulnerability as is evidenced by the cross. Those who justify themselves will never learn what it means to be wrapped in the arms of heaven. All they care about are a carefree lifestyle today and outward appearances. They have no idea there is something more to this life.”

According to Evagrius, cultivating a virtuous apathy, that is, a passionless regard for life as it is given, is the doorway to love. Perhaps this is what is meant in the famous love chapter of I Corinthians, chapter 13, verse 7: “It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Agape love, accessed through passionlessness, cultivated by spiritual practice, regards everything equally as a gift from God.

Finally, I can see Evagrius smiling at the words of Paul, “He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.” Through the lens of Evagrius’ passionlessness, I hear in these words, “God meets us in our bodies, our humble bodies, but not to burden us. Rather, to transform our stiff, sore, and broken bodies into a space where God may be worshiped.”

IV.

As we read about the early Christian mystics, including Origen of Alexandria and Evagrius Ponticus, I am learning that, for them, love is *not* the ultimate goal of the mystical life. There is something even higher than love. For Evagrius, there is an essential knowledge of God, more specifically, knowledge of God as Trinity that is higher than our love for God and higher than our apprehension of God’s love for us.

According to Dr. McGinn, “Evagrius’ equation of pure prayer with essential knowledge of the Trinity is one of the most distinctive contributions of his thought... he is one of the first who made contemplative prayer the essence of the monastic life and thus linked the forces of monasticism and mysticism in a powerful way.” Despite his being declared a heretic, Evagrius was a trinitarian theologian, believing that the Trinity described God in God self. Through contemplative prayer, one could ascend to this pure form of prayer, being drawn into and merging with the Triune God.

As a young man in Roman society, Evagrius had passions he could not control. In the desert, he learned to direct those passions toward a pursuit of God. The practices that worked well, he shared with all who sought him out. While his ascetic life may seem, in some ways bizarre, in Evagrius we have a person whose feet were planted firmly on the ground, giving sage advice and practical wisdom to all who seek to follow the way of God. And we also have a person who was constantly pushing further into spiritual consciousness to behold the glory of God in Godself.

What a thing to contemplate:

That God meets us in Christ’s flesh to transform the meaning of our own flesh,

That God meets us in our desire, even sexual desire, which foreshadows our desire for God,

That God who is truly God is here now, but is never contained in the present.

The God who is truly God is always waiting for us around the next corner of our self-discovery, lying in wait, ready to say “boo” before slipping around the next corner before we can barely catch a glimpse of God’s backside. Amen.