

Luke 15:11-32
March 31, 2019

Found

How does one explain life, what it means to be alive, to be a human being?

It may be explained scientifically, in terms of the biology of things, DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid). Or the chemistry with the elements; the ancient 4, fire, air, water, land; or the more involved periodic chart of 118 elements including carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, gold, silver, uranium, plutonium, iron, and all the rest.

Or it may be explained in terms of physics or math with formulas like $E=mc^2$, or $a^2+b^2=c^2$, $2\pi r$, or countless others, which describe the shapes and movements of things. Or perhaps an economic description with supply and demand and transactions involving dollars and pounds and marks. Life as an exchange.

Philosophy offers reason and interprets life in terms of what makes sense. Or history, with its account of the rise and fall of civilizations, the coming and going of peoples and regimes, the fighting of wars, the nature of technology and production.

All of these and more attempt to explain reality and the human experience of life and partly succeed, but even taken together they leave us asking for more.

The Bible offers another explanation. It says life is a pleasant surprise. Think of what it is like to find

something that has been lost. It may be something small like your keys or your wallet or your glasses; or it may be something big like a job or a friend or a lover. What is it like to find it again?

Reconciliation and Forgiveness

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul speaks at length about “reconciliation.” He says that the meaning of the gospel is that human beings have been reconciled to God. To be estranged from God is like having lost something. To be reconciled is to find it again.

“If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation, the old has passed, the new has come . . . all this is from God.”

Though this particular text doesn’t use the word, “forgiveness,” there is not any way around the reality that forgiveness is implied. If to be forgiven by someone (or to forgive) is not the same as to be reconciled with them, it is very close.

The Prodigal

The story about the Prodigal Son illustrates the same idea. Like Paul’s words about reconciliation, the story does not mention the word “forgiveness.” To interpret this story any other way than to conclude that the father *forgave the son* (or that the older brother refused to forgive), makes an absurdity of it.

In the 15th chapter of Luke's gospel, the narrative moves from the finding of a lost sheep, to the re-discovery of a lost coin, to the restoration of a lost son. The greater the value of what was lost, the greater the joy when it is found.

A man of means had two sons. The younger was rash and irresponsible and demanded his inheritance and then squandered it on reckless living. This Prodigal Son and his brother stands for all the things we do as human beings to negate the great gift of life that we have been given. The truth it reveals is that in one way or another, we all have wasted the gift; perhaps in less dramatic ways, but squandered nonetheless.

The older brother, who was responsible and obedient, but eventually jealous and bitter, also found a way to squander his life away, though in a different way than the younger brother did. It makes no difference whether one wastes a life on recklessness or legalism, by living it as a duty to be performed, the result is the same; one becomes estranged, in need of forgiveness, and reconciliation.

The prodigal story is about the same reconciliation with God Paul talks about. The description here is of a father who was so overjoyed at the return of the son, even before he had heard the speech the son was prepared to offer, that he threw a party. That is what God is like.

The story compels to explore different perspectives on these relationships, what it is like to be the parent or

either one of the brothers, even what it is like to sit as an observer and see it play out from the outside. How can it fail to make us smile, and for a moment, to feel good inside. Forgiveness leads to reconciliation which finds joy.

The whole idea of forgiveness and reconciliation, and the metaphor of finding something lost, is a theological discovery that tells us about two things we might never guess any other way: that God is a forgiving God and that the way to reconciliation is through forgiveness.

Part of what we mean when we say that the bible is true is that we believe it is right about sin and forgiveness, about reconciliation.

Theology

In your mind take these ideas; finding something that had been lost, the restoration of a foundering relationship, forgiveness; and lift them up out of the circumstance in which you experienced them. Raise them up so that you can understand them in the larger sense of how they speak to the question of God. Let them become theology for you. Understand that the claim made for these ideas by Jesus and Paul in these sacred texts is that they explain life, God's nature, in a way that Biology and Physics and Philosophy and History simply do not.

Though human beings are presented as being lost in a variety of ways, they are also found. God is a joyous

and extravagant God, filled with love and compassion, forgiving what has yet to be repented. This description *is* as much a part the nature of things as the chemical make-up of our bodies of the reconstruction of the past.

It does not always seem like grace is in the very nature of things. Please, it never did. Things in the world are not really worse now than before. When people focus their attention on the world as people have made it, the mess that is and continues to be made is very notorious. We see the mess, but the grace must be shown to us.

The revealed explanation of scripture engages us beyond the science and math and economics and history of things. Theology tells us in different terms about the way the world is put together. It says the principle elements are sin and grace, forgiveness and restoration, life and love and faith; and in the end an inexpressible joy. As Buechner wrote, “All’s lost, all’s found.”

All is lost, there is really not other way to see it, yet it is also miraculously true that all is found, to the glory of God.

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