

Jeremiah 18:1-11 Transcendence
Luke 14:25-33
September 4, 2022

Over the summer, I was invited into a discussion group, kind of like a book club. Every month a book is chosen and then there is a meeting to discuss it, right now it is online. The books are theological in nature, having to do with the Christian faith in one way or another.

The book for this month is called, Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World, written by a Bosnian Pentecostal who is now a professor at Yale. He has an interesting biography, having grown up in communist Yugoslavia and experienced the wars in the 1990's that involved religion; Catholic and Orthodox Christians and Muslims all trying to kill each other.

I did not choose the book but I have to admit that I am fascinated by it because the author seems to be on the same, or similar, intellectual journey that I am on, and has reached similar conclusions.

Let me summarize some of what I have read so far, He distinguishes between local and world religions. At the local level, religion is primarily concerned with everyday life, what he calls ordinary human flourishing, with down to earth mundane aspects of life; with prosperity, health, long life, and fertility.

In the larger sense, religions distinguish between transcendent and mundane realms and give primacy to the former. They are concerned with the good that goes beyond ordinary flourishing and contend that attachment to the transcendent realm is the key to ordinary human flourishing.

The modern industrialized globalized world involves a notion of human flourishing in which relation to the transcendent plays no role, its concern is exclusively with the good of ordinary life. You have maybe heard people talking about being "good without God."

The Christian religion proclaims that salvation is the result of God coming down to us and lifting us up (that is Grace). We are not capable of lifting ourselves up (that would be works righteousness). There is a conflict here, between the idea of salvation from below as the result of human effort, and salvation from above, that is the result of God's mercy.

The idea is pervasive that the way to a happy and trouble-free life is to keep everything in order; to get training or an education so one can have a job and make enough money, and then to live within one's means, to do the shopping, the cooking and the cleaning, to eat healthy, sleep soundly, say all the right things to family and friends, pay all the bills on time, be good citizens, play by the rules, etc., and there will be no trouble. In other words, one can earn a trouble-free life.

America is the land of the pragmatic, practical and technology oriented. The whole industrialized world operates on the assumption that a happy life is one without problems, at least without problems that can't be solved. To focus only on the problems that can be solved is to ignore or deny the existence of the one's that can't.

It is all very burdensome. Even the human attempt to make religion a way of earning a joyous and meaningful life, just turns out to be burdensome, and well, pitiful. It is better to keep things ordered, but trouble comes anyway.

You can see where he is going; one of the reasons we need religion is to redeem modern life from its inherent materialism and works righteousness by keeping the focus on the spiritual, the divine, as he puts it, the transcendent.

We find an expression of this idea in the reading from Jeremiah, in which the metaphor of the potter is used. God is pictured as a potter shaping clay, and people, that is, we, are the clay. A meaningful life of peace and joy is found when people allow themselves to be shaped by God's purpose and will, but trouble comes when there is resistance.

God is like a teacher or a coach, helping, encouraging in a way that leads to the finding our truest and best selves. The fulness of our humanity in its best sense and the salvation of our souls is not achieved by our efforts, but is the work of God.

The passage from Luke may not seem like it bears the same message, but in a way it can be seen in the same light. The characteristics of a life well lived do not come from human desires, plans, or achievements; rather, they come from submission to God's will. The text, with its count the cost challenge, asks us if we are ready for that, or are we trying to use God as a way to accomplish *our* vision, *our* purpose, *our* will. That would be like the clay trying to shape the potter.

Life is not a problem to be solved, it is a gift to be received. The right response is gratitude . . . and we can think of other things; obedience, faithfulness, perseverance, and most of all, unselfish love.

Let me offer a prayer as a way of bringing things to a close. It is another John Baillie prayer, I have used them before. I do believe that there are others whose prayers are worth listening to and making our own, and I am sure that sometime I will move on from John Baillie's, [A Diary of Private Prayer](#), but for now they are helpful to me and this one speaks to the message of the day:

“O Lord, you indwell our shabby human life, lifting it now and then above the dominance of animal passion and greed, allowing it to shine with borrowed lights of love and joy and peace, and making it a mirror of the beauties of a world unseen. Grant that our part in the world's life today may not be to obscure the splendor of your presence but rather to make it more plainly visible to the eyes of our fellow women and men.

Help us to make a stand today for:

whatever is pure, true, just, and good;
the advancement of science and education and
learning; the redemption of daily business from the
blight of self-seeking; cooperation and mutual help in
industry, commerce, and government; the
conservation of the rich traditions of the past;
the recognition of new movements of your Spirit in the
minds and lives of people today; the hope of even
more glorious days to come.

Today, dear Lord help us:

put what is right before our own interests; put others
before ourselves; not to forget matters of the spirit, by
being too consumed with matters of the body; put the
attainment of what is true, and just, and honorable
above the enjoyment of present pleasures; put
principle above reputation; put you above all else.

O God, the reflection of your transcendent glory once
appeared broken in the face of Jesus Christ. Give us
today hearts like his: a brave heart, a true heart, a
tender heart, a heart with great room in it, a heart fixed
on you, for his name's sake, and for the sake of the
world. Amen.

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