

The Most Basic Human Urge
II Corinthians 9: 6-15, Exodus 33: 12-23
“Moses said, ‘Show me your glory, I pray.’” Exodus 33: 18
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During our Seminary days, my friends and I were partial to a story about a professor of preaching who was fixated on the importance of sermon titles. “Listen, students,” he would say, “the title of your sermon needs to grab people’s attention. It ought to be so attention grabbing that if it were written on the sign in front of your church, people would want to get off the bus and come to church. Can someone give me an example of a sermon title with that kind of power?” A fellow on the front row raised his hand. “How about this one, Professor? ‘Your Bus is on Fire!’”

Today’s title might have brought you to church expecting a racy sermon on sex, but I want to talk about an even more basic human urge than that. The desire of which I speak has to be handled throughout our lives. Its mishandling causes all manner of misery and regret. I will not name it now. See if you can figure out what I am talking about as you listen in on a conversation between Moses, the great liberator of the Hebrew people, and God. On the journey of the Hebrew people through the wilderness, there was set up outside of camp what was called “the tent of meeting” where

Moses would go to converse with the Lord. “When he entered the tent, a pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance to the tent. The cloud signaled the mysterious and holy presence of God.

Words of Madeleine L’Engle in her book, *The Irrational Season* capture how Moses must have reacted when the cloud appeared:

“Your immanent eminence

wholly transcendent,

holy, resplendent,

incomprehensible,

infinite wisdom,

one indivisible,

un begun, un beginning

complete, but unending. . .

Eternal compassion

helpless before you

I, Lord, in my fashion,

love and adore you...”

The writer of Exodus describes the scene beautifully. “The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as one would speak with a friend.”(33:11) Here are the mystery of God and the intimacy of God. Perhaps it is only when we

experience the mystery of God and the intimacy of God together that we can hear the voice of God speaking directly to us. (1) In this encounter, the Lord speaks in answer to Moses' request for God's continued presence with the Israelites as they journey to the promised land. The Lord assures Moses, "My presence will go with you." Moses isn't convinced. You know how it is when you are anxious. You are so busy worrying about the bad things you expect to happen; you miss the good things that **are** happening. Moses was given the promise he was looking for, but his anxiety about not getting it kept him from receiving the gift. What the Lord **said** was "I'll be with you all the way." What Moses **heard** was "I might have other things to do. Hope you bones don't rot out there in the wilderness."

Moses presses on, "If you won't go with us, what will happen to us? How shall anybody know that I and your people have found favor in your sight unless you go with us?"

Moses was not the last person who thought he was having a one-way conversation with God. I cannot count the number of times people have asked me over the years why God doesn't answer when they pray. The assumption usually is that God must be hard of hearing or indifferent to their needs. What we see, at least with Moses and the Almighty, is that God speaks, but Moses won't listen. What we see is that God offers Moses

everything he need and wants, but Moses is not satisfied. No matter that they have been communing friend to friend, Moses wants more. He demands the ultimate: “Show me your glory, I pray.”

The Almighty replies in a very God-like way, “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” There is God and there are mortals, and we are not in the same category. No human being can behold the fullness of God’s glory and live, but because God is merciful, the Lord says to Moses, “I will put you in a cave in the mountain, and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take my hand away and you will see my backside, but my face you will not see.” You’ve got to love God’s sense of humor here!

Have you figured out the most basic human urge? It is to have more. It is to crave, to want, to covet, never to be satisfied. We cannot have everything we want. To be human is to have limits. Only God has no limits.

What a strange thing this nature of ours is. On the one hand where would we be without the desire for more? Wasn’t it the yearning for more religious freedom that led to the founding of our nation? Isn’t the desire for more knowledge the motivation behind every act of learning? What is wrong with the desire for more security, more independence, more joy, more years added to life?

And yet, I pose this question: Is there any instinct more likely to get us into deep trouble than the desire for more? Think of Goethe's Faust.

Mephistopheles offers him that which his heart desires but only in exchange for the ownership of his soul.

All the great religions of the world warn against forgetting that there are limits at the very heart of human existence. Christianity speaks time and time again of the foolishness of having acquisition at the center of one's life.

"Consider the raven," Jesus said, "they have neither storehouses nor barn, yet God feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Can any of you by worrying add one hour to your span of life?"

Sometimes we meld together Greek Philosophy and Christian truth when actually there are dissimilarities between the two, but on this point there is complete agreement: "At the heart of all things, there is a sense of proportion, of moral harmony that overreaching, arrogant men and women upset to their own peril." (2)

Eastern traditions know this truth as well. "A Zen master told his disciples as he lay dying, 'I have learned only one thing in life- how much is enough.'"

(3) Our patriarch Moses could not have put it better.

I want to suggest to you today that while we live at a time in history in which the urge for more is given free reign in every quarter, the urge is no more conducive to health or happiness now than it has ever been.

Let me make two fairly obvious points. The first has to do with time. Of all the problems I see people dealing with at Morningside, this is near the top of the list. Simply put, a lot of people around here are overextended. If five days on the calendar are full, why not make it seven? The temptation is always to be more than we are and to do more than we can; yet, the happiest people I know are those who realize that life itself is an extravagant gift from God and live appropriately within the constraints of time, family demands, age, and health.

Did you know that there are six billion people in the world? Every single one of them, us included, will die. Our lives are limited. The key is to live each day in joy and praise, which is a difficult thing to do when your day is overdone. If you want to see even the backside of God in this life, overreaching will have to be harnessed. The Psalmist couldn't have been more on target when he wrote, "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

The last thing I want to say has to do with money. Here is an irony for you. The more of it some people make, the more anxious they become about not

having enough. You would think that the more people had, the more willing they would be to give to their church, to charities, and to important causes, but often that is not the case. In Studs Terkel's book, *American Dreams-Lost and Found* a successful businessman wonders aloud, "How much money is enough? Enough is always a little more than I have. It is like a mirage in the desert: it always stays a hundred yards ahead of you."

In the mid 1980's, I went on a tour of our Presbyterian Church's mission work in Africa. Ghana was our first stop. At breakfast the second morning, one of the American ministers in our group said, "I have a confession to make to you. Last night, after all of you had gone to sleep, I went into the bathroom and took all the soap and toilet tissue and packed it in my suitcase. I am sorry, but I was afraid that I might not have enough."

Next Sunday will be Commitment Sunday at Morningside. You and I will have the opportunity to break the tyranny of the urge for more and to enter into a state of abundant grace. We will have a fresh chance to decide how we will spend our time on earth, our talents, and our material possessions. You have already received your pledge cards in the mail. In the next seven days, I hope you will have a conversation with yourself, with your family, and with God, friend to friend, about how much you really need and how much you need to give.

Stewardship is the most counter cultural activity I know. In contrast to the message of our society which is “Buy in order to be,” the Christian message is “Give, as God has so generously given to you.” How does Paul put it in his letter to the little church in Corinth? “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”

When I was beginning in the ministry, an older woman in the church I served said to me one Sunday,” Joanna, I don’t come to church to hear your sermons.” My ego was deflated, to say the least, but it was even worse when she said that what she looked forward to most at church was the benediction. She went on to explain, “I have lived longer than you have, and I have learned a thing or two. I have learned that I can’t make it through the week without the promise that with God, there is always more to come. When you say, ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you,’ I think-wonderful There will be more divine grace and love, more fellowship with God. The very things on which my life depends will be dispensed day after day, world without end.”

What more do you want than that?

Notes:

(1) Edmund A Steimle, *God the Stranger*

(2) *The New Yorker*, 6/9/86.

(3) Harvey Cox, "The market as God," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March, 1999,
p.21.