

“Recovering an Attitude of Enough”
Text: II Corinthians 9:6-8; Exodus 33 – selected verses
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Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” Exodus 33:18

Today’s reading from Exodus allows us to listen in on a most unusual conversation, unusual because of who is involved in it, and unusual because of the chutzpah of one of the two who are involved. The setting is the wilderness, after Moses has liberated the Hebrew people from the chains of Egyptian oppression. Moses goes into what is called the “tent of meeting,” which he has had built just outside the camp of the people. He would go into the tent of meeting to converse with the Lord. When he entered the tent, “a pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent,” the cloud signaling the mysterious, holy presence of God.

In her book *The Irrational Season*, Madeleine L’Engle captures a little of how Moses must have felt when that cloud appeared. “Oh my goodness, your immanent eminence, wholly transcendent, incomparable, indivisible, eternal compassion, I, Lord, in my fashion love and adore you, and am humbled before you...”

The writer of Exodus describes the scene with particular eloquence, saying, “The Lord spoke to Moses, face-to-face, as one might speak with a friend.” What juxtaposition here: the great majesty of God and intimacy with Almighty God. In this encounter, Moses asks the Lord for God’s continuing presence with the Israelites as they journey to the Promised Land.

The Lord says, “I will definitely go with you. Yes. All is settled; I will be there for you.”

Moses responds, “Why won’t you say you’ll go with us?” The Lord has just said that He *would* go with them. I can identify here. Sometimes I’m so worried about bad things that might happen - have you ever done this? You miss out on the good things that actually are happening, because you just can’t believe that goodness is occurring. The more God reassures Moses, the more nervous he gets.

“I’ll be with you all the way,” the Lord says.

Moses says, “If you won’t come with us, what’s going to happen to us?” It’s crazy, but we do it!

Moses was not the last person to feel uncertain while having a conversation with the Lord. It is an easy thing to assume that the Lord is *not* hearing your prayers. But of course, the Lord was hearing and promising to answer. I love the idea that “the heart and mind of God really are vulnerable to the pleas and arguments of the human creature.” (1) Moses asks. God promises. But still Moses is not satisfied. No matter that they been communing friend to friend; Moses presses and pushes until he finally demands the ultimate. “God, I would like to see your glory.”

The Almighty replies in a very Almighty-like way. “You cannot see my face because no one can see my face and live, but I will show you something. I will put you in the cave in the mountain and cover you with my hand until I pass by. I will let you see my backside. But my face, you will never see.” It turns out that the holy eminence, holy transcendent, indivisible Lord has the characteristics of both holiness and a sense of humor.

The point is that Moses could not have everything he wanted, and neither can we. That is a great moral lesson for us, at this particular time in history, to remember. We cannot have as much of everything as we want. To be human is to have limits.

It is a strange thing, this human nature of ours. God put within us a desire for more, and where would we be without it? Wasn’t it the yearning for more religious freedom that led to the founding of this nation? Isn’t the desire for more knowledge the motivation behind every act of learning? What’s wrong with the desire for more security, more independence, more joy, more years to live on this earth? More is not universally bad, but there really is no instinct more likely to get us into deep trouble than the unbridled desire for more. Think of Goethe’s *Faust*. Mephistopheles, the devil, offers him everything his heart and his ambition desire, but only in exchange for what? The ownership of his soul - that was the deal, a deal similar to the deal the devil wanted to make with Jesus in the wilderness. “Turn the stone to bread.” In other words, use God as “an emergency dial-up service.”(2) “Fall off the pinnacle of the temple. God will save you.” The third temptation, “All the kingdoms of the world will be yours.” Well, if you’re a good guy, why wouldn’t you want to be in charge of all the kingdoms of the world? Why? Because to be human is to have limits. All the great religions of the world warn against forgetting that this idea of limit lies at the very heart of human existence.

The Bible speaks time and time again of the foolishness of having acquisition at the center of one’s life. Maybe we ought not to spend everything we have and

then some on everything our hearts desire. The Bible suggests, "Consider the ravens. They don't have anything; they have neither storehouses nor barns, yet God takes care of them. And aren't you of much more value than they?" Jesus said to his followers, "Those who seek to save their lives will lose them, but those who are willing to lose their lives for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel are the ones who will have life with abundance."

People sometimes collapse Greek philosophy and Christian truths together when they're actually quite dissimilar, but on one point, Greek philosophy and Christian truth are exactly congruent with one another. At the heart of things, there is a sense of proportion, of moral harmony, that overreaching, arrogant men and women upset to their own peril. Eastern religions know this truth as well. A Zen master told his disciples as he lay dying, "I have learned only one thing that is important enough to pass on to you, and that one thing I've learned in life is this: how much is enough."

Our patriarch Moses could not have put it better, after his encounter with the Lord at the tent of meeting. The lesson the Lord had for Moses was "Stop. Be content with living inside human limits."

There was a column in the *New York Times* this week, written by a Londoner, describing how the economic disaster is affecting Great Britain. After a paragraph or so saying ugly things about the United States, this columnist writes, "But it is our fault too, and everybody knows it. London has been living like a drunken sailor for the last decade, tripping up High Street in the delirium of deregulation and fantasy wealth. . . Champagne sales have been through the roof. Britain drinks more of it than all of the United States. But now, the only product showing a fresh boom in sales are home safes, as people began to feel it might be safer to lock up their money at home than to put it in a British bank." The world is learning that to live without any limits is a sure fire way to destroy human society.

I want to suggest that while we live in a time when the urge for more has been given free reign, it is just as destructive as it has always been. Money and the stuff that money can buy has never been nor will it ever be the way to redemption or salvation. Here is an irony for you, the more of it people make, the more anxious people become about whether or not they have enough. You would think that if you had a lot, you would be more than willing to give a lot to your church, to charities, to important causes, but often that is not the case. In Studs Terkel's book *American Dreams - Lost and Found* a very successful businessman wonders how much money is enough. "Enough is always a little more than I have. It's like a mirage in the desert. It always stays 100 yards ahead of me."

Three weeks from today, on Commitment Sunday, you and I will have a great opportunity provided by our church, 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 money, and our material possessions.

Giving, especially sacrificial giving, is the most countercultural idea I know. The Christian message is to give as God has so generously given to you. God will make sure that you will always have enough of everything, so that you can share abundantly in every good work.

Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity, once asked an audience of seminarians, whether it was possible to own a house that was sinfully large. The crowd yelled back "Yes!"

"When is it sinfully too large?"

There was silence, until one honest soul was heard to answer, "When it's bigger than mine."

Did you know that 3 billion people on this planet, half of the 6 billion, live on less than two dollars a day? It would take five additional planets if our American lifestyle were adopted by others.

Somewhere along the way we lost ourselves, and a passion for more became our God. It happened, I don't know when, but I know it happened after Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his second inaugural address said, "The test of America's progress is not whether we add to the abundance of those who have much. It is whether we provide for those who have too little." Somewhere along the way, we became "rich in things and poor in soul." Somewhere along the way, greed became a virtue and flaunting what you have became socially acceptable. Living large morphed into living too large. So here we are, having invested too much in our love affair with more and waking up to the fact that we must do with less.

One of the great ironies of the whole thing is that when the Earth started, there was plenty of everything for every body. Go back and read Genesis 1; God created the earth, and the animals, and the seas and the forests, and the human creatures, who by the way, were created on the same day the cows were created. The Lord said to the whole bunch, *Be fruitful and multiply*, which is exactly what happened. There was so much of everything that God had to declare a Sabbath. Walter Brueggemann has written "God needed a break! He needed to get out of the office." There was so much of everything, and how have we gotten to the point where some of us have so much, all bunched up in some places, and others of us have so little?

For two years after we moved back to Atlanta, Al and I rented two Shurgard storage bins on Piedmont Road – we had too much stuff! Not long before he died, Paul Newman got rid of a lot of things. A friend told me the other night that she had heard that when he died he had three shirts, a couple of jackets and two pairs of pants hanging in his closet. Before his death, Newman said, "The trick of living is to slip on and off the planet with the least fuss you can muster. I'm not

running for sainthood. I just happen to think that in life, we need to be like the farmer, who puts back into the earth what he takes out.”

I know that for many of us the term “simple living” connotes water in a bucket, a log cabin, and a pinched approach to life. We will always be consumers, but can't we also move from being extravagant consumers toward a more responsible consumerism?

How should we live in our darkening, but still beautiful world? Shall we not live with humility before our majestic and gracious God? Shall we not start counting the costs of the excess that accrues when the altar of self becomes our place of worship? Ought we not commit ourselves anew to the practical gospel that advises us to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves?

On Sundays, I often offer this benediction: “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit rest and abide with you.” The implication is that for the week ahead, there's going to be plenty of grace, plenty of love, and plenty of fellowship and communion to live on. Those are three commodities that never give out. They are the only commodities essential for human existence. We have enough, more than we need, thanks be to God.

(1) Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer*.

(2) A phrase used by Craig Barnes in a forthcoming book.