
When the Spirit of the Lord is Upon Us: The Church and the Millennium Development Goals

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When we hear the Biblical story with a certain question in mind we hear it in new ways. Sermons are always heard through the filters made up of the questions on people's minds. That is the reason we can preach on world peace and have a parishioner thank us for helping them to know how to raise teen-agers. The backdrop of their own issues determines how they hear the story. We hear what we are prepared to hear or as the Chinese put it, "Most of what we see is behind our eyes." There is nothing wrong with this and in fact it is impossible to avoid. Mostly this phenomenon is subconscious. This morning we are going to do it consciously.

The question on our mind is social responsibility, specifically what our faith story has to tell us about caring for others. It is our question because the topic for this gathering is the Church and the Millennium Development Goals. Listen to the old familiar story of our faith with the new MDGs in mind.

We all know that the first words of the Bible are "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." But we must remember that the first idea of the Bible is not expressed with simple clarity until much later. The First Epistle of John to be exact. "God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them." (4:16b). The idea that the basic nature of God is Love permeates the scriptures and the revelation of Jesus. It is the reason the creation narrative in our tradition is so calm and bloodless compared to that of contemporary myths. God is in serene control and brings being into being with a word. And why would God do such a thing? Because God's signature characteristic is Love. We all know that, unless we are conjugating Latin verbs, it is not enough to say "I love." One wants to say "I love something" – flowers, potato chips, sunsets, opera, or you. Love requires an object and that is the reason for creation. Creation is what God loves. We also know that love desires a response. It is sweet beyond the telling to hear the beloved say, "I love you too." But such a reply

cannot be programmed or forced. It must be free to be satisfying. All creatures great and small are hardwired to be faithful to their creator. Birds and bees sort of have to do what birds and bees do. They have no ticket to enter the moral universe. So God called into being a creature with a capacity for morality and immorality, a creature who could choose to be faithful to the Creator or not. That faithfulness is the love response that God seeks. Loving God is not having saccharine thoughts about the Deity but doing what we were created to do. As Jesus put it "If you love me you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). That is the idea behind people but unfortunately, we have chosen and do choose to obey our hearts rather than our Creator. As Eve said, speaking for us all as she contemplated the forbidden fruit, "It [fill in your heart's desire here] is good for food, a delight to the eyes, desired to make one wise" (Gen 3:6). On that principle God's plan and the Love instinct behind it begins to unravel. The harmony breaks apart as represented in Adam's spirited if shallow attempt to blame everyone but himself for his actions, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree and I ate it" (Gen 3:12).

God, as the story is told, had a decision to make. Is it worth it? Noah's story indicates that the decision to continue the human experiment was not clear cut. But God is Love, a gatherer by self-chosen nature. God's thing is putting things back together. The word "Religion" means literally to re-bind. That is the reason so many religious words begin with "re" – reconcile...redeem...repent...renew. The basic business of God in the world is putting the broken relationships back together. That is why creation is a uni-verse we know as opposed to the multi-verse of chaos.

Since God's Love won out over God's Frustration, the question became one of implementation. How will God do the work of healing this "sinful and broken world." Since the breakage came from disobedience, God chooses to rebuild on a foundation of obedience. He forms a people who at least struggle to be obedient. The key phrase for this formation is "Abram went" (Gen 12:4). God told him to do something, and he did it! The "went" of Abram is obedience, the kind of obedience that is Love in this story. It marks the fact that our faith is something done not merely held or revered or anything else. Believing is wenting!

The People-who-at-least-struggle-to-be-obedient (they will be called Israel which literally means “struggles with God”) are given the experience of the exodus to forever remind them of the power of the One with whom they struggle. Then they are given the Law so that they will know what to do to be obedient. The Law is divided into two parts which the people immediately have trouble keeping connected. There are four commandments about their relationship with God and six about their relationships with people. Jesus and others will summarize the Law as “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and with all your mind – and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The two points are intertwined, but the people keep trying to unwind them. At Sinai they received the Law in both of its parts including the bit about not killing but without so much as a wince they proceeded to kill everybody they could get their hands on in Jericho. The reason for this disconnect is that they think that the first four laws permit or perhaps even require them to ignore the last six. They think the Law is more about God than about people (a mistake that, unlike the walls of Jericho, still stands among us). The Hindus have a poem which serves to remind the faithful of that elusive balance between the two sections of the Law. “If you would give your flowers to the god on the alter/ Give your flowers to the man on the street/ And the god on the altar will get them.” It is so simple but so hard to remember.

Examples of the human difficulty in maintaining the connection between what is owed to God and what is owed to the people world God loves about in history. Sometimes the “God alone” people will cite the story of Elijah at Mt. Horeb as a case for simple quietism and pietism. You will recall that Elijah and the priest so f Baal had established what must be the low point of ecumenicity in a god contest that ended in slaughter. Elijah hid of Horeb as that testy evangelical Jezebel was looking for him. There he had an experience that included wind, earthquake and fire, but God was not to be found in these dramatic forces. God was met in what the King James Version called “a still small voice” and more modern translations (undoubtedly influenced by Simon and Garfunkle) call “a sound of sheer silence.” These words are often the mantra of those who seek God apart from the world in which we live. That approach has its place, but those who rely on this story forget what the still small voice said to Elijah. Look it up in I Kings 19:15-18. It calls him to foment a revolution!

At another time Amaziah was priest at Bethel where the workshop of God was as close to perfection as is humanly possible. Choirs and acolytes moved as drill teams, music soared; preaching convinced the righteous of their righteousness, pews were full and coffee hour used the good cups. Amaziah had built a powerhouse on the first four commandments and so was confronted by Amos who spoke for God when he said, "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look up on. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream...Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!" (Amos 5:21-24; 6:4-6)

Amos is saying that the first four commandments separated from the last six, a devotion to God that ignores "the ruin of Joseph," is not just a half-truth (the literal meaning of heresy) but blasphemy that brings judgment on its adherent. The Millennium Development Goals are not a matter of casual interest.

Then we come to the Great Turning Point of our faith story. The Fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The people believed that God was a resident of Jerusalem and as such would not let it fall into enemy hands. The people might struggle, make mistakes, even be mean spirited from time to time, but nothing could change the relationship between God and Jerusalem. It was like the Church Pension Fund, a college in a small town, the Proctor Endowment in this diocese, the ocean at a beach or harbor town, or the federal budget. We count on those things being there no matter what and have no contingency plan for their failure. Their loss is beyond comprehension. But Jerusalem did fall. It did not merely stumble but fell flat so that the Temple was destroyed, the best people were taken into exile, the walls were leveled and "there was no sorrow like our sorrow" as the great book of rock bottom, Lamentations, describes it.

The question during the exile and afterwards was painfully huge: Why did it happen? What did we do to make God let us fall that way? To make a long complex story both short and simple, there were two schools of thought. One represented by Ezra and Nehemiah maintained that the problem was impurity. The people had gotten mixed up with the likes of you and me (aka Gentiles) and God was not pleased. "The peoples of Israel have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands" lamented Ezra (9:1). His words found action in the person of the hands of governor Nehemiah under whose direction "those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners." (Nehemiah 9:2).

Isaiah sketched a very different view in this Servant Songs as the Book of Ruth did in its story of a foreign woman who was King David's great grandmother. "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob...I will give you as a light to the nations!" cried Isaiah (49:6). He was saying that God is interested in the whole world; it is the object of God's Love and therefore, the proper concern of God's people. It is not that we mixed with the world too much, it is that we did it too little. Micah chimed in with memorable words to challenge the devotees of the first four commandments. "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be please with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:6-8).

The question was a serious one and after much struggle was resolved in favor of Ezra and Nehemiah. This marked the beginning of five hundred years of spiritual apartheid in our faith tradition where Holier-Than-Thou became a varsity sport, and the pros went by the name of Pharisees or "Separate Ones." The system and the assumptions behind it were well established by the time Jesus made his inaugural address in the tiny synagogue at Nazareth.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the

prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is up on me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And he rolled up the scroll gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ (Luke 4:14-20). In other words, the real winner is Isaiah! It is Isaiah’s call into the world not Ezra’s retreat from it that represents God’s interests. The faithful, obedient, loving community is not a lifeboat pulling away from a sinking world but a ray of light shining in an otherwise dark treasure house. Can you love someone and ignore their children at the same time? How could one serve God without serving that which was created to be the object of God’s love? That which was proclaimed and acted out by Jesus as he wandered willy-nilly across the carefully constructed barriers our faith had placed between the clean and the unclean was underlined by the Holy Spirit whose upper room inaugural was no less clear than Jesus’ synagogue address. “Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ (Acts 2:5-12). What it meant, of course, was that God’s eyes were on all people, not just a few.

The Biblical story, in as much as we consider it in light of the question about social responsibility and caring for others, finds its fulfillment at this point. But there is a further significant development in the next few centuries that must color our understanding of what it means to be obedient/loving to God. For the most part, the

faith communities' response to human need and suffering was on an "at need" basis. Like Jesus people were fed, healed and comforted without any serious questions about how they got that way in the first place. Systemic concern, other than a tribe or small nation's concern for its own, was not part of the picture. But God was not through painting the picture. The early Christian community followed the pattern of its predecessors. The Order of Deacons and the subsequent Order of Widows met human need where they found it for the church was far too small and socially insignificant to be a player in the systems of the world. That was true until two most unlikely events. The first was the elevation of Christianity from persecution to prominence through the enthusiasm of Emperor Constantine. No sooner had this taken place than a second inconceivable shook the world, like Jerusalem before it, Rome fell. The only institution left standing was the Church. That we were woefully unprepared for the role is made clear by the term Dark Ages to describe the beginning of the period of our stewardship. But something else happened. The Church as state and later as state church introduced us to the complex responsibilities of systemic change. It was no longer enough for us to care for the poor, we had to wonder why they were poor in the first place. Long term issues like education, nutrition, sustainable economies and ecology became Love issues for People-who-at-least-struggle-to-be-obedient. It is a whole new ball game fraught with challenges, not least among them the failure of stake holders in the systems of the world to appreciate having those systems considered much less changed. As Roman Catholic theologian Dom Helder Camara said "I bought food for the hungry. People called me a saint. I asked why they were hungry. People called me a Communist." Still, by whatever means it came to us, systemic concern for the suffering of the world is as important as relief efforts.

So the story that began at the creation was underlined in God's response to the Fall and was made clear in the scope of the Ten Commandments/Summary of the Law. The story that Isaiah got when most others did not, that Jesus proclaimed in Nazareth and everywhere else he went. The story the Holy Spirit blew them away with in the Upper Room and a whole new dimension of which emerged in what was otherwise not our finest hour or era in history leads us to the Millennium Development Goals. Which it is my pleasure to set before you:

- **Eradicate extreme poverty**
- **Achieve universal primary education**
- **Promote gender equality and empower women**
- **Reduce child mortality**
- **Improve maternal health**
- **Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases**
- **Ensure environmental stability**
- **Develop a global partnership for development**

May the Holy Spirit guide us into new and better ways of Loving God.