

You Can't Get There From Here

September 30, 2007

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

The amazing thing about being alive on God's earth is that we are never alone. To be a human being is to be connected—connections that reach back into our past and forward into our future. We may try and run away, or turn our faces to the wall, but we are just pretending to be alone. Even if we don't realize it, someone, somewhere is praying for us, and of course, God is always with us.

Being human means, we are constantly in exchange, in dialogue, with our environment. Human beings do not, cannot live in a vacuum. We are constantly giving and receiving, calling and responding, speaking and listening. We start interacting with our mother before we are born, and these interactions increase in complexity and intensity, as we grow older. When asked, "who are you?" most of us answer by describing our relationships—family, business, church, and social.

Although we tend to describe our relationships as dyads—pairs, we know that all our relationships are imbedded in broader systems. Even though we may strive to be autonomous individuals, we are always representing those who nurtured and formed us.

I was once asked if a Christian could have a personal relationship with God, on his or her own, with no one else involved. My answer is a resounding "no." Our relationship with God always concerns our relationships with other people. Those people do not have to be physically present or even alive, but they are the "meat and potatoes" of our life with God. I cannot imagine a Christian having a prayer life that does not involve other people! Even if I were stranded on a desert island, I would pray for my friends,

family, church, and world. To be honest, I would mainly pray for God to send me a “girl Friday” right away.

By definition, a Christian is a member of a community of believers in Christ, a member of the Church, the Body of Christ. Even the strictest hermits, those who live alone far off in the woods, are praying for you and me every day.

So being a Christian is all about our relationships with other people. Sometimes we feel that we choose to be in relationships, while other times, for better or for worse, they seem to be chosen for us. As they say, “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your relatives.” In relationships, as in so much else, we are offered opportunities, we make choices, new opportunities emerge, and we make new choices, and so on, building the story of our lives.

I feel there are two fundamental ways of looking at the relationships that come to us. First, there is the view that these relationship opportunities are purely random. We are born into a particular family by luck and who we are and whom we meet from then on is chiefly determined by luck. There is no pattern or meaning to the relationships we are offered. What is important is the choices we make in response to the hand we are dealt. Some people have found this view easy to accept. The pagans even made luck a goddess, Fortuna, as in “Fortuna imperatrix mundi,” Fortune is the empress of the world.

Other cultures felt that the things that happen to us, including the relationships we offered must be rewards and punishments for past actions that we committed in previous lives, called karma, or actions that were committed by our ancestors. As in [Exodus 20:5](#) “...I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the

parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

Based on some of Christ’s sayings, Christians tend to take a different view:

“[John 9:1] As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

3 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Many Christians have believed that all the events of their lives are “providential,” a reflection of God’s will. I think it is quite moving to consider that “Providence” means that we are under divine guidance or care. “Providence” is the power sustaining and guiding human destiny.

To me, the story of our lives is really the story of our dialogue with God. Moreover, the way that God speaks to us is through the people that he sends to us. I do not experience this as a fixed plan, but as a story, that God and I are telling together. Sometimes it reminds me of chess game: I make a move and God responds, and I respond to his move, and so on. When I partner with God to shape my life story, I am working to change my life into a salvation story. This means looking at my entire life through Christ-colored glasses. My future is salvation and my past is the road to salvation. Viewed this way, even my past disappointments, hurts, divorces, and losses, can become blessings if they helped bring me closer to God. When my story is done, I hope that everyone I have met will be a blessing to me.

Today’s Gospel is a story about relationships. Like all of Jesus’ parables, so many crucial details are left out, making us dig deeply to fully understand the story. Dives

(Latin for “rich) is not just rich, but incredibly rich, in our terms not just a millionaire, but a multi-billionaire. The Pharisees saw wealth as a sign of God's blessing for a righteous life. Moreover, we have no evidence in the story that Dives was not a righteous man. He may have tithed, gone to synagogue, attended all the Jerusalem festivals, and made all the appropriate sacrifices. He may have even had his banker donate to charities that took care of the deserving poor. He might have believed that taking care of Lazarus was a job for the welfare department. In the immortal words of Ebenezer Scrooge, “Are there no Prisons? Are there no workhouses?”

God sent Lazarus, whose name means “God Helps” to Dives. Lazarus lay by Dive's gate, hungry and sick for many days, while Dives feasted in his great house. Everyday, Dives turned away from an opportunity to love his neighbor. Even in the afterlife, Dives treated Lazarus as a servant, asking him to bring him water, and wanting to send him as a messenger to warn Dive's brothers about their sin. Abraham replies that “you can't get there from here” and points out that the faith of Dives and his brothers is so weak that even the coming death and resurrection of the Christ would not be enough to convince them to repent.

When Lazarus dies, he goes to be with Father Abraham. One of the ancient commentators, John Chrysostom (c.347-407), points out that the choice of Abraham is quite deliberate, because Abraham was famous for his extravagant hospitality:

“Abraham used to pursue even passers-by and drag them into his home, whereas the rich man disregarded someone lying in his own doorway. The patriarch was not like that but just the opposite. He would sit in his doorway and catch all who passed by. And just as a fisherman casting a net into the sea hauls up fish, yes, but also quite often gold

and pearls, so Abraham whilst catching people in his net finished by catching angels, though strangely enough without knowing it.”

If I believe that every person placed before me is there to help me understand and deepen my faith, I should be asking myself, “How does God want me to love this person?” Sometimes loving them means helping them materially. Sometimes loving them means welcoming them into our church community.

If I really believe that God and I are writing my life story together, then this applies to my personal life also. If I believe that my friends and family are gifts to me from God, I start thinking of them a little differently. Sometimes it is hardest to act out our faith with those who are closest to us. Sometimes it is the difficult relationships, the ones that challenge me, that make me uncomfortable and sometimes unhappy are the ones that give me the greatest opportunity to grow my faith.

Loving your neighbor means really using your eyes to see and your ears to listen, so you can truly hear the message that God is sending to you through your neighbor. Even in the briefest contacts with others, I think that loving our neighbor means acknowledging them as your neighbor, letting them know that you accept them as a brother or sister in Christ. If they are a stranger, consider asking them for their name and shaking their hand. Above all, let them know that you will be praying for them.

I find that when I greet everyone in this way, God sends me wonderful strangers to teach me and to pray for me. There have been people who have I met only once, just for a few minutes, in a hospital room, on street corner, or sitting on the next park bench, who have added immeasurably to my faith journey. Some of those people have been among those who knock on our church door asking for help.

Let us do our best to be like Father Abraham, who showed hospitality to angels without knowing it. Amen.

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