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### “The Soul’s Thirst for God”

If you were to open up the magazine that comes with Sunday’s *New York Times*, you will find many promises. Many of these promises are quite subliminal, and yet they clearly tap a need. The need is not necessarily for the product, but rather for the experience you will realize if you possess the product. (Guaranteed.) If you drink Coca Cola you get “the real thing” or Gatorade, *all* your thirst will be quenched. Diamonds, as we know, are a foretaste of eternity; they’re forever. Wearing Calvin Klein clothes and fragrances will make you ravishing, adored. If you would use an AT&T calling card, your family will finally be reconciled and live happily together, forever. Drive a Buick and you get the ride of the century. If you travel to Mauritius, it will all come together.... On and on it goes.

From a marketing or psychological perspective, we could analyze the ads and ask “What’s *really* being sold?” It’s our need to belong, our need for self-esteem and for quite personal and unique recognition; our need to be attractive and desired, our need to appear successful, in part because we are *better*; our longing for immortality... or at least appear to be young forever. Those whose business it is to market, understand that we’re all looking for something more. I think it’s true.

If we go a step deeper, deeper than the marketing strategy and psychological insight, to speak the language of the soul, I would say that this marketing strategy “works.” What we see purveyed in Sunday magazines, on the commercials in between the touchdowns, on the pop-ups that show up on the internet, on the billboards, store windows, and on the sides of buses... is effective because the soul *does* crave for something more because we’ve been created in the image of God, who is more. And, I would say, if we don’t seek to satisfy our infinite longing *for* what is more, *on* what is more, we will settle on something that is less... and we will work out our infinite cravings relentlessly. The Psalmist says:

“O God, you are my God; eagerly I see you;  
My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you,  
As in a barren and dry land where there is no water.”<sup>63:1</sup>

Many people today would not use the language of the psalms to express their longing... but I *do* think the language of the psalms is the common language of the soul, longing for what is infinitely more, who is God.

If what I am suggesting here is right, right to you, rings true, that you long for more, how would you tap the source of what is more, who is God? I’ll suggest three practices – these could be, for you, spiritual practices as we prepare for Eastertide – which run counter to a consumer culture which is constantly alluring us, teasing us to fill up, to gorge, on something that is jumbo, a whopper, guaranteed to satisfy... which may sate your tummy for awhile... but not your soul. Here’s three counter-cultural practices for you to consider in these days ahead:

σ **Love the emptiness.** If you do not have space in your soul – that is, if you keep yourself filled on food or on constant activity or ever-new ideas or endlessly surfing horizontal things – if you do not have space in your soul, your desire will be blunted or diverted even perverted. We have been created with the gift of desire, to long for, to anticipate. I think that God mostly reaches out to us in the form of our desire, which springs from some need, some emptiness. If you are fast fooding on life, if your life is absolutely stuffed, you will miss the real thing, what Jesus called “the food that will last.” Please pardon this pun: to find the food that will last, you may need to fast... Fast from where you are too full.

The word “fast” is very common in everyday parlance, but usually as an adjective. We go fast. To go slow is un-American. Curiously enough, “going fast” – traveling or working fast, or having a fast connection to the internet – *that* kind of fast comes from the same etymological root as the verb, “to fast,” “fasting,” in the sense of abstaining from food or something else. Our word “fast” comes from the Old English *fæsten*, which denoted “firm,” such as “to hold fast” to some decision or driving principle. “Hold fast.” We also may talk about a “a long, fast friend,” meaning someone who has been a secure friend, someone who has been tight with you – a steadfast friend. This word “fast” came to be a verb, applied to the abstinence of food, because of one’s “holding fast to a particular observance,” which was a firm resolve. This etymological development in English seems consistent to the way the scriptures speak about fasting. Fasting, not in the sense of eliminating something or denying yourself of some food, but fasting in the sense of holding firm, of fastening our resolve to a kind of discipline or practice. Fasting: more an affirmation of some value rather than a renunciation of some desire.

That’s my first suggestion. Rather than living into the marketing delusion that “you can have it all,” and that you can have it now, and that you *should* have it now, that you open some space in your soul, and love the emptiness. Listen to your desire, which is where God will come knocking on the door of your soul. Try out some ways you can live with the word “fast” not just as an adjective – which is about speed – but also the word “fast” as a verb – which is about space. Fast from food, from compulsive worrying, from endless controlling, from multi-tasking, from binging in whatever form. Love the emptiness. I’m talking about living in “real time.” “Real time” is a much, much deeper reality than a news cast on CNN. The author, Wayne Muller, writes “All life has emptiness at its core.” He says, “It is the quiet hollow reed through which the wind of God blows and makes the music that is our life. All creation springs from emptiness.”<sup>1</sup> Love the emptiness. Make some space; keep some space.

σ **Believe less.** By this, I’m not suggesting to willy-nilly discard a verse from the Bible here, a phrase from the Nicene Creed there, an historic Christian doctrine that you don’t fancy. By saying “believe less” I’m not suggesting tossing but rather reclaiming. If you’re finding yourself these days rather scattered or confused, if you feel like you’ve lost your spiritual anchorage because of things going on quite personally or quite publicly, then go deeper, to the bedrock of your soul where you’re *not* confused. In Jesus’ own day, where there were endless rules, doctrines, principles, and practices, and commandments – which, it seems, were not altogether helpful to everyone’s program – he was asked, you’ll recall, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” And Jesus answered: “Love God with all your heart, and soul, and mind.” That’s number one. And number two: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>11</sup>

If you find that in this season of your life you cannot believe more, then believe less, something profoundly less.

To believe is not ultimately to wrap your brain around some existential concept. To believe is to embrace something with your heart, as if your life depended upon it. The English word *believe* comes from the same etymological root as the word *belove*, which is to hold dear, to love deeply.<sup>iii</sup> Believe; belove. So go deeper. Get out of the confusions of your head and go deeper into your heart. Conform your life around the priority and practice of loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and loving your neighbor as yourself. Where to start? Start with what is most immediate: yourself. If, inside your soul, you're yelling at yourself right now: a part of you yelling that you should be better or different and the other part of you saying that this is the way it is and you're doing the best you can.... If there's a part of you that's not on speaking terms with another part of you. If there's something unforgiven or seemingly unforgivable in your past... well, you need to get over this. And you may need some help. But you're worth it. And you're not going to be able to love your neighbor any better than you love yourself. And I think that the love of God – your love of God and God's love of you – will become very present and very real as you sort out these other two loves: for yourself and for your neighbor. Who you are, what you are, how ever it is you've gotten to be the way you are God knows and God loves and God desires... you. In the scriptures we are consistently referred to as "children of God." There's no reference to "adults of God." We're consistently called "children of God," and God loves children. God believes in you; God beloves you.

σ **Gather up the fragments.**<sup>iv</sup> Your life is in pieces. There's been this, and there's been that. Some of it has been good; some of it, not. Lots of things have gotten broken and lost. *You've* been broken and lost. Your life is in pieces and yet they weave together into this most amazing tapestry. It does all hold together. Some of us, if left alone, only see the inside, the back side of the tapestry, where there's lots of stray threads and knots and pulls. The front side of the tapestry is often quite a different picture the way the shape, form, color, design holds together... which is how others, who know us the best and love us the most see us. Which is how God knows and sees us. Most of us, if left alone, are quite myopic and can't get a true perspective on the amazing grace of our life. We need to be saved from that mean short-sightedness about ourselves, to pray for "the eyes of our heart to be enlightened" to see ourselves as God sees us.<sup>v</sup> If there are pieces in your past that you think don't fit in your present, I probably beg differ with you. It all belongs somewhere, someway. God is very frugal in this way. In the vocabulary of the church, we call this "redemption." Nothing is wasted; nothing *is* to be wasted. It all belongs, it all forms part of this majestic tapestry called "your life," like none other... except that most of us are an awful lot alike.

Love the emptiness; believe less; gather up the fragments. And then, back to the psalms We hear the psalmist pray, "and under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice."<sup>vi</sup> If you are in the dark about something just now – something about your life in the present or past or future – and there's nothing you can do about it, then confidently wait with it. Wait in the shadow, the shadow of God's wings, knowing that God knows what you do not know and, perhaps, in the fullness of time you will know more. But in the meantime you know what you are able to bear.

Confidently, patiently wait with that assurance. Do you remember from your high school Latin the etymology for our word, “confidence.” Confidence is *confidere*, with full trust. Wait in confidence. As the psalmist prays, “For you have been my helper, and under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice. My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast.”<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Wayne Muller in *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*. Muller, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, is the founder of Bread for the Journey, a nationwide relief organization, and TREAT, a community-based AIDS research and care group. He has authored several other books.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 22:36-40.

<sup>iii</sup> The word *believe* comes from the Old English *belyfan*, from the “Proto-Germanic” (*the* hypothetical prehistoric ancestor of all Germanic languages, including English) *ga-laubjan* “to hold dear, to love.”

<sup>iv</sup> A phrase of Jesus, remembered in John’s gospel 6:12-13.

<sup>v</sup> The phrase “... the eyes of your heart be enlightened” taken from Ephesians 1:17-19

<sup>vi</sup> Psalm 63:7.

<sup>vii</sup> Psalm 63:7-8.