

SAYINGS OF JESUS  
THE WORD IS VERY NEAR

Texts on Sunday, August 15, 2010

*Deuteronomy 30: 11-14 & Luke 12: 8-12*

In his autobiography, Carl Jung tells of a patient whose cure came so fast that his editor footnotes the fact: “This case is distinguished . . . by the brevity of the treatment.” Of his patient, Jung writes: “She was Jewish . . . pretty, chic, and highly intelligent, [yet] suffering from a severe anxiety neurosis.” At first, Jung could make nothing of her. He learned that she was the granddaughter of a Chasidic rabbi, a *zaddik*. The patient said of her grandfather, “It is said he was some kind of saint and possessed second sight. But that is all nonsense!” Jung writes: “She had no mythological ideas.” He does not mean erroneous ideas, or wishful or fabulous ones. Rather, he refers to something positive, even necessary. Mythological ideas are those which are rooted in a spiritual tradition through symbols. Stories of Moses and Jesus are, in this sense, mythological ideas. This patient had none. Jung goes on: “All her conscious activity was directed toward flirtation, clothes, and sex . . . She knew only the intellect and lived a meaningless life.” Yet Jung sensed in the woman a profound religious dimension. In a single session, she was healed, when Jung saw that he “had to awaken mythological and religious ideas in her, for she belonged to that class of human beings of whom spiritual activity is demanded.”<sup>1</sup>

Do you? I’m not interested in judging those who don’t belong to that class—or those who do. Following Jesus’ lead, let’s avoid religion’s “big” error—the assumption that one size fits all. I am interested in your ultimate value, where your heart is set. That requires your knowing—deciding—your own case: Is spiritual activity demanded of you? What is spiritual activity?

Bring to mind a perfect summer day and its evening. Fill this table with your imagination of satisfactions; never mind for the moment whether you have possessed them. Think of the summer self, attractive, healthy, delighted by the air, the company, the show, the energy coiled in the body ready to take pleasure. It sounds exquisite. Someone might have said, “Simply divine.” And though only a boor would quarrel with that qualification out on the summer deck, on reflection, a sober mind—a spiritual mind—would see that drinking in pleasures is not divine, but earthly. We are wired for it, like all the animals—to pursue what pleases us and to take pleasure.

Through the centuries, religious teachings have gone off the tracks arguing that taking pleasure is wrong, especially sexual pleasure. And the 20<sup>th</sup> century reacted to those instructions like a teenager flipping off his parents. *Taking pleasure is the whole point*, we cried. Asked what were the aims proper to a non-neurotic life, Freud famously quipped, “Lieben und arbeiten,” to love and to work. Well, all of us squirrels want that, more or less.

To awake to a desire for something more is to belong to the class of human beings of whom spiritual activity is demanded. First, the eye of Spirit regards the other side of our creature nature. We are as just as wired to loathe and resist what’s bad as we are drawn to pleasures. So between feeling drawn to this and turning from that, we are like animals in a lab, slowly learning which of life’s levers to tap and which to avoid to get our way.

If the eye of Spirit in us is open, we see these things about our nature, and we are not shocked or annoyed or worried. In the eye of Spirit, we become very interested in the question, Is there a space in between me and the pleasures I desire—a space in which I am free to see but not act; to choose? Is there a space in between me and the objects I fear or hate—a space in which *I AM*, before I react or run? If such a space exists, then that is the uniquely human space, the space between heaven and earth.

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<sup>1</sup>Memories, Dreams, Reflections (Vintage Books, 1965), p. 139

If that space does not exist, well, then why shouldn't all my "conscious activity be directed toward flirtation, clothes, and sex"—for as long as I've got them?

If you know that this space exists—if even the question about the space is awake in you and your eye will not close for wondering—then you belong among those of whom spiritual activity is demanded. Spiritual activity is the practice of becoming aware of that space within you which is separate from every need and every fear. Spiritual activity is inquiry into the question, How large can this space get? Am I able to cooperate in widening my freedom to choose how I will act, and not react; to decide whether to keep drumming the thought that possesses me and obsesses me, or let it go? Teach me.

Some call this space the Witness, some the higher Self. There are other names. Christians call this space the presence of the Holy Spirit. Christians directly connect inner freedom to the action of God within you. Jesus makes the connection. It's the key to his obscure saying that whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. That may seem out of keeping with the message of love and forgiveness, but it is really only a law of spiritual logic. If you speak a word against me, Jesus says, you will be forgiven. Did you ever use his name in a crude way? Did you ever hear someone doubt that Jesus is all that he seems to claim? Never mind, says this Jesus; you'll be free of all that. But whoever speaks evil ("blasphemes") of the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven, cannot be let go. See how this works.

To speak against Holy Spirit is to deny that there exists any space between you and your reactions, between you and your desires, you and your fears. To speak against Holy Spirit is to identify yourself totally with your wired, creature needs and ways. To blaspheme against Holy Spirit is to shout, *I gotta be what I gotta be; don't expect me to change*. In the mythological language of Christianity, God Holy Spirit is the agent of possibility, of growth, of development. To deny that God moves in you to create space between your creature cravings and your true Self is to build a prison wall around your being with no doors—and to forget that you yourself built it and shut yourself in with pleasures that will not last and fears no more real than dreams.

Blaspheming against Holy Spirit manifests itself mainly in two ways. One is the arrogance of autonomy, taking pride in what we have become as if we are totally responsible for the beauty and the genius and the power. When Americans clamor to cut taxes because, as one fool said, "It's your money!" they are poisoned with the arrogance of autonomy, for the grace of God Holy Spirit is everywhere the agent of creativity in the thousands upon thousands of human hands and hearts that make any wealth possible. When people urge the expulsion of millions of immigrants whom we have ourselves drawn here to serve our cravings, the arrogance of autonomy is breathtaking—Spirit-taking, How fortunate are the citizens of this city that their mayor, a wealthy man, is committed beyond all political calculation to the vision of a nation where worship shall be free, specifically where men and women of Islam will build a center of peace and understanding in the center of this endangered, Spirit-deprived world.

The other way that we speak evil against the Holy Spirit is through endless guilt and self-loathing. See how guilt works. When you pay attention to how guilty and inadequate you feel, your ego gets the star part in your drama. It is always on stage, always in the bright lights, it is always all about me. Oh, of course the speeches in our heads yammer on that we're supposed to have done this for that and not that to this, but to no more effect than a parent's ineffective nagging of a child. The main effect of our guilt is to keep our self at the center of our concern with no space whatsoever between our essence and our fears or desires. Guilt and self-loathing squeeze Holy Spirit possibility out of our nature and reduce toward zero the likelihood of new behavior.

I suppose it is predictable that inducing more guilt has been among religion's big errors. You could think of some church doctrine as a protection racket. *You give us some guilt every week and we'll take*

*care of you, see?* Yet we ourselves are finally responsible for guilty feelings. Such a strange and powerful arrogance is implied in self-loathing: to think yourself so bad, so unworthy that not even God can help, not even Holy Spirit can reach you in the cell of your past to break you free into the Spirit of God's own Christ. Have you been there, blaspheming the Holy Spirit? I have. Jesus says we will not be forgiven. It sounds harsh. It can mean this: There is no release from the arrogance of autonomy and despair until you relax from your anxious, tight identification with your desires and your fears and acknowledge Holy Spirit. Take a breath. Get some space. God is in there in the breath, waiting, ready to reveal new possibility whenever you step outside your old story. Prayer and meditation and holy worship are for this.

Start where you are. This is the word to those who are forgiven. As Moses says to the people in one of our great mythological sermons, "The commandment I am giving you is not too hard to understand, not too difficult to do, but the word is very near to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart." So start where you are, always. Are you cynical? Are you angry? Are you full of doubts? Do you want to stop doing something so obsessively? Start where you are. Step away for a bit and see this thing of yourself with dispassion, with compassion. Just watch. Do not try to stop it or defend it. Just look. Trust. In space like this, God is active. Indeed, *this* is trusting God—more and more to see yourself and others as if from God's point of view—with so much space set between you and your desires, between your future and your past, as you imagine God sees in you. Jesus says, "Do not worry how to defend yourselves. At the right time, the Holy Spirit will teach you what you ought to say."

Friends, the word is very near. It is in your mouth, it is in your heart for you to observe. May you go into the last of your summer sensing surrounding Holy Spirit space and grace freely letting you love and letting you let go so that God's dream may come on earth, as it is in Heaven.

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