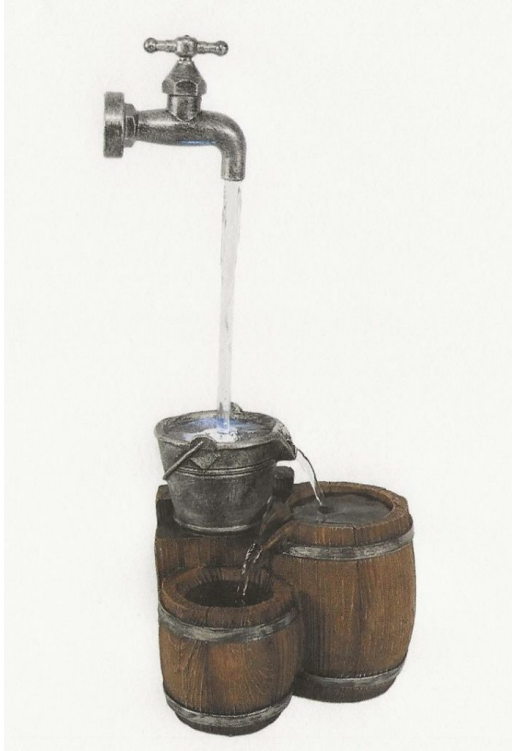


“The Echoing Green” by John Morris



The Second Sunday in Lent

March 5, 2023

The reading from Romans this morning seems very difficult to me. I wish I could transpose myself into the mind of a Greek-reading early Christian, so I could understand how these words were received! For us today, all we have is a translation of a language that was very different from ours in many ways, and separated from our era by two millennia. It's a hard gap to bridge.

Not being a scholar, I'm just going to give you my sense of what the passage might mean, or at least what it means to me. The basic point seems to be a contrast between works, and faith. Paul tells us that a person who works *deserves* their wages – it's a matter of simple justice. But to have faith in

“the one who justifies the ungodly” can give you the unearned gift of “inheriting the world.” It sounds to me like “justifying the ungodly” means showing favor even to those who don’t obey the law, who don’t “work.” Because that’s the second big point that Paul seems to make here. Along with “works” comes “the law,” and Paul is really radical here: “If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the inheritors, faith is null and the promise is void.”

What contrasts with law here? It’s the Greek word *charin*, usually translated as “grace.” This word has the same root as “charisma,” which we often forget refers to “a gift of divine grace.” So obeying the law will only get us so far; we need to ask God for grace, for favor, and Paul seems to be saying that in order to do that, we must have faith of a kind that goes beyond simply applying for our fair wages. It’s kind of unreasonable, in a way, but it’s just the sort of thing Jesus loved to tell parables about. Sure, any good worker can get their paycheck at the end of the day, but God is actually willing to love and bless us poor idiots who can’t get the job done.

Deborah’s sermon from two weeks ago had a lot to say about this theme too. She reminded us that, if we base our journey with Jesus on how well, how thoroughly, we’re able to follow his ethical commandments, *and nothing else*, we are in a real fix. It’s an invitation to constant guilt and lack of self-worth. How could what I do ever be enough, in this suffering world? I’d need to spend every waking minute writing letters and visiting the sick and the imprisoned, not allowing myself any time for relaxation or spiritual renewal or even fun. And having done that for 50 or 60 years, what would I find? That it wasn’t enough! The world still suffers, the demands on my energy and compassion are unabated. And I could surely have found an extra 30 minutes here and there to do even more.

“The law brings wrath,” says Paul. I don’t usually experience God as being angry with me, but I certainly know the feeling of being judged and found wanting, no matter how hard I try.

How does this affect my life at Seekers? I’m a member of two ministry teams, the CreatureKind Ministry Team and the Racial and Ethnic Justice Ministry Team. Both these teams are working on issues that are dear to my heart, and which could be summarized simply as “justice for animals” and “justice for the oppressed.” The School for Christian Growth is offering a class called “Protest Kitchen” this term which will try to make the connection between these two forms of justice. And last weekend, we had a retreat for the Racial and Ethnic Justice team that produced a lot of energy, ideas, and concrete plans.

I think it’s safe to say that Seekers as a whole, and I personally, have found plenty to do in living out the message of Jesus in these two areas. If it wasn’t for annoying people like Paul, I could maybe even rest kind of content and tell myself, “Yes, this is what Jesus asks of me, and so I will work really hard to follow his ‘law’ here. Do I feel like something’s missing? Well, no time to worry about that, I have another Zoom meeting to attend.”

But in this reading from Romans, we find Paul saying strange things like “God gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” And, as we already noted, he compares doing the right thing to a wage-earner getting his paycheck after a hard day’s work. We can obey the ethical law and get what we deserve, and that is “null and void” when compared with the fruits of the spirit. If I’m reading Paul right, there is a level of being, a way of conducting my life in the spirit, that goes beyond the rational, the ethical, the law-abiding.

We all know this – we really do. It’s just hard to admit it sometimes, because we feel like we’re letting down the side.

It even feels immoral, somehow, because after all, what could be more important, more Christ-like, than reaching out a hand to help your sisters and brothers, human and non-human alike?

Let me read you a poem. It's a poem about happiness, by William Blake:

The Echoing Green

*The sun does arise,
And make happy the skies.
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring.
The sky-lark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around,
To the bells' cheerful sound,
While our sports shall be seen
On the Echoing Green.
Old John, with white hair,
Does laugh away care,
Sitting under the oak,
Among the old folk.
They laugh at our play,
And soon they all say,
'Such, such were the joys.
When we all girls & boys,
In our youth-time were seen,
On the Echoing Green.'
Till the little ones weary
No more can be merry.
The sun does descend,
And our sports have an end:
Round the laps of their mothers,
Many sisters and brothers,
Like birds in their nest,
Are ready for rest;
And sport no more seen,*

On the darkening Green.

William Blake, 1789

This is not a description of some deep ecstasy, or some great work of art, or even a powerful romantic love. And it is certainly not about helping the oppressed. It is an evocation of the simple pleasure of being alive and content, in the company of family and friends, if only for an afternoon. The poet knows it won't last – Old John can't play sports anymore, and the final lines seem to acknowledge that death will come to "the darkening Green." But happiness is real, and beautiful, and if it is not God's gift, then I don't know what is. Certainly Blake, a fervent Christian, believed it was.

After all, why do we struggle so hard to bring about a world of justice and compassion? What is supposed to happen, on that impossible day when the lion lies down with the lamb and Christ's realm is here on Earth? We'll all be happy! We'll praise God and love creation and make art and play sports! We'll laugh and make jokes! There'll be dancing in the streets! We will stop seeking justice because justice is here and now. But we will not stop loving God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind – the great commandment – indeed, I wonder whether we may finally, really, start on that holy day. In Paul's words, God will give life to the dead and bring into existence the things which have never existed before.

Here is another mysterious teaching from our readings this week, this time from Jesus himself:

"The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

In New Testament, non-philosophical Greek, "wind" and "breath" and "spirit" are more or less the same word, and something of

this connection still remains in English, when we talk about "the breath of life." It's a good reminder that even Jesus had to use metaphors and figures of speech when he talked about God. In this teaching, the wind and the Holy Spirit are like each other for a couple of reasons: first, each "blows" where it chooses, not where *you* choose; and second, you know it when you hear it, but that won't tell you where it comes from or where it will go. In other words, you can't figure it out, make a plan or a schedule out of it, explain it or control it. I am justified in faith if I *trust* the Holy Spirit. If I claim to be following some law that I believe I can deduce from the way the wind blows, I am probably deluding myself.

I'll also mention that Marjory had some related things to say about this passage in her Inward/Outward reflection yesterday. This is the way she puts it: "I often stay at the level of problem-solving, missing the breeze of the spirit. I wrestle with my dilemma, tugging and pulling at a problem while I fume about losing sleep." As I understand her, this again refers to that other level of being, that life of Spirit that is different from the rational, law-abiding, problem-solving mode.

So, to return to Paul, we have the law and we have grace. Is Paul positioning them against each other, as opponents in our lives? That's not how I read it. I think he saw them as two ways of *justifying* ourselves, and he's trying to point out the danger of getting so caught up in doing the right thing that we forget to praise God every day. Perhaps he also knew the words of Jesus, "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill." This faith in the Spirit is, for me, how the ethical law is fulfilled. It's the endpoint, and it's the energy.

I want to close with another poem by William Blake, which I believe Paul would have understood and pondered. It's a warning; take it to heart.

The Garden of Love

*I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.
And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And 'Thou shalt not' writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.
And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.*

William Blake, 1794

God, please help me not to put tombstones where flowers should be. Help me remember, in my struggles against injustice, to play on the echoing green.