

The Constant Gardener

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Tom Landry, the former coach of the Dallas Cowboys – one of the longest tenured coaches in the history of the NFL – was once asked about coaching and this is what he had to say: “The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don’t want to do, in order to achieve what they’ve always wanted to be.”

I don’t know about you, but in my daily walk with God, in my effort to be a disciple of Christ, I am very often confronted with things I don’t want to do. It seems that every time I turn around in my spiritual journey Jesus is there encouraging me to behave differently than what my inclination tells me. When I am inclined to be selfish, Jesus tells me to be selfless. When I am tempted to judge, Jesus tells me to get the log out of my own eye. When I am eager to get back at my enemy, Jesus tells me to love him. When I continue to fester over grievances long past, Jesus tells me to forgive. Christian spirituality, it seems, is the life of being disciplined by Jesus to do what you don’t want to do. At least, that’s what it often feels like. And that’s why a lot of people don’t go for religion. Less and less Americans are inclined (they say) toward religion. Organized religion. Of course, I tell them they should try Church of the Palms – we’re disorganized religion. But people don’t like religion because they feel like it’s a bunch of do’s and don’ts – being told to do things you don’t want to do.

But of course that’s only half the story. The other half of the story is being what we’ve always wanted to be. Could it be true that our relationship with God is a relationship of being guided to do what we don’t want to do in order to be what we’ve always wanted to be?

You know, so often we keep ourselves from being what we've always wanted to be because we are afraid of doing what we don't want to do.

When I was young I was a basketball player. I played from fourth grade to twelfth grade. I had managed through the first several years of playing basketball not to learn how to perform a left-handed lay up. I had always shied away from making lay ups from the left hand side. I wasn't good with my left hand. And just never took the time to learn. I always went under the hoop to the right side. And even when I had to make a left-handed lay up I always did it with my right hand. Now I had managed to make my way up to being a starter but still could not make a left-handed lay up. I did a lot of things to compensate for it and to hide it, but the bottom line is I couldn't do it – and I always felt bad about it. When I got to tenth grade the Varsity coach watched me in practice the first couple of days and he pulled me aside and said, "You can't make a left-handed lay up can you?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I mean ... you can't make a left-handed lay up can you?" I said, "You're right." He said, "Well guess what? You don't make the team unless you can make a left-handed layup. So every day after practice you and I are going to practice left-handed lay ups." And so for the next two weeks after practice I stayed while my buddies were showering in the locker room – laughing, I can imagine, at my inability – and I practiced making left-handed lay ups until I could. And when I finally figured it out I felt very different about myself.

We keep ourselves from being what we've always wanted to be because we are afraid of doing what we don't want to do.

Now according to the New Testament the thing we've always wanted to be is a fruit bearer. We were created, according to Jesus, to bear fruit. It's not to say that there aren't a whole lot of other things we want to be; football players, basketball players, artists, teachers or millionaires. But Jesus tells us that there is a want that goes far deeper than all the other wants. One that is etched deep within our souls ... deep within our genetic codes. What we really want to be is a bearer of good and Godly fruit. "You will know them by their fruits," he says. "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire --for a tree is known by its fruit." "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch

that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” If you are wondering about what you’ve always wanted to be, Jesus says what you’ve always wanted to be is a fruit bearer. You may want to be a teacher or a lawyer or a doctor or a business person, but underneath all those wants is this ultimate desire to bear good fruit.

Now with this as a deepest purpose and greatest want in life – fruit bearing – God, of course, becomes the “gardener”. If our purpose is to bear fruit, then God is the gardener. God is the constant gardener, to borrow a movie title from years ago. God is the constant gardener. The one who planted us. The one who tends us. The one who expects us to bear fruit for the kingdom of God. And the thing about God is he is never happy until we are happy. And he knows we will never be happy unless we are able to achieve the very purpose for which we were planted. There may be all kinds of things we think we want to be but our greatest joy comes when we discover that what God wants us to be is a bearer of fruit.

So it’s no surprise when Paul writes to the Galatians and is trying to describe for them what the characteristics of the new life in Christ look like – he calls them the Fruit of the Spirit. This is what a mature tree in the kingdom looks like: it will bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And can you imagine wanting a better life – than a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Talk about a compelling person! And not just a compelling person – but a compelling church! Imagine being a church about which it is spoken – boy, they seem to be a community of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

But to be what we want to be – it sometimes means doing what you don’t want to do.

So when Paul writes to the Corinthians in I Corinthians 13 about love – the first of the fruit – he is writing to a community that doesn’t want to do what it needs to do in order to be what it wants to be. It doesn’t want to love. What it wants to do is divide. What it wants to do is fracture itself. What it wants to do is split over all sorts of issues – morality, religious practices, how to live in the world and not be of the world, interpretation of gifts – all those churchy things that have divided churches and congregations over the last 2000 years. Paul says, What you want to do is run away from each other.

What you want to do is bludgeon each other with your own opinion and knowledge. What you want to do is speak louder and more often and listen less. What you want do is give up on being the body of Christ. What you want to do is say to another part of the body, "I have no need of you." That's what you want to do. But love is not doing what you want to do. Love is doing what you don't want to do in order to be what you most want to be.

I know a young man who is an Army Ranger and just recently competed in the National Best Ranger Event – a grueling 60 hour non-stop event where Rangers have to exhibit their strength, ingenuity, marksmanship and agility all while basically not sleeping for two and a half days. The competition was a couple months ago and I got to watch some of it. And what was most inspiring about the competition was not the strength, not the ingenuity, not the marksmanship, not the agility – all of which were amazing. What was most inspiring about the event was learning that there is no such thing as a Lone Ranger. No, when you are real Ranger – not a Hollywood Ranger, but a real Ranger, you are inextricably connected to partner. And when you try to be the Best Ranger you compete with a partner – and if your partner falls behind you fall behind. If your partner grows weak, then you take up the burden. If your partner has to drop out – you get to drop out too. You never go it alone. You stay connected. And so the partners work, in turn, for the squad, and the squad works for the platoon and the platoon works for the company. And no one gets to say, "I have no need of you."

So Paul writes to the Corinthians and says that there are all sorts of opinions among you, there are all sorts of knowledge among you, there are all sorts of abilities among you, there are all sorts of "maturity" among you – but all of that someday will pass away. We know only in part. And when the complete comes all the abilities and knowledge and opinions and maturity will pass away. The only thing that remains is love. Why? Because God is love. God is love. God is love. And nothing, Paul says, will separate us from the love of God. God will never say to us, "I have no need of you." And if God cannot say this to us, then we do not have this to say to each other.

Presbyterians are gathering up in Detroit this week at our Biennial General Assembly and as we are in a pattern to do – we will take up some thorny issues. We will open up discussion about things that other churches may not want to talk about. Peacemaking in the Middle East. The role of gays and lesbians in the life of the Church. The definition of marriage. Gun control. Racism, Poverty, etc. etc.. The list is daunting – as is our mission in the world. And if there is such a thing as having a momentary gift of prophecy – then I prophesize that many Presbyterians will disagree with many of the actions taken. I also prophesize that what you read in the paper will only be about 20% of the truth. If that. Some of our brothers and sisters in anticipation of these things have already decided to run away. Some have said already, “I have no need of you.” Some are mounting for a fight to the death. Such is what we are tempted to do when we disagree over very important matters. And most of these things are very important matters, as were the issues faced and disagreed upon by the Corinthians.

But in the spirit of grace and peace Paul says that what we know, we know in part. What we prophesy, we prophesy in part. And when we look in the mirror we see only a dim reflection. And so in the midst of all the disagreement what are we to do? So what is the default setting? What is the trump card that must always be played? What is the gift above all gifts? What is it that we must do though we don't want to do it – in order to be what we most want to be? We must love. Love bears all things. Love believes all things. Love hopes all things. Love endures all things. Love never ends.

For this is how the constant gardener gardens. With love. The cross of Christ. Sacrificial love. Sacrifice of self for the body. A stumbling block for Jews. Foolishness to us Gentiles. But to those who are called – the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Calling us to do what we don't want to do, in order to be what we most want to be.