

Portion Control

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Psalm 16; Philippians 4:4-13

William Broyles, Jr. is a Hollywood screenwriter. He has been involved in the writing of such movies as *Apollo 13*, *Planet of the Apes*, *The Polar Express* and *Saving Private Ryan*. Another one of the films to his credit is the movie *Cast Away*. Some of you may recall the movie *Cast Away*. It starred Tom Hanks as a man, Chuck Noland, who survives a plane crash in the ocean and ends up on a deserted island – stranded there for four years to survive on his own with whatever he could eek out of the island. When Bill Broyles was preparing to write the screenplay for this movie he decided to create his own castaway experience and found a remote beach out in the Gulf of California and spent a week mostly on his own trying to experience what it might mean to be alone and survive. And while he was doing this, lo and behold a volleyball came floating onto the beach and Broyles grabbed it, held onto it, and after a while found himself relating to it, talking to it. This was the birth of Wilson the Volleyball. If you’ve seen the film you’ll remember that Chuck Noland recovers a volleyball that has drifted to shore – a Wilson volleyball -- and after a while he begins to treat the volleyball as an imaginary friend and calls him Wilson. He talks to it and sometimes even thinks that Wilson is communicating back to him. It is, on one hand, a brilliant means by which to show how deeply relational every human being is – no man is an island – we desperately crave relationship – even if we have to make it up. But on the other hand the movie suggests something that Chuck Noland didn’t have – which was any sense of the existence or the presence of God. Losing his home, losing his family, losing his contact with world – Chuck Noland found himself truly alone not having taken with him any understanding of the reality and presence of God. There is no prayer of lament, no prayer of petition, no

prayer of gratitude for having survived, no prayer at all because there is no God. No presence about him to which to relate.

We will be blessed, will we not, if we do not have to live through four years on a deserted island, or four weeks, or four days? It’s likely you and I will never be tested to such extremes – stripped of all we hold dear and left to ourselves. But to wonder about such an experience is to wonder about what our experience of the presence of God is today. If it would be our hope that if somehow we were left completely to ourselves we would draw upon the sustaining presence of God – and I suspect most of us would hope that for ourselves – the curious question might be how is it that we draw upon the sustaining presence of God today? Because of course what most of us have been taught since we were children is that the presence of God is not some kind of genie stuck inside some magic lantern awaiting our summons in order to come through for us with what we wish – but rather the presence of God is a reality imbedded into every moment. In every time. Your time, my time. This time, every time. God is in every moment.

This is what we sing all those carols about at Christmastime. We rejoice with the shepherds and wise men to see that God has entered time – or to say it more accurately God has always been in time. God is in every moment. It’s what we’ve sung about. It’s what we told ourselves.

And it’s most certainly what the psalmist tells himself when he writes, when he sings, when he prays:

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.
I bless the Lord who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.
I keep the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

“...the presence of God is a reality imbedded into every moment. In every time. Your time, my time. This time, every time. God is in every moment.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.
For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.
You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup. Words seemingly from a person whose aim and hope is to claim the sufficiency of the presence of God. Who somehow is able to see that no matter what the time, no matter what the place, no matter what the circumstance – there is this never ending presence of God. That though all else might be stripped – there remains the sufficient portion – the presence of God. That God inhabits every moment and if God is my chosen portion, my sufficient portion – then how can I ever be dissatisfied?

Think of what this means for your life? Imagine the presence of God in every moment. Imagine that you don’t have to conjure up the holy in order to find him present. Life is not some scavenger hunt for God. God is not in some hide and seek hiding place. Life is (to borrow from Brother Lawrence) the practicing of the presence of God. God is in this time.

Funny, isn’t it, that when we read the Bible or when we look wistfully at the past we convince ourselves to think that somehow God was more present in the olden days. Annie Dillard, one of my favorite writers, puts it this way:

“It is a weakening and discoloring idea, that rustic people knew God personally once upon a time-- or even knew selflessness or courage or literature-- but that it is too late for us. In fact, the absolute is

available to everyone in every age. There never was a more holy age than ours, and never a less.

“There is no less holiness at this time- as you are reading this- than there was on the day the Red Sea parted, or that day in the 30th year [in the 4th month, on the 5th day of the month as Ezekiel was a captive by the river Cheban] when the heavens opened and Ezekiel saw visions of god. There is no [whit] less enlightenment under the tree at the end of your street than there was under Buddha’s bo tree. There is no [whit] less might in heaven or on earth than there was the day Jesus said, “Maid arise” to the centurion’s daughter, or the day Peter walked on water.... In any instant the sacred may wipe you with its finger.”

And don’t you wonder about that when the apostle Paul sits down to pen his letter to the Philippians. Paul writes his letter from some form of imprisonment. It might have been a cell or it might have been house arrest – but he is locked up. Isolated. He is has been put to pasture. He has been bound to a small boundary. Cast away to a lonely island. It’s not the first time. Paul was no stranger to a prison cell. And likely as he writes to the Philippians he remembers that Philippian jail. That cell into which he and Silas got thrown after they had been beaten. That little 10x10 block. Shackled. Going nowhere. No Wilson the Volleyball to talk to. And Luke tells us that come midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns. And we know enough to know that when the New Testament figures prayed and singing hymns... they were likely praying and singing the psalms. And maybe they were praying, “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” Maybe they are praying,

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” Maybe they are praying, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name.” Or maybe, just maybe, they are praying, “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup: you hold my lot. The boundary lines, the 10x10 boundary lines, have fallen for me in pleasant places...”

It explains, doesn't it, that when Paul writes to the Philippians he says, Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Think about these things? Why? Why, for God is in these things. God is in your time. God is in your cell. God is in your hearts and minds. And if God is in your hearts and minds – then God is wherever your heart and mind may go.

St. Patrick, no stranger to a prison cell himself, is attributed the prayer called St. Patrick's Breastplate – a portion of which is printed on the cover of your bulletin. It is a staple of Celtic Christian spirituality born in the islands of Ireland and Scotland. And Celtic spirituality, if it is anything, it is the trained awareness of the presence of God in every moment. That the Trinity is not simply some philosophical or Biblical category – but is a deeply personal presence in every moment of time. We are surrounded and filled with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and that the presence of God is just as real today as he was crying in that Bethlehem night.

Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,

Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

It is I suppose what the prison dweller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, brought to mind as he sat in his own 10 x 10 cell. Put there by the Nazi's for his resistance to the Third Reich. In one of his own letters from prison to his good friend he wrote, “God must be recognized at the center of life, not when we are at the end of our resources; it is his will to be recognized in life ...”

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me.

I think about this when I think back to the days when working in the inner city of Washington, DC and it was my job to work with the aging community of a pretty rough section of the city – what was then the red light district. And I got to know in my days there a woman by the name of Johnnie Hughes. Johnnie Hughes was an older single woman, never married, who lived in a two bedroom apartment. No family to care or provide for her she was reliant upon her paltry Social Security check and that was about it. Her un-air conditioned apartment had the basic furniture – kitchen table, a couple chairs, a bed and not much else. Johnnie Hughes was the person I would make sure to visit at the end of the day. After walking the streets on those hot Washington summer days, after having to face some tough situations along the way that would cast down my spirit – I would look forward to ending up at Johnnie Hughes un-air conditioned apartment. She would pour me a glass of iced tea and find some store bought cookies and put them on a paper plate and push them in front of me. And then in her gentle, gentle way – fanning herself with her hand fan – she

would talk to me about how she had seen God that day. She heard God in the early morning when bird songs came through the open window. She saw God in the kids playing in the street. She read about God in the Bible she had open on the kitchen table. She praised God in remembering the sermon the preacher preached last Sunday. She found God in the next door neighbor who helped her down the steps. She thanked God that the pain in her knee wasn't worse than it was. When I walked into Johnnie Hughes' little cell, I walked onto holy ground. God was at the center. No less holiness here than at the parting of the Red Sea. The Lord was her portion.

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me.

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places. There was a time when I thought that was the prayer of a lucky man. You know, the guy who was fortunate enough to have things go his way and provide for himself some place nice. But God just doesn't work that way. God isn't where the beauty is. Beauty is where God is. In your presence, O God, there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me.



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Dr. Stephen D. McConnell
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Church of the Palms

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3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323