
Are We "Human Beings Having a Spiritual Experience?"

**A sermon by the Rev. Theophus "Thee" Smith
Atlanta, Georgia**

Invocation: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and our redeemer (Paraphrase, Ps.19.14).

Have you seen one of those New Age bumper stickers? I'm thinking of the one that begins:

We're not human beings having a spiritual experience . . .

You might also have seen it on a poster, or one of those websites that presents itself as spiritual but not religious. If you've seen it, then you know it's pretty long to read on a bumper sticker on the back of someone's car. But it's memorable once you get the logic of it. Here's the full quotation:

We're not human beings having a *spiritual* experience.

We're spiritual beings having a *human* experience.

That's a quotation from the Catholic thinker, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He's often called just "Teilhard." He's perhaps best known for his idea of the "Omega Point," the ultimate reunion with Christ towards which the entire universe is evolving, he declared. That idea already connects us with our gospel reading for today, this first Sunday after Christmas.

"In the beginning was the Word," we hear from the first verse of the gospel of John today. And the gospel goes on to identify that Word with Christ. "All things came into being through him," John says, "and . . . What has come into being in him was life" (Jn. 1.3-4). Of course, that's why the book of Revelation calls Christ the "Alpha" the Beginning, as well as the "Omega" the End; taken of course from the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet, *alpha* and *omega*.

Now with his Omega Point idea, Teilhard exemplified the Jesuit principle of "finding God in all things." Indeed his thought is so inclusive that he has been embraced by many non-Christians; other spiritually minded people. So that's why you can find his ideas quoted even on a bumper sticker nowadays. I want to re-state that quotation here in the form of a question so I can make it clear for myself. Here's the question: Are we "human beings having a spiritual experience?" Or rather are we "spiritual beings having a human experience?"

To address that question I want to relate it to our reading from Galatians appointed for today: "Now before faith came," St. Paul wrote to the Galatians,

Before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law [in custody] until faith would be revealed . . . But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian . . . (Galatians

3:23,25)

Right here, I wonder if what Teilhard meant by "'human beings having a spiritual experience' can include what St. Paul meant by being 'imprisoned and guarded under the law.'" If we think of ourselves as human beings having spiritual experiences, it's as if we are being tutored or disciplined under the custodianship of religious laws and teachings'"as if we have to strive to attain or achieve their spirituality.

But on the contrary, what if we think of ourselves as already spiritual'"already spiritual beings who simply exist to discover, explore, and enjoy what it means to be human; what it means to be in these kinds of bodies and have these kinds of souls or psyches, these kinds of sensibilities and abilities? It's an adventure of discovery and exploration that even the angels don't have the opportunity to enjoy. What a difference, yes?

Be that as it may, I want to show you a contrary and challenging picture of what it can look like, in Paul's phrase, to be "'imprisoned and guarded under the law,' or "'in custody' or "'subject to a disciplinarian.'" Consider a classic Bill Watterson cartoon. It's from his comic strip of Calvin and Hobbes, where one of his child characters is looking very peeved. The boy's hair is a complete mess and there's a resentful expression on his face. Then the caption underneath explains why he looks so bitter. With an intense frown he's complaining:

"'God put me on this earth to accomplish a certain number of things and right now I am so far behind I will never die!'

That's it. He's verry unhappy, the caption says, because the few things that God sent him to accomplish are still undone. In fact he's so far from getting them done that he will never be able to die because there will always be more to do. And he will have to live forever not in bliss but in order to complete that dreadful list of God's assignments for him!

Wow, what a picture! It's a cartoon, of course, so we're supposed be laughing. But we could just as easily be crying with the poor kid. Indeed something more sinister may be the cartoonist's real intention. He implies that there may be a pernicious side to godly commitments. Consider for example the phrase that Atlanta pastor Rick Warren has popularized among evangelical Christians: "a purpose driven life." Perhaps such a life can have a shadow side when we reflect on the possibility of obsessive-compulsive behavior even in the name of God. Is my purpose-driven life like that cartoon?

Now I need to careful'"I want to be careful here not to debunk or belittle someone's deeply held and God-authenticated spirituality of the "purpose driven life." And later I will come back to a purpose driven life that is in accord with our Lord's life of grace and redemption that is not a compulsive life of endless labor. But first let's test that question of whether my life is one of perpetual God-given assignments that are so endless that I will need an eternity to accomplish them. Is it possible that I've crafted for myself not an eternity of blissful enjoyment of God, as affirmed in our Catechisms of faith? Rather am I projecting something more like hell'"the kind of hell that we see in the ancient myth of Sisyphus or Tantalus?

You remember Sisyphus and Tantalus. Sisyphus was punished by the gods to spend eternity performing the task of rolling a huge boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down. Then he had to begin his task all over again. And there was the punishment of Tantalus. He was condemned to stand under a tree of luscious fruit with his feet covered in a pool of refreshing clear water. But poor Tantalus could never enjoy either one. Whenever he tried to eat the fruit a wind would blow the tree limb away as he reached up. And whenever he reached down to draw water the pool would sink and escape his grasp. Like the myth of Sisyphus it's another image of hell: hell as the endless thwarting of our will and the inevitable frustration of our "'purpose.'

But let's get back to the lighter side with more comic or cartoon images. For example there's the hilarious case of the purpose-driven life of Jake and Elwood Blues in the film classic, "'The Blues Brothers.'" It begins with brother Jake, played by John Belushi, being released from prison. His brother Elwood, played by Dan Aykroyd, picks him up and the next day they drive to the Roman Catholic orphanage where they grew up as schoolboys.

"We have to see the Penguin," Elwood tells Jake. "Penguin" is the boyhood name they have given to the Mother Superior at the orphanage. It's because she's short and totters a little when she walks, and with her black and white nun's habit the effect is'"well, you get the picture! In the course of conversation with their "'spiritual mother' the brothers learn that the

orphanage is about to be closed by the city for failure to pay taxes. It will take \$5,000, Mother reveals, to save the orphanage.

And that's how the Blue Brothers acquire their "mission from God" to save their childhood orphanage. And that's how they come to commit all sorts of mayhem, misdeeds and disasters for the rest of the film. But these all add up to hilarious happenings that produce one of the most comic films ever made. We all enjoy for example the high-speed car-chase through downtown Chicago when the Blues Brothers are being pursued by the police. They say that filming that scene reportedly involved wrecking over a hundred cars! But from the perspective of the Blues Brothers there's nothing to worry about it in all this. "They'll never catch us," one brother assures the other. "We're on a Mission from God."

Well, how about our "mission from God?" Presented in our scriptures appointed for today we get two contrasting images. In our first reading from Galatians there's a vivid contrast between the cartoon image we started with "the image of being "subject to a disciplinarian," and even being slaves" "enslaved to carry-out our mission, on the one hand. On the other hand the apostle mandates a more gracious path: "receiving our adoption as children" and becoming "heirs" with Christ.

Indeed, like or unlike the orphaned Blues Brothers, St. Paul declares that we have been rescued by adoption. By our Christian identity as "children of God" we have received in our hearts the very "Spirit of God's Son." And because we have received that Spirit we are internally and perpetually invoking God as our own loving Father; not a taskmaster, not an oppressor who's punishing us with endless tasks that we can never fully achieve. It's as if we too are experiencing the birth of the Christ-child in us during this Christmas season. As the apostle says,

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Gal.4.4-7 chk)

So on this first Sunday after Christmas we have an appropriate and timely image of our own inner child as a Christ-child. It's an incredible theology of our incarnation. In our Christ-child hearts we internalize Christ's Spirit as adopted children. And that's why we observe 12 days of Christmas to practice incarnation; practice internalizing our Christ-child. In a similar way we take time later in the church year to observe 50 days of Easter in order to practice resurrection; practice all the ways there are to "rise from the dead."

What would it be like to spend these 12 days of Christmas practicing our Christ-child adoption, no longer pursuing endless tasks as if we were under a disciplinarian, rather receiving gracious identity as children of God? Would it be receiving our true humanity as graced children of a loving God? Would it be like the phrase Teilhard gave us: no longer human beings trying to have a spiritual experience, but spiritual beings exploring, discovering, enjoying what it means to have human experience as the children of God "each of us, a Christ-child of God.

My brothers and sisters I invite you to observe the 12 days of Christmas, as converging with the entire created world towards the Christ life that is a life of grace, beyond law, beyond works, beyond judgment "the resurrection life of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As our gospel of John declares today: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (Jn. 1.16). For God's sake, for the sake of the Christ-child of this season and the Christ-child in us, let us receive the fullness of that grace.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.