

## The Point

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 18, Year A, RCL, Track 2. Ezekiel 33:7-11. Psalm 119:33-40. Romans 13:8-14. Matthew 18:15-20. September 10, 2017. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:8) So begins today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans.

One of the wisest friends I’ve ever had said this to me on a significant occasion: “If we’re not here to help each other, what’s the point?” I often quote that, because it says something about the human situation that is succinct, memorable, and—from any sensible moral standpoint—profoundly true.

Yesterday I decided to add something to that aphorism, at least on certain occasions: “If we’re not here to help *and delight* each other, what’s the point?” What was the point of doing what I was doing yesterday—checking out the annual Kent State University Aeronautics Fair—if I wasn’t there to be delighted and share that delight with others? I’m not a professional aviation person; I wasn’t a volunteer; I had no interest in the event except the enjoyment of aviation itself.

You and I participate in a universe created by a God whose chief characteristics are delighting in things, helping when things go wrong, and being very consistent, steadfast, and faithful in all this. This is how we describe God’s love: steadfast care for and delight in his creation. We are supposed to model our attitude and behavior on this—which is the point about being made in God’s image: not that we look like him but that we are set up to act like him. God is love; so are we, when we are being faithful to his image.

Notice that this adjusts to the disproportion in agency—the difference in the power to act—between us and God. We are not omnipotent, omnipresent or omniscient: we can’t do just anything we want, we aren’t everywhere at once, and we don’t know everything. But we still have love as our core characteristic. As does God.

Now, we all know we very often miss the mark in this love business. We are hardly steadfast, faithful and consistent in delighting in things and being helpful. We don’t always care about the right things or in the right way. But God, who already has this covered because he delights in us and wants to help us—and who is *very* constant in both those things—has chosen ways of intervening in our situation that do not turn us into little machines or puppets or slaves but still offer us a way out of the problem of our moral and aesthetic inconsistency.

“Aesthetic” is a big word but I have to use it because it is the adjective that corresponds to our perception of, and our rational and emotional response to, what is beautiful—that is, what delights us. “Moral,” or “ethical,” goes with what we ought to do when things go (or might go) haywire; aesthetic goes with what we perceive and respond to as lovely, wonderful, delightful, and so on. I believe, and so do many theologians, that you can’t have a morality or ethics that’s worth much unless you also have an *aesthetic* that is worth something. Because unless we pay attention to both the righteousness *and* the loveliness that are rooted in God, we misunderstand who we are and what we ought to be about.

So when I was out yesterday enjoying the beauty of a sky full of clouds and sunshine, enjoying the various behaviors of the adults and children, enjoying the amazing machinery and procedures of aviation, the history and hope behind and ahead of it all—when I was engaged in these things it was making real for me the delight that God takes in what his creation does and what his creatures do, and it was giving me reasons to live better, to care more for others, to care more for what we on this planet are up to, for the whole life of the world—to care, to love as God loves, but according to my history, my capabilities, and my calling.

Part of my calling is to try to explain to Christians who inherit a tradition that has sometimes been suspicious of pleasure why aesthetics—the philosophy of delight—is as important to knowing God and doing his will as ethics—the philosophy of doing the right thing, of helping ourselves through self-discipline and helping one another through generosity and compassion. If we do not see the universe as full of God’s glory, God’s beauty, God’s delight—if we do not see God sharing this, spreading it around with extravagant abundance—we will not think there is enough oomph in existence to keep us going. We will run up against my friend’s comment, “What’s the point?”

Love is both doing good for the life of the world and taking delight in the glory infused throughout the world by its creator. The alternative to both those things is despair. If we aren't here to help one another and delight in one another and all that God has made, what's the point?

So that we will have the help we need in doing this, God sent Jesus and Jesus gave the Holy Spirit. It is part of God's compassionate righteousness and abundant delight that this is so. God delights in us—though not in our sin, which blights his image in us—and he wants us to delight in him and everything he has made.

C. S. Lewis once said that “joy is the serious business of heaven.” That joy was particularly close to me for a few hours yesterday. I hope it will be close to you and to me many times, many days, and on into always.