

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT AND SANITY: *Faith Casts Out Fear*

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PREPARATIONS

When I look at the bare fields in winter, the sunflowers are there.
When I gaze at the sunflowers I see the scarred snowy fields.
This is how you tell you are ready to leave
this beautiful and deadly place,
depart
and return there,
 annihilated,
healed.

 While there is time
I call to mind Your constant unrequited
and preemptive forgiveness.

And remember You are not
and never were the object
of my thought,
my prayer,
my words
 but rather I
was the object of Yours!

And I think I'm beginning to learn finally
what everything has been trying to teach me
just recently
again, and
for the past fifty years of forever:
total love for You-the mysterious gift of my life-
truly felt at each instant
and every day
of deepest recollection,
grace-filled apprehension, it *would*
dispel all fear, as well
as the love that requires a response-
from others, other
ghosts (or
even
You!)

And I have always failed, yet
always know IT was there-this utter love-
And so am ready with the speechless
universe all word
my company,
my light,
my sunflower. Dark morning thoughts-...
(Franz Wright, *God's Silence*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, pp. 113-114.
Used with permission.)

From his poems I gather that Franz Wright knows the struggle with demons, and perhaps with the demon of addiction. But he has found God and thus a measure of peace and wholeness and élan for life, and even won a Pulitzer Prize for poetry. I want to claim in this article that he has become, what all of us human beings must become if we want really to live, namely a believer, someone who acts as though the first commandment were true.

Notice that this poem ends with the words “Dark morning thoughts...” It is winter, and he is looking out on a bleak landscape where the sunflowers are only there in hope. He goes there and is annihilated, he says, and healed. He remembers the truth that God is not the object of his thought or prayers, but that he is the object of God’s thought. Like many of us, it seems, Wright has learned in the pit of darkness that we are never alone, nor without light, because God desires us into being, keeps us in being and will keep us in being forever. And that God does this, purely out of love and compassion, not for anything God can gain from us. Moreover, he has learned what all of us addicts have to learn or else wallow in the smell of our fear, namely that belief in and love of God casts out fear. In addition, he knows that each day we have to ask God to pick us up from the floor where our fears will keep us nailed, and that God will respond. Most of the themes of this article are touched in this moving and powerful poem.

GOD SEEKS US

Often enough we speak of seeking God. But our seeking of God rests on a deeper reality, namely that God is always seeking us. That’s a point Wright makes when he says:

And remember You are not
and never were the object
of my thought,
my prayer,
my words
but rather I
was the object of Yours!

Here he is reiterating in other words what the First Letter of John says: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be

the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). We exist only because God desires us to exist, wants us; God’s desire, God’s wanting, creates us and keeps us in existence. We forget this basic truth at our peril. It is the basis of the First Commandment.

The Benedictine monk and spiritual writer Sebastian Moore notes that our desires are elicited by the existing beauty or attractiveness of something or someone. Something or someone is there for us to be attracted to. But with God it is totally different. We do not exist for God to be attracted to us. God’s desire creates what God finds desirable. God’s desire for us makes us, and makes us desirable to God. We exist only because of God’s desire, and we will exist forever as the object of God’s desire. God is always seeking us. And our desire for God is only the correlative of God’s prior desire for us. So we seek God only because God first seeks us and in desiring us creates in us a desire for God.

This is the deepest meaning of the creation stories of the book of Genesis. God calls into existence everything that is “not God” out of generosity and abundant love. God does not need anything else to be happy; God does not create because of loneliness or any other need. Everything that exists exists only because God wants it to exist, not because it must exist. And everything that exists will continue to exist only as long as God wants it to exist. There is nothing any created person or thing can do to assure existence. Moreover, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God; hence, we are like God and will exist forever because God wants this. And because God wants human beings to live forever, somehow the created world will live forever since human beings are bodily creatures with ties to the whole universe. Moreover, Christians believe that God has become a human being with ties to the whole universe, another assurance that somehow or other the universe will last forever. This is what God wants; we have nothing to do with guaranteeing our existence or our likeness to God; that is God’s doing. Again this is the meaning of the first commandment: “I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2). Only God is God; everything else is created by God, and, therefore, dependent on God’s desire.

The crazy thing is that what we have purely as gift we try to guarantee by our own efforts. We want to control things. One of the characters in the P.D. James

detective story, *Devices and Desires*, says: “We need, all of us, to be in control of our lives, and so we shrink them until they’re small and mean enough so that we can feel in control” (1990, p. 248). This is the temptation described in chapter three of the book of Genesis. The serpent insinuates that God doesn’t want us to live forever, doesn’t want us to be like God. In effect, he says, “God doesn’t want any rivals; that’s why he doesn’t want you to eat of the tree of good and evil. So if you eat of that tree, you can be like God and have control of your destiny.” But, in reality, God wants us to be like God; God creates us in the divine image and likeness. And God wants us to live in friendship and cooperation with God forever. Addiction begins with the belief that we can control our existence through some means other than faith and trust in God. “A bite of that apple will make me whole,” that belief says. And look at what happens when the first human beings take the bait; they become afraid of and hide from God and from one another. Before they tried to gain control of their lives, the story goes, they were naked and were unashamed; they were, we might say, totally transparent and unafraid before God and one another. But now they put on clothes and hide because they are afraid. Pretty soon they are killing and raping, engaging in endless warfare, and finally in chapter 11 of Genesis find themselves unable to communicate with one another at the tower of Babel. Crazy indeed.

So the first thing we need to get straight is that God loves us first, seeks us first. Any move toward God in love, or for that matter toward anyone else, is only possible because God loves us first, creates us by desiring us into being. The first commandment rests on this simple reality. God alone is God, the Holy One who creates for the sheer joy of it, out of abundance, not any need. We are not needed; but we are wanted by God. And, I believe, all God wants from us is our friendship. If we can ever get that straight, then we are on the road to living without fear in this world, living as the images of God we are created to be.

A personal story. Fourteen years ago when I was provincial of the New England province of the Jesuits I had cancer of the vocal cord which was treated by radiation. About a year later, after a particularly difficult meeting with a group in the province, I made my annual retreat. Needless to say, I was anxious and fearful at the beginning of the retreat. But I repeatedly heard God saying to me something like this, “I am God, and you are not. I don’t need you; but

I do want you.” One evening as I was out walking the thought flashed through my mind, “You could be dead now.” It was true, and the recent cancer treatments had brought this home to me. I broke into a smile, almost a laugh, because of the mood of the retreat and what God had been saying to me during it. Almost immediately, I thought, “Someone else would be provincial, and the province would get along without your so-called leadership. So why are you worrying so much?” I was free of fear at that moment and for some time afterwards. But, of course, the experience gradually faded into the background, and my default of wanting to be in control has too often taken over, along with the return of fear, because, of course, trying to be in control is a hopeless task.

SEEKING GOD

The desire of God that creates us puts in us a correlative desire for God. Thus the deepest desire of the human heart is for union or friendship with God. Let me develop this notion now. We are made in the image and likeness of God; we are icons of God. Now I want you to reflect with me on the revelation that God is triune, three who are mysteriously one. Over the centuries Christians have tried to get a glimmer of understanding of this mystery of who God is. The best that theologians have been able to do is to say that in God there are three “persons” who are distinguished from one another by nothing but their relationship to one another. That is, they are three so in love with one another, so one with one another, that they are only one God. Within God, we can say, friendship reigns supreme. God is a perfect dance, three so perfectly in tune with one another that they are One. Now this God of perfect harmony and friendship creates and sustains the whole universe. As Ignatius of Loyola writes in his *Spiritual Exercises*: “I will consider how God dwells in creatures... I will consider how God labors and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth” (Sp. Ex. 235-236). And this God who dwells in, labors in and works in all creatures is the Three-in-One Mystery of perfect friendship and harmony. So at the heart of the universe pulses the most amazingly beautiful harmonious dance.

The writer Frederick Buechner describes an experience of such a dance when he was at Sea World on a beautiful day as six killer whales were released into the tank:

What with the dazzle of the sky and sun, the beautiful young people on the platform, the soft southern air, and the crowds all around us watching the performance with a delight matched only by what seemed the delight of the performing whales, it was as if the whole creation—men and women and beasts and sun and water and earth and sky and, for all I know, God himself—was caught up in one great, jubilant dance of unimaginable beauty. And then, right in the midst of it, I was astonished to find that my eyes were filled with tears...

I believe there is no mystery about why we shed tears. We shed tears because we had caught a glimpse of the Peaceable Kingdom, and it had almost broken our hearts. For a few moments we had seen Eden and been part of the great dance that goes on at the heart of creation. We shed tears because we were given a glimpse of the way life was created to be and is not (*The Longing for Home*, pp. 126-127).

This is the way God wants the world to be because God can only create what is “not God” on the divine model; God has only Godself as model, and God is, we might say, harmonious dance, perfect friendship.

Given this theology, we can say that we, who are images of God, are made for similar relationships of friendship, friendship with God, with one another and with the whole of creation. This is the deepest desire of our hearts. When, like Buechner, we get a glimpse of this beautiful dance, we want it and we are, at the same time, heartbroken because it seems so far from what we have. Nonetheless, deep down we want only this, to be in tune with the dance that goes on at the heart of creation, to be friends with God. If we cannot have this, we cannot be happy. Hence, we are made to be a people of the First Commandment, people who recognize that they are made by and for God and live out of this recognition. We cannot have strange gods before us and have what we most want in this world—to live in friendship with God, with one

another and with the whole of creation, to live in harmony with the great dance of the Trinity that goes on at the heart of creation.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Well, if God and we both want the same thing, what's the problem? Why is it that so many of us feel at a great distance from God? The problem is fear. We imbibe fear with our mother's milk, it seems. We are afraid of others, afraid that they will take what we need or have, afraid that they will not accept us, afraid that they will hurt us. And we are afraid of God, afraid of closeness to God, afraid of God's rejection of us, afraid of being swallowed up in God. False images of God colonize our minds and hearts; so instead of expecting a welcoming look and an embrace of friendship from God, we expect angry judgment and rejection. We don't need to go into all the reasons for the fears that bedevil all our relationships including our relationship with God. Let's just take it for granted that fear inhabits our hearts, minds and souls like a fungus eating away at any peace we might have.

Yet for Jesus fear is the opposite of faith, not lack of belief in certain doctrines. Often in the gospels we hear him say things like, “Do not fear, only believe” (Mark 5:36) or when the disciples are terrified in a storm, “Where is your faith?” (Luke 8:25), or “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:3). Because of his own faith Jesus did not fear the leaders of his own religion, nor the Roman procurator who could and did put him to death.

When we are afraid, we begin to hedge our bets on God, begin to hoard like the rich man who built bigger and bigger barns in the gospel story. The temptation in the Garden is based on fear. The serpent insinuates that God is a rival to be feared, rather than a Father to be loved. In their fear they run away from their friendship with God; they no longer believe in God as the good Creator. Given the reality of the good world God creates and how good the good God is, their fear is irrational. They are actually insane, at least in this regard. They already had, by God's good will and grace, what they tried to gain by their own efforts; hence, they are afraid and try to hide from God, a futile and ultimately self-defeating action. The story of my retreat illustrates how fear arises from the insane desire to be in control of life.

My mention of insanity just now must have struck a familiar chord with anyone who knows the Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous or similar programs. All who have dealt with their own addictions and with those of others know what insanity is. It is the belief that we cannot live without whatever it is we crave. In the *Big Book* one woman puts it this way:

And still by the time I was thirty years old I was being pushed around with a compulsion to drink that was completely beyond my control. I couldn't stop drinking. I would hang on for sobriety for short intervals, but always there would come the tide of an overpowering *necessity* to drink and, as I was engulfed in it, I felt such a sense of panic that I really believed I would die if I didn't get that drink inside (3rd Edition, p. 306).

For addicts, what we crave becomes a graven image, an idol. It takes the place of God. This is insanity indeed. Of course, many of us get away with it for years because we seem to be sane. In an insane world sanity and insanity easily pass for their opposites. Remember, according to Mark's gospel, Jesus' family thought him insane, and the religious leaders considered him possessed by a demon (Mark 3:20-35). But the "cure" of our fear provided by the substance or activity or other person is only temporary, and gradually, but almost inexorably, more and more of the "cure" is needed to quell our fears. Our insanity becomes more and more evident, and we hit a wall that, if we are fortunate, forces us to face the truth. We are offered a glimpse into our insanity and there find God patiently waiting to welcome us back to sanity. To this experience I now turn.

THE TURN TO SANITY

Over the past year or so I have been impressed by the number of times I have come across people who are grateful for things that seem quite frightful. I have met depressed people who are grateful that they got depressed, sick people who are grateful for their sickness and alcoholics who are grateful that they are alcoholics. Many of them have said something like this: "I am grateful because the depression (alcoholism,

sickness) drew me back to God. I had lost contact with God, and now I've come back home." This is the message I take from a conversation in Gerard Goggins' novel *Anonymous Disciple*, based on the lives of two now deceased Jesuits of my province who found peace and serenity and even joy in the fellowship of A.A. In this scene Jim, the talkative one and the protagonist of the novel, is visited in the hospital late one night by Fred, the other Jesuit. Jim engages in this soliloquy.

"I wonder what kind of man I would be if I was not an alcoholic. I wonder what kind of Jesuit. I'd probably be proud and off the track. I'd have wound up being an apostate or a ladies' man. I would have been a disgrace to the Society. And instead, because I'm an alcoholic and because of A.A. and because of you, Fred, I have found love and peace and fulfillment. I have found friendship, and I have found my vocation even if it's not the one I expected" (pp. 167-168).

Jim was grateful for his alcoholism because it brought him back to friendship with God and with many other people as broken as he had been and still was. Moreover, he was a very happy man who drew people to him as light draws insects.

When I was provincial superior of my province in the 1990s, I said at our assemblies on more than one occasion, and only half jokingly: "When we entered the Society of Jesus, we didn't have to believe in God; we could believe in the Church which was growing by leaps and bounds, or in the Society of Jesus which was also enjoying the same kind of success. Now, with our numbers declining and our seminaries and novitiates half empty we can find out whether or not we believe in God." What I meant is what I am saying here. When things are going swimmingly for us, we can easily forget our Maker, imagining that everything is going so well because we are so good or so smart or so capable; and we can easily get into the mindset of believing that we deserve all the good things we have. We may even harbor, deep in our hearts, the unspoken thought that God is quite lucky to have us on his side. I know one man who is grateful that he is an alcoholic. He says, "Because I am so competent, I easily forget that all is gift. At least in this one area

I had to admit my absolute need for God. It has led me to the further realization of how much I use my competence to give me the illusion of control."

We come back to the First Commandment. We are never in control because we are creatures; only God is in control. You might say that the act of faith is a three step process, in fact the first three steps of the A.A. program. The first step is the recognition that one is powerless over alcohol. This recognition is the beginning of wisdom because we are powerless over more than alcohol; we are powerless over life itself ultimately. Some of us, maybe a great many of us, need to be brought up short to come to this realization, to the realization that much of our life is ruled by insanity. Insanity is the belief that we can control life. And this insanity leads to many of the useless fears that bedevil us. The second step begins with coming to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. In other words, we come to believe in the existence of God, a God who is waiting for us to turn to him. But the second step can remain only notional if it is not followed by the third step, making a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand Him. The third step is the act of faith. I put my uncontrollable life in God's hands in trust and hope, and then I do what I can to let God do the job of saving me. Faith requires the action of turning our lives over to God; in fact, it requires a repeated action every moment of our lives. Thus, faith is a way of life. We can only live without anxious fear insofar as we can turn our lives over to God. Sanity depends on the third step, and that dependence never ends. Hence, in a real sense all sane people are recovering addicts, because sane people are aware how fragile faith is and how easily they can succumb to idol worship.

HELP MY UNBELIEF

This brings me to my final point, the need continually to ask for greater and greater faith. In Mark's gospel Jesus is faced by a father whose son is possessed by a demon. The man says to Jesus, "but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus replies, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." And the father blurts out, "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:14-29). This is a great prayer, and one that I constantly recommend to people. Like this man's faith, our faith,

in practice, is small. Yet, small though our faith is, there is at least a glimmer of belief. Because our faith is fragile and constantly under threat, we need to pray continually, "Help my unbelief." "Help me to believe more and more fully; help me to give up my futile attempts to control my life by my own efforts. Help me to enjoy life, not live in terror of it."

As we near the end of this article, I offer you another poem by Franz Wright, this one from the Pulitzer Prize winning book *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*.

One Heart

It is late afternoon and I have just returned from the longer version of my walk nobody knows about. For the first time in nearly a month, and everything changed. It is the end of March, once more I have lived. This morning a young woman described what it's like shooting coke with a baby in your arms. The astonishing windy and altering light and clouds and water were, at certain moments,
You.

There is only one heart in my body,
have mercy
on me.

The brown leaves buried all winter creatureless feet running over dead grass beginning to green, the first scent-less violet here and there, returned, the first star noticed all at once as one stands staring into the black water.

Thank You for letting me live for a little as one of the sane; thank You for letting me know what this is like. Thank You for letting me look at your frightening blue sky without fear, and your terrible world without terror, and your loveless psychotic and hopelessly lost
with this love
(Franz Wright, *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p. 5. Used with permission).

According to the book jacket, Wright works at a mental health center now. Perhaps that is where he heard the woman speak of snorting coke while holding her baby; or perhaps it was at a Twelve Step meeting. Perhaps, too, that woman is “your loveless psychotic and hopelessly lost” person upon whom he can, because of God’s grace, look with love. The poem does sum up, in much shorter space, what I have been trying to say with so many more words.

CONCLUSION

God, the Mystery who is three in one, perfect friendship, creates a world of unimaginable beauty and goodness purely out of generosity. The world and all in it, including us, exist because God wants it all. Human beings are the conscious, thinking, willing icons of God. We are made to be God’s conscious images in this world. And we are made to be friends of God and of one another and cooperators with God in the tending of our planet and its environs. To live happily and creatively in this world, all we have to do is live with faith in God, that is, with trust that no matter what happens God will take care of us. Insofar as we have this faith we live without fear. We are desired into existence for friendship with God, and, as Augustine wrote, our hearts are restless until they rest in God. But, for some reason, we are bedeviled by fears, we do not believe as we ought. Hence, we become addicts of one kind or another, looking for some thing or some person who will assuage our fears and make us feel safe. But all such searching is idol worship.

Finally, we must come to the realization that only God can save us from our fears and our addictions. Many of us need to hit a wall in order to have a chance of waking up to the reality that we are living insane lives as long as we believe that we can control things on our own. When we wake up to the real world, we find God patiently waiting for us, ready to help, ready to save us and make us whole. As the late Scottish philosopher John Macmurray said long ago: “The maxim of illusory religion runs: ‘Fear not; trust in God and He will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you’; that of real

religion, on the contrary, is ‘Fear not; the things that you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of.’” Those who live the way of life of the Twelve Steps follow the maxim of real religion and have a shot at living without fear. With this faith in God we can say with Franz Wright:

Thank You for letting me live for a little
as one of the sane; thank You for letting
me know what this is like. Thank You
for letting me look at your frightening
blue sky without fear, and your terrible
world without terror, and your loveless
psychotic and hopelessly
lost
with this love.

RECOMMENDED READING

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