

Harmonious Days

One of the themes of the book of Acts is the importance of choosing what God wants over what other people want. It's in today's reading, Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than any human authority." It's in the apostles' trial by the ruling council, the Sanhedrin, in Acts 4:19: "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." (That, by the way, is quite similar to something Socrates said when he was on trial.) And that sounds reasonable: do what God wants, even if other people disagree. That just leaves one little problem: how can you tell what God wants?

It's hard for us doubters. And I've got to tell you: I have doubts that make Thomas look positively credulous. In particular, I have doubts about the channels by which God is traditionally said to communicate with people. The book of Acts is full of these: almost every chapter has someone witnessing miraculous signs, having divinely inspired dreams, being visited by angels, or hearing voices. But when I hear about people who claim to have received miraculous and explicit communications from God, I'm skeptical. Remember how Oral Roberts said that God was going to call him home if he didn't raise eight million dollars? Nor do I take dreams as coded messages from God, not when there's some simpler explanation. For example, if I had been fasting like Peter in the book of Acts, and if I then had a dream in which I was offered a big dish of roast pork, I don't think I would take this as permission from God to modify the Jewish dietary code. I'm skeptical about hunches. I have hunches, as we all do, and sometimes they turn out to be right. When they turn out to be right, I brag about them: I tell Kelly, "I just knew that was going to happen." But as for all the hunches that turn out to be wrong, well, I don't tell anyone about them; I just conveniently forget about them. I'm skeptical about gut feelings: for me, these often turn out to be nothing but my own prejudices masquerading as inspirations. I'm skeptical about divination: in the book of Acts, the apostles cast lots to determine God's choice for an apostle to replace Judas Iscariot. Come seven, come eleven, from your Father in heaven. But isn't the creator of the universe able to communicate without the help of a pair of dice?

At bottom, I just don't think of God theistically. I don't think of God as being like a person, a man with a plan, a guy in the sky who plays us like a video game, hitting control-D to influence the Dice, control-A to send an Angel, control-S to Smite.

Last week, Reverend Curran encouraged us not to settle for a stale catalog of the things we don't believe, but to engage in a positive quest for the things we do believe. So here's something that I do believe: I believe that God is right here with us, and I believe that we can know something about what God wants. I'm going to ask the choir to help me with a demonstration of what that means to me.

[Clear Fountain refrain, choir only.]

For me, God is like a song. Some days, when I'm living well, I can hear it clearly; other days, not so much. Some things help me hear the song better: for me, meditation helps, and walking in the woods helps. Once I've focused my attention on God's music, I have some access to God's will, and the will of God as I understand it is essentially this: that I make my life sing along.

[Refrain again, with my sung harmonies.]

There's freedom in this: God doesn't tell me what to sing. I can sing it like I feel it. I can live out my own dreams. God is there in our dreams; when we're living well, what we want is what God wants for us.

But there's also the possibility of getting it wrong. That traditional concept of sin; the ancients were onto something there. Sin is disharmony; as Reverend Curran likes to say, it's being out of right relationship with God. It sounds like this:

[Refrain again, with my sung disharmony!]

Thanks, choir!

What God wants is for us to make our own music, harmoniously with God's. Of course, that's only a metaphor. Try another, if music isn't your thing. God is like a beautiful garden; how will you tend it, and what will you plant there? God is like an elegant mathematics; what new theorem will you contribute? Your answer doesn't have to be like anyone else's answer, and it doesn't have to be remotely church related. But however we are called, we are called into harmony.

There is excitement in this, an excitement that (it seems to me) runs through the book of Acts. I was an undergraduate the first time I read it from beginning to end, and I still remember how surprisingly compelling it was, taken like that, not cut up into little lectionary slices but read as a whole story. If, like me, you are skeptical of all the miraculous communication from God, you can take those parts as literary license; you can read all those miraculous communications as dramatic metaphors for the personal discernment of God's will. That's how I like to read it. It helps me to hear more clearly the author's excitement about the new-born church. Those were heady days, days of the early church in Jerusalem, days of the church branching out to embrace the Greek-speaking, Gentile world. Dangerous days, yes, risking imprisonment and worse, but days energized by the knowledge that we were doing the right thing, choosing what God wants over what other people want, doing what Jesus, as some of us still remembered him, would have wanted us to do. Remember the way we were, says the author? Remember how we shared all our property in common? Remember the risks we ran? Remember Peter and his dreams, remember Paul and his great change of heart, remember the fine, eager boldness that cost our dear Stephen his life?

That same kind of excitement is with us now, because in our own way we too are in the early days of a new church. Decades from now, people will look back on these early days of Open Prairie with the same kind of excitement. We will look back and say, remember that meeting on the Flanders' deck? Remember that meeting on the Ernst's back porch? Remember that first meeting as a new church, out at Hornbaker's on a beautiful spring morning, and the thrill of seeing one car after another come up the road? Remember when we met at Pilgrim Park, remember when we met in the Prouty Building? Remember our fabulous Reverend Dr. Curran Reichert --that "Dr." part is in her future now, of course, but it will be their past. Remember our first church home, the one that we converted from an

old livery stable? And a hush will fall as the oldest of us share our memories of the early members and all that they did. And maybe it will seem miraculous. Remember how much they gave, those early members, though they seemed to have so little? Remember who gave that first big chunk of our first building? Remember who gave what it took to put in that first floor? Remember who gave what it took to put in the stage lighting? (That hasn't happened yet, but it will!) Remember who gave what it took to pay off the mortgage? Remember who endowed the first permanent youth ministry position? Remember the *second* building? Remember when we founded the school, the clinic, the retreat center, the touring company?

Maybe they will even remember me, Adam Webber, the church's first keyboardist / composer / webmaster. "Adam?" they'll say, "I think I've heard of him. Wasn't he the husband of She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed?" But, seriously, I hope I am remembered better than I deserve, because I deserve to be remembered as Adam the Reluctant, Adam the Unready, Adam the Hypocrite.

I must confess this to you: when the first vote went against us back in the Hampshire Colony days, when we failed to get the two-thirds majority required to call Reverend Curran, my sorrow was mixed with relief. I thought then, "At least I can get my life back now. At least I'll get Kelly back. At least I'll be able to sleep in on Sundays again. At least the work is over."

But the work wasn't over. Since then I've written many songs: written them, but not acted on them. You heard me sing many of them in this church. I sang: "I arise today // through a mighty faith." But I did not arise; I hunkered down. You heard me sing: "Fear not, said the angel." But I was afraid. You heard me sing: "Don't be afraid to lose yourself // that's no great price to pay // It's just someone you didn't want to be forever anyway." But I clung stubbornly to my old self. You hear me sing: "It's just a walk in the park, It's just a leap in the dark // But as long as you're falling, dive!" But I clung to the edge and did not dive. You heard me advise my children that "There's no one else like you // Just be true." But I was living an untrue life even as I said it.

Today I am a professor of computer science, a subject I've studied pretty diligently for twenty-five years, and I have spent a lot of my energies on academic teaching and research and writing. I've published one textbook on the subject, and I have another one coming out in June. But for the last four years I have struggled with a growing sense of disharmony -- a feeling that this was not what I should be doing. I knew that the composing and writing and speaking and performing that I was doing for Hampshire Colony, and for Open Prairie, and for the chapel at Monmouth College, brought me a unique kind of happiness -- the exciting kind of happiness that comes with right harmony. But for the last four years I have not done anything about it.

Now I have taken a step toward being more true, with Kelly's help, and Curran's, and Debby's, and Susan's, and Wendy's -- a step that I'd like to share with you today, though I guess some of you have already heard about it through the grapevine. I have quit my job as a professor, and I'm going back to school. I will be attending the Earlham School of Religion, which is a Quaker seminary in Richmond, Indiana. It's a program that combines two-week intensive courses in Richmond with online study, so we won't be leaving Princeton -- at least not immediately, and I hope not for a long time. I don't have a plan for what I'm going to do when I finish. I think it would be a

mistake to do too much planning about it at this point: it feels more like a leave-your-nets situation. I want to find some way to use my gifts for composing and writing and speaking and performing to touch people's hearts. And if I could have my wish, it would be to remain in Princeton, to be a part of this community and its story. My feeling is that the most exciting part of our story is yet to come.

I started out today by telling you some of my doubts about the miraculous channels by which God is traditionally said to communicate with people. But to be completely honest, I also have to tell you about a strange thing that happened to me. It happened late last fall, when I was feeling particularly conflicted and low. I'd been wrestling with all this, losing sleep over it, unable to stop thinking about it, unable to tie it up with any kind of neat explanation. I was desperate for some kind of explicit communication from God: God, if you're the cause of this knot in my life, tell me how to untie it! It was a Wednesday, chapel day at Monmouth, and I was scheduled to speak and sing at the chapel service. I finished teaching my class in the Math/Science building, gathered up some music, and set out across campus to the chapel. I started to cross the quad. There was no one else in sight. That's when I heard the voice.

Yes, I heard an actual voice. As Dave Barry says, I am not making this up. I don't suppose it would help for me to assure you at this point that I'm not crazy. (Reassuring people that you're not crazy is a sure sign of madness.) But don't worry: God didn't tell me to go save France, or imitate Origen the Adamant, or anything rash like that. Instead, I heard these five very loud and clear words: "I really love you, Adam!"

There is, of course, a perfectly rational explanation for this. Most likely, there is some student with a boyfriend named Adam, and he or she was calling to him, and the whole thing had nothing to do with me. Or maybe Kelly sneaked over to Monmouth, staged the voice just to cheer me up, and then slipped away again. But no matter how rational I try to be, I can't quite explain the whole thing away. Even if it was some perfectly ordinary student Eve calling across the campus to her student Adam, there remains the remarkable coincidence that it came to my ears at just that critical moment: that utterance, "I really love you, Adam," which in my forty-four years I have never before heard shouted out like that. And it is just the sort of wonderful, reassuring, maddening thing I imagine God would say. Like an inscrutable mystic master, God rarely gives direct answers to questions. We try all kinds of crazy ways to figure out what God wants: we interpret our dreams, we follow our hunches, we roll the dice. But I think God rarely tells us exactly what God wants, because often, what God wants is for us to figure it out for ourselves, to work out our own harmonies to God's great song.

What we get instead of an answer is a reassurance: the music with which we are struggling to harmonize is, after all, a love song.

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