

EUCLID & JESUS

Unity: How we long for it. How seldom we see and experience it. And when we do, how long does it last?

Do you have any friends who think religion is boring? My hunch is that lots of the folk who are “out and about” right now, doing everything except going somewhere to worship, have concluded that religion is all cut-and-dried – reducible to a few moral platitudes that they already know, and that they do not need any help in applying.

But I suspect that most of them have never gotten far enough into the WAY – far enough along on the PATH – to realize that our WAY of Life is about a relationship with the Holy Spirit who guides our lives and directs our efforts in everything we do. Prayer is the core and center of everything.

Only, most prayer in our day and time is not the core or center of anything. It doesn't take long and it is not very interesting just to tell God from time to time what you want and what God needs to do about some of the things you care about.

There are always some others in the mix, but most of the people I know really do try hard to be good and to do good – most of the time. Then it's on with life as we are trying to own and control it. And that's about all there is to religion – until or unless we run into problems serious enough and severe enough to cause us to seek help from a higher power.

Even so, is it really all cut-and-dried – simple or obvious? Do we all pray to the same God? In theory, perhaps. Yet I happen to know that when we stop being theoretical and general – when we turn into the personal and the relational – it is suddenly a huge and complex affair. We seek dialogue with the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord. Only, none of us have the same images or the same convictions about what the Holy Spirit is really like or what the Spirit wants of us.

Some people have been raised by parents who of course had parents of their own, and the family has passed down their convictions that no matter how good God is, essentially the Divine Being is pretty stern, demanding, maybe just, but not very kind if we stray or make mistakes. And sitting next to them is a person who has always assumed

that the Holy Spirit is gentle, patient, very kind and forgiving – but of course the Spirit would never dream of sending them on a difficult assignment or require anything from them that they did not find pleasing and pleasant. And sitting next to *them* is a person who conceives of the Holy Spirit as sort of a “vague, oblong blur.”

So perhaps we all pray to the same God, but in reality, and where it matters, nothing is as simplex or easy as we often imply. Why do I keep wanting more and more of you to get into a Disciple Band, and when you do, why do I urge you to study Luke and Acts and Ephesians together? To be sure, I want us to know the Bible better. It is our common language and heritage, and it is the source of most of our information about those who shaped and formed our Faith – our WAY of Life. But I care about something far more important than that. I care about your prayer lives.

I want you to know the Gospel of Luke with more and deeper understanding all the time. And I urge you to study it together so that you have the balance of each other’s perspectives and experiences brought to bear on your own growing awareness of who Jesus really was and what He was actually like. Why? Because the only thing we really know about the nature of the Holy Spirit comes from our awareness that the Holy Spirit is our Risen Lord. Sometimes we get to thinking that we know who the Holy Spirit is and what the Holy Spirit is like from some other source. But there *is* no other source. The Holy Spirit is like what Jesus was like. The rest is being made up to suit somebody’s fancy.

This connection between us and the Holy Spirit is a subtle gift we have from God, who has arranged it for us by sending the Messiah. Even what we know about God has been greatly altered and made far clearer by this Jesus. “King of kings, and Lord of lords” may seem like a grand title perhaps, but even that is hardly tribute enough for what we really owe to this incredible man who spent such a short time among us, yet who changed everything for us.

Jesus is endlessly fascinating, and we never get Him figured out or pinned down in some “right or orthodox” way. But the Holy Spirit carries on the mission and purpose of Jesus in our world, and our relationship with the Holy Spirit is how *we* get into the story and purpose of what God is doing in and with our own lives today. So what each of us knows and understands about Jesus is critical – essential – to our prayer lives. The heart and core of our WAY of Life is our prayers, and the heart and core of our prayers is our relationship with the Holy Spirit.

So, Bruce has this “thing” about Disciple Bands, and he happens to like the Gospel of Luke. Do you really think that is what it is about? Do you really think that is all there is to it? Well, maybe it’s time to shift gears for a bit.

If the Creator is intelligent and purposeful, that has endless implications. NSS, you say? Elementary and obvious. But I encounter many groups and churches that do not seem to know this. They think the Creator is not very intelligent, and in fact encourages ignorance and has a bit of a vendetta against intellect. The Creator does not know that the world is round; does not know that science has learned many things in the last two thousand years; does not like it when people grow or change; does not approve if we try to understand anything differently from what Athanasius claimed to be the ultimate “truth” in 350 A.D.

My father used to say, “If you have a God who is afraid of your questions, afraid of science, afraid of truth, afraid of your doubts – you need to go find a better God.” Nobody can genuinely believe beyond the level of their honest doubts. Jesus was not negative, but in the context of His true doubts, He was the greatest doubter of all time. He questioned so much of the traditions and assumptions of His Jewish Faith – which He dearly loved, by the way – that it finally burst the borders and morphed into a whole New Covenant, a whole new religion: a whole new comprehension of what our relationship with God is for and about. We do not crucify somebody for saying the same thing everybody else is already saying.

Anyway, I assume that everybody here believes that the Creator is intelligent, and far beyond our very limited capacities to imagine. And we believe that the Creator is purposeful, and far beyond our abilities to comprehend meaning or purpose.

So yes, our ancient myths contend that some form of “rebellion” entered Creation, thus making life much harder and more broken and discordant than the Design intended. I do not always know how to separate myth from fact. I suspect that the forbidden fruit was part of the plan. God gave us free will on purpose: wanted us to be conscious – wanted us to know and learn the difference between good and evil. I suspect that conscious awareness and the ability to choose are necessary to this “classroom,” this “boot camp” – this place of preparation for the realms to come. I suspect we are *supposed* to learn, to grow, to evolve and develop – until we choose God on purpose and in love, not fear; until we turn away from self-will, deceit, pride,

and loneliness because we are sick of it. So my suspicion is that the “wild card” of our free will and our self-centered choices is part of the Design.

All of life is a journey between two gardens: The Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane. The Garden of “my will, not Thine, be done” and the Garden of “Thy will, not mine, be done.”

So we hunger more and more as we go: for unity, because of love; for truth, because we long for it; for community, because all alone there is no meaning or purpose or relationship. But always we have to choose. And God is patient beyond belief. We have to choose: Jesus, because we love Him and need Him; God, because we dare to trust him; each other, because we have come to care. Until we make such choices, we are not into religion – at least not this one.

Then one day it starts to dawn on us: Maybe God is not as dumb as we thought, and not as obtuse either. All of Creation, even on our low level of understanding, is designed with more purpose and meaning than we have realized. Endless possibilities and potential are built into the Design. But endless traps and temptations are possible along with the possibilities, because it is not a mere puppet show. However temporal, everything here is very real, and the choices matter. But there is a safety valve built in. It is a *temporal* realm. We cannot do *eternal* damage. Why are we so afraid of making a mistake? Can we make a mistake so bad that God cannot fix it? Death will give us a chance to get our bearings – to see what we have done and become. And then we will pick it up again from where we left off, only in a new and higher realm.

My philosophical musings are not important, except to me. I share a tiny piece of them to encourage you to keep working on your own. It is important for each of us to pay some attention to what we think is going on here. Otherwise we get lost in a sea of fog, and all hope and light grows dim until we get lost in depression. By the way, depression is the number one mental problem of our age. I wonder if that could have anything to do with the fact that so many people have been turning away from the church in greater and greater numbers.

Anyway, back to those of us who have seen and claim and find ourselves drawn to the Messiah of God. Not everybody is drawn to the Messiah of God, of course. That does not seem strange to me. But more and more I care about those who are, and less and less about

those who are not. Remember Dorothy Sayers? “As I grow older and older, and totter toward the tomb, I find that I care less and less who goes to bed with whom.” Yes, well, I think I have already spent more time than I should have worrying about those who do not want to know or love Jesus. More and more I am grateful for those of you who do.

So who was Euclid? About 300 B.C., in the city of Alexandria in Egypt – the greatest city of learning in the ancient world – there lived this mathematician by the name of Euclid, who specialized in Geometry. He is often called the “Father of Geometry.” He wrote a text called *Elements*. It became one of the most influential works in the history of mathematics. It was a primary text for teaching Geometry from the time Euclid wrote it until early in the twentieth century.

In *Elements*, Euclid deduced principles of Geometry from a small set of axioms. Essentially, this is a claim that we can know things we otherwise would not know – by taking things we *do* know and, following certain principles, letting them lead us to conclusions about things otherwise hidden from us. It is, of course, a very familiar practice in the world of science. Strangely, it is not very familiar in the world of religion.

Euclid’s first ten axioms are the most familiar. The eighth axiom, for instance: “If equals are subtracted from equals, then the remainders are equal.” Isn’t that fun? Teach your daughters: Never marry somebody to save them. Choose a partner who wants to put in as much as you do. Otherwise it will get more and more lopsided as you go.

But I wanted to mention the sixth axiom: “Things that are equal to a third thing are equal to each other.” (Or “Things that are equal to the same thing are equal to one another.”)

So you will accuse me of extrapolating, as well you should – but I don’t care. I find this a fascinating axiom when I try to apply it to relationships. And cutting to the chase: If both of us are related to Jesus, what does that do to our relationship with each other? If both of us have a love-bond with Jesus, is it not inevitable that we will find a love-bond forming with each other?

Please don’t go naive or Pollyanna on me here. Some of our very best relationships have been difficult, demanding, and just plain hard at moments. Are none of us married? Do our children never concern us? Relationships are built and designed for our progress and our

growth. Support and affection and understanding are wonderful too, but if you have a relationship with someone that never stretches you, never challenges you, never brings you to awareness and new vistas that you did not have before, then that is not one of your better relationships.

But my question is: If we are both related by a bond of love with Jesus, will that not have some impact on our relationship with each other? I ask the question because it seems clear to me that in the “life of the church,” at least in many places in our time, people work hard not to allow their relationship with Jesus to have any impact on their relationships with each other. Put another way: The relationships people have with other church members are frequently no different than their relationships with anybody else. And sometimes people even tell me that the friendships they have with people *outside* the church are more important or meaningful to them than the friendships they have *inside* the church.

Does this surprise me? No – it merely makes me sad. I trust Euclid’s sixth axiom. If two people are in a deep love-bond with Jesus and they do not feel a powerful love-bond forming with each other, then somebody is shielding from it – somebody is stopping it on purpose. We do have free will. We do not have to open ourselves to such things if we do not want to. And in fact, as all of us know, it takes some willingness, some risk, some conscious choice on our part to allow a love-bond to grow and thrive.

We have endless rituals and rules of etiquette and safe behavior to help us get through almost any gathering of people, in almost any setting, without letting things get beyond the confines of safe and pleasant exchanges of nonpersonal, insignificant comments and conversation. That’s not all bad, of course. Who wants to have deep, heart-to-heart sharing or confrontation every time they turn around? Lots of times important things are shared and exchanged in settings that do not seem to be fraught with a serious or intense atmosphere. And besides, authentic relationships grow best when not forced. I am not suggesting that we should rush them. I am just asking quietly: Are we sometimes stopping them on purpose?

If over time you do not find love-bonds growing deeper and stronger with other members of your faith family, something is stopping it – something is preventing it. You are cutting yourself off from one of the most important blessings of the Christian Life.

Please let me add: If you were a “normal” congregation, I would not even bring up this subject; it would be too soon. But there are many deep and wonderful relationships in this church. That is encouraging. Jesus said: *“To those who have, will more be given.”* He did not say that this is fair. He just said that it is the way it is.

We need love-bonds and we need strong relationships if we are to be bold enough and brave enough to live the Christian Life in any of its authentic dimensions. If we are open to the Spirit’s guidance, there is no question about it: More and more friendships will grow among us, and we will know that Jesus is at the center of them. They will be more profound than “normal” relationships, and they will support and sustain us in ways we never imagined to be possible when we were new on the Path.