



NORTHMINSTER Baptist Church

"THE SECRET IS COLLABORATION"

A Sermon

by

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Scripture: I Corinthians 15:8-11

One of the oldest of all questions in the religious realm is this: what does God do and what do we humans do in the drama of events? Here is a specific moment in history: what part of it do you attribute to Divine activity, and what part of it to human initiative and energy? In a sense, many of the divisions

that exist at this moment in the American Church can be traced back to the way this one question is answered.

For example, over on the extreme right are those denominations who believe that God does practically everything and we humans do nothing in the drama of existence. They put all the emphasis on Divine initiative and action and discount as hardly being significant at all the activity of humans. "Let go and let God" is a familiar slogan with people like this. Their model of Divine-human interaction is a complete emptying of self on the one hand and total absorption of one being into Another on the other hand. "God is everything, I am nothing" becomes the ideal pattern in this way of thinking. I once heard this position depicted in a very graphic image. It seems that an American Indian was converted to this form of Christianity, and he went back to the reservation to share his new-found faith. However, he seemed unable to get the message across in words, so he resorted to more tangible means. He went and found an earthworm and set it down in the middle of a circle of dried leaves. Then he set the leaves on fire, and the people watched as the worm instinctively recognized its danger and began to try to escape, turning first this way and then that. However, in every direction it was met with a wall of fire. Finally, realizing that the situation was hopeless, the worm crawled back to the center, as far as it could get from the heat, and visibly went limp, giving up the effort to escape altogether. At that point, the convert reached down and plucked the worm out of the flames and said, "This is what it means to be saved. When we abandon all efforts to do anything for ourselves, becoming absolutely immobile and helpless, then is when God becomes active, but not before." This image sums up very well the thinking of those conservative groups who put almost the whole emphasis on the God-ward side of the equation of history. "I can't, but He can," "God is everything, I am nothing," become their watchwords, and it follows logically that groups like this put little emphasis on education or social involvement in any form. They view the human role in the drama of history as largely passive, as being acted upon rather than acting. God is Subject, we are objects in this particular answer to the question: "What does God do and what do we humans do?"

But of course, since life as we know it usually has a bi-polar structure, it is not surprising to find other groups of Christians way over at the other extreme.

These are the folk who place the emphasis largely on human initiative and action. To be sure, God is not left out altogether. He was present at the beginning — creating the world to operate according to certain principles, and He will be around at the end to give us a grade on our performances, but during the time in between, we humans are pretty much on our own. “The heavens belong to God,” these folk are fond of saying, “the earth — it belongs to us; that is, what is done here depends largely on human ingenuity and goodness and courage.” There is no such thing as Divine intervention or miracle or rescue in this way of thinking. To expect such is regarded as infantile regression, wanting to stay a baby when in fact we have to grow up and take responsibility for ourselves and the earth and all the rest. This is the way your more liberal denominations approach the equation of history, and again it is not surprising that they had a high commitment to education and political action and whatever comes of purely human initiatives. If the words “Let go and let God” epitomize the folk on the extreme right, the words of the great pioneer in social work, Jane Adams, epitomize the left: “If not now, when? If not you, who?” The heavens, remember, are where God works. The earth — it belongs to us and everything depends on how well or how poorly we choose to act.

Now admittedly, I have stated these two positions in a most extreme way, but they do form the framework of American Christianity and all of its various denominational expressions, and the question remains: how are we to understand the activities of Divinity and humanity in the events of history? It will probably not surprise you to hear me say that personally I am not comfortable with either one of the positions, for neither of them “squares” with what I see in the sweep of Holy Scripture or with certain experiences that I have had in the pilgrimage of my life.

I came to realize a long time ago that the Bible is so rich and diverse a religious document that you can find support for almost any position if you ignore the context or isolate certain parts of it to the exclusion of all the rest. Even an atheist can point to the words, “There is no God,” in Psalm 14:1. Of course, the whole verse reads, “The fool sayeth in his heart, There is no God,” but if you take a “Yellow Pages” approach to the Scripture, almost anything can be supported. Therefore, I am not thrown off that advocates of both of these extremes can cite chapter and

verse again and again to make it seem that God does it all and we humans do nothing, or we humans have it all on our shoulders and God's role is confined largely to the beginning and the end. However, when I refuse to get mesmerized by any one part, but step back and view the document as a whole, the feel I get for the Divine-human relation is not that of a solo at all but some form of a duet, a collaboration, almost the image of a dance, you might say, where one Partner invites the other to participate in a shared adventure, and there is response and something comes of it that neither one of the two could have created by themselves.

This is the sense I get from the experience of Abraham and then from that finest of all his descendants, the man Jesus of Nazareth. Abraham was confronted one day by a God Who spoke of things he would never have dreamed possible had he been left on his own — a land to call his own, descendants more numerous than the sands of the sea, a name that would be remembered throughout all of history, a way by which all the families of earth could bless themselves. This represents direct intervention, I would have to say, not some watch-maker-like-God Who creates a world, winds it up, and then goes off to leave it until at last it runs down, No, here is intervention in the midst of history, God calling an individual by his very own name and offering to make certain things possible that clearly would have been beyond the reach of this individual's natural powers. It was an invitation to share in a more-than-human enterprise, yet notice closely that Abraham was not asked to go limp like that worm and have all this done to him passively. There was a role for him to play in this new "dance step" if I can call it that. In fact, what was asked of Abraham was utterly unheard of for that moment of history. He was to leave his clan and country of familiar surrounding, and venture out toward a land that would be shown him as he made the journey. At a time before individualism had even been clearly conceived, this was quite a challenge, yet Abraham accepted — he joined the duet, stepped out on the floor to learn a new dance step, and this was the beginning of Biblical religion — not God doing everything and human beings doing nothing or human beings doing everything and God doing nothing, but a mystery of creative collaboration when the two became one and yet remained two at the same time — neither one absorbing the other into themselves, but dancing, if you please, as only two

can dance. I am convinced this is the secret of authentic Christian experience and true religious creativity.

This is what I see most clearly in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. He was by no means "a limp leaf on a wet log," allowing Himself to be object before some overwhelming Subject. He acted with all the marks of true individuality, yet at the same time He went out and prayed all night again and again and claimed that none of those extraordinary things He did were His own completely, but in conjunction with the Father Whose working enabled Him to work and Whose giving made it possible for Him to give. That sense of two becoming one and yet remaining two resounds through all His days and nights, and yet I do not know if I would have understood this really had it not been for experiences of my very own that follow this same pattern of "duet" and "dance" and collaboration, rather than solo or absorption or utter passivity. The most vivid case in point was my recent experience with the lectures at Yale. I was invited to do these some two years ago and immediately began to collect material and give thought to how I wanted to approach this project. I was anxious that the timing of preparation be right — not too early that the material would be stale by the time of the actual giving of it, nor too late so as to be rushed or pressed. I devised in my own mind how I would set aside the month of January to do the final forming of the lectures, and thus I began. But by the end of the second week, although I had worked diligently for several hours each day, I had gotten absolutely no where. Not one word had gotten set down on paper, and to be honest with you, a sense of panic began to set in. I thought to myself: "Here I have had two years, and now I am about to make an absolute fool of myself." All kinds of self-recrimination and anxieties swept over me, and one afternoon in deep anguish I laid down my pencil and took the whole situation straight to the Father in what might be called "an exercise in honesty." I openly acknowledged how locked and immobile I was at the point of creativity, and the panic that was building up because of this. Please understand that I did not hear any audible voice or see any visual images, but after I had emptied myself before my Maker, the impression came to me: the people at Yale would like to renegotiate this contract with you. They would prefer that Jesus of Nazareth give these lectures, for across the years, the words that have really been significant have all emanated from Him. However, and I smile now when

that exist at this moment in the American Church can be traced back to the way this one question is answered.

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effort, it has not been just me at work, but Christ working in me." You have to have experienced this kind of creativity in order to understand it fully, but I am here to report that **there is something to it**, and the conviction has grown on me that the way the Beecher Lectures got done is a good way of doing all of life. The contract that was offered to me for that project is a contract I am prepared to sign for every day and every project. It is living the way Abraham was invited to live, the way all his creative sons and daughters have lived, and it is available at this very moment to whoever is gripped by its promise and is willing to start learning the dance step of collaboration.

I do not know how you hear this. I imagine that most of us here decided a long time ago against the kind of infantilism where God does everything and we humans do nothing. That is not likely to bear problems for most of us. But to say that God really does collaborate with individuals like ourselves in the day to day tasks of life — that is the puzzler. I want "to go public" this morning and say that it is my experience that God is more than the Alpha and Omega in the drama of history. He is in it with us now — not as the only Actor, but as a real Actor. There is a way of doing life collaboratively, a duet and not a solo. If the possibility intrigues you, let's talk about it. I'll be only too glad to share how this might become an actuality for you.

It is possible to share the adventures of life with God — not exclusively as object or subject, but as partner. There is a way to learn to dance.

What about it?