



NORTHMINSTER Baptist Church

**3955 Ridgewood Road
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“God Is An Amateur”

A Sermon

by

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Scripture: Genesis 1

I have alluded before, I think, to an incident in the life of Sir Christopher Wren, the architect who had so much to do with the rebuilding of London after the terrible fire in 1666. The most ambitious of all his projects was St. Paul's Cathedral. It took him thirty-five long years to complete this task, and when it was done he personally escorted the then reigning monarch, her Majesty Queen Ann, throughout the building and awaited breathlessly her reaction to it. She summed up her feelings in three adjectives: “It is awful, it is amusing, it is artificial.” Imagine how you would feel if words like these were used to describe

the masterpiece of your life! However, Sir Christopher's biographer reports that he heaved a sigh of relief and bowed gratefully before his sovereign. How on earth could this be? The answer lies in the realm of linguistics, for back in 1710, when all this was taking place the word "awful" meant "awe-inspiring," the word "amusing" meant "amazing," and the word "artificial" meant "artistic." You see, language is a living, moving dynamic thing. Words change from age to age, and this is the point that needs to be taken into account in relation to the title of the sermon this morning. Back last Monday when I said in the office that I wanted to preach on the subject "God Is An Amateur," believe me, eyebrows were raised all over the place. While nobody said it in so many words, I could tell they were thinking: "Has he fallen out of his tree, or is this some desperate effort to drum up a crowd on Labor Day weekend?" Thus I very quickly pointed out that what happened to the words "awful" and "amusing" and "artificial" had also happened to the word "amateur." It goes back to the Latin root "amore," which means "to love," and originally stood for the person **who did something for the love of it. They were not paid to do or forced to do it in any coercive way; they did it out of what Rollo May would call "positive intentionality,"** for no other reason than they wanted to and were able to and found it their joy to do so. Originally then, the antonym for "amateur" would have been "slave." someone who was forced to do something from without, but now, of course, the popular meaning of the word has shifted significantly. We use it today in reference to competence more than motivation. An amateur is one who does not do things as well as a professional. That has become the antonym for amateur rather than "slave." Not only is he or she not paid for what they do, they are not as trained or skilled as the ones who act professionally. Now **obviously the modern meaning is not what I want to say this morning. My intention is to get back to the root-level, not only of a familiar word, but of reality itself; that is, both God's nature and our own as human beings.** There is something about this concept of an amateur — one who does what he or she does for the love of it — that is very close to the heart of things as they are interpreted by the Biblical writers.

For example, as I read a few moments ago that poetic hymn of creation called Genesis one, Did not you sense behind it and all through it the very thing the word "amateur" stood for originally? The ancient

writers were struggling with that most ultimate of all questions: "Why something and not nothing? Where did everything come from and why?" And the answer they come up with is a Creative Power Who in the deepest sense of the word is an "Amateur;" that is, He does what He does because He wants to and is able to do so. There is not a hint of coercion or drivenness about the images of Genesis one. No one put a gun to the Creator's head and said: "Make world or else!" The whole process from beginning to end is characterized by the words: "Let us . . . call something out of nothing, cause light to shine in darkness, take the chaos and step by step shape it into increasing forms of beauty and meaning." The spirit of the whole thing is that freedom and competence and immense delight. Seven times in this one account the Almighty looks at what He has done and says with relish: "It is good! It is good! It is very, very good!" There is nothing desperate or needful about God's involvement in this process. In one sense creation seems to be profoundly unnecessary to Him. He did all of this because He wanted to, not because He had to, and this one fact says volumes about our world and how it came to be in the first place and why God relates to it as He does. For one thing, it posits joy as the Alpha and Omega of all existence. "Why something and not nothing? Where did everything come from and why?" is answered by the image of a Power Who found His own aliveness to be so joyful that He decided it was too good to keep to Himself. He wanted others to get in on some of the ecstasy He was experiencing; therefore, the decision to create was an act of generosity, not of selfishness. God called all things into being, not in order to get something for Himself, but rather to give something of Himself, and that is such an important thing to know.

This also provides a clue as to how God has been merciful and patient across the centuries with our kind of world. If we had been necessary to God; that is, if some of His very existence had been tied up with our being one way or another, He would have long ago invaded our planet by force or given up on us all together. That He has continued to work with us so patiently on the original terms of creation is a powerful sign that He really is an Amateur, not in the sense of being an inept Bumbler, but in the sense of doing what He does for the love of it. If He had not wanted to do it on His own or found delight in that movement from nothingness to chaos to ever increasing forms of beauty, do you think He would still be at it, given all the resistance and opposition we have thrown up in

His face? You could not pay someone enough or coerce them externally to put up with what God has had to put up with over the long history of this planet. Only an “amateur” in the original sense of that word would still be around, for is it not true that we do for love what we would not do for any other reason? Ask any parent who is worthy of the name or a spouse why they “bear all things and believe all things and hope all things and endure all things and never give up,” and the answer inevitably is not money or constraint or any other external force; at the bottom line is love — amateurism in its original sense. I watched my mother-in-law patiently care for her husband through fifteen years of slow deterioration that is called Parkinsonism. This meant getting up forty times a night, never being free to go anywhere herself — incredibly demanding — and she did it without a murmur. Why? For the love of it, because deep down it was what she had chosen, intended, wanted to do out of the center of her being. This process described in Genesis — God surveying all His options, then freely deciding which one He wanted to do, beginning to act on it with resolve and dispatch, and then being pleased with what He had done and was doing — this is the essence of the term “amateur”, and it not only sheds light on the very nature of God, and explains who He is and why He does what He does, but it also suggests who we are and how we ought to do life at the deepest level.

Have you ever thought of Genesis one as being about us as well as God and the creation of the world a paradigm of how a full functioning human being operates in our kind of world? “Amateur” is a word that applies to us too, not just God. We are made in His image, remember — meant to do with the strength of our lives what He does with His. But the moment I begin to think down along these lines and lay the pattern of Genesis one alongside my life, a great sadness comes over me, and the familiar words of St. Paul become existentially real: “We have all sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) That is it in a nutshell, I — we — all of us have failed to be the “amateur” we were meant to be and have become galley slaves instead, doing things, not for the love of them, but for all kinds of reasons that do not originate in here but out there somewhere. Honestly now, how many of your weeks follow the pattern laid out in Genesis one? That means at the outset you carefully survey all your options and then freely pick the most appealing one. Then with zest you throw yourself into that task or tasks, and come

Saturday night, you look back on what you have done and exclaim joyfully: "It's good! It's good! It's very, very good! I'm glad I chose it. I'm glad I did it. I'm pleased with what I have done!" In all honesty, I do not know if any week of my life could be described that way, and this is tragic, for like Paul says, this is "falling short of the glory;" this is being less than I have it in me to be as a child of God's image.

How have I lost my "amateur status?" Why are so few of my actions done for the love of it and so many put on me from outside? How is it that I who was born to be free have allowed myself to become little more than somebody else's chattel property? There are no single or simple answers to so awesome a question, I suppose. As I analyze my own experience, I can identify several clues. For one thing, I did not do my homework thoroughly at the beginning of my pilgrimage of personhood. I did not set out, like Columbus, to explore the continents of my inner being, to discover there precisely what kind of hand I had been dealt in creation, my particular set of potencies and capabilities and weaknesses. Well into my adulthood, I had to acknowledge that I was still largely a stranger to myself. I really did not know much about what the Psalmist calls: "all that was within me," and how on earth can one play intelligently in a game if at the outset you do not even pick up your hand and see what kind of cards you have been dealt?

Once it dawned on me how largely unconscious I had been up to that point, I began to wonder why and encountered the age-old realities of doubt and fear. Somewhere early in my life I had picked up the notion that there was nothing of worth inside of me, that I was largely a nothingness, a void, a big fat zero. I have shared with you before the message that was ground into me in those early days; namely, "If you are ever going to amount to anything, you have got to make **something of yourself**." I took that to mean that as I was, I did not amount to anything, and that if I was ever going to acquire density and significance of being, it would have to come from somewhere else. That was the beginning of a ceaseless effort on my part to get what was outside inside by achieving and competing and striving, like Willie Loman, "to come out number one man." With this sort of scenario, there is little wonder that I did not invest much on "an inner journey." Why put forth effort to dig in a place you had already concluded was empty of anything positive? Why search for a treasure in a field which you had come to believe was inherently barren? I realize now that this negative image

of self played a major role in my not doing the homework that is essential to becoming an amateur in the original sense of that word.

The other problem I detected was a sense of fear as to what I would find in this "basement of being" called the inner self. I did not grow up every hearing the name of Sigmund Freud, but the overflow of what he thought had filtered down to the place where I was shaped, and it served to make me very uneasy about "the all that was within me." A kind of pop-Freudianism depicted the unconscious as the place where all kinds of brutal and destructive forces were on the loose and this served to give me a primordial fear of this aspect of my being. "Better let sleeping dogs lie" was another message that got conveyed to me, which is the other reason for my having gotten well into adulthood without every having delved deeply into my own individuality.

And this lack of self-knowledge only played into the hands of those people who did have specific needs and plans into which they wanted me to fit. A friend of ours in Washington distinguishes between "clear" and "unclear" people, and she rightly notes that "the unclear" or the confused are no match really for folk who have themselves together and are only too ready to line you up in their causes. My belief that value really was "out there" and not "in here" made me even more vulnerable to these forms of "take over," and I cannot tell you the number of times I found myself involved in projects and activities for which I had no personal taste at all. My reason for doing these things was not internal at all. Some "clear" shaker and mover had come along and swept me up before I knew, and if you want to know the polar-opposite of being "an amateur" in the original sense, this is it — up to your neck in projects that mean something to somebody else, but have no real significance to you whatsoever. You talk about slavery — this may not be the formal institution of being owned by another, but on the psychic level, there is not much different.

This, then is precisely where I found myself not too many years ago — racing around breathlessly with all kinds of irons in the fire, but not really personally invested in any of it, and if you have ever been there, you know as well as I do that this is not how we were meant to live. It is "falling short of the glory," being a slave rather than a person of your own creativity. And to be honest, things did not get much better for me until the most radical of all the break-throughs began to happen to me — what Thomas Merton calls "the break-through to the already." I have referred

again and again to that moment in Louisville, Kentucky when I was in an ecumenical group of ministers and for the first time had been really honest about my exhaustive desire over "trying to amount to something by making something of myself," and an Episcopal rector said to me: "Do you know what we need? We need to hear the Gospel with our guts. Do you know where Jesus says 'You are the light of the world.' He does not say: 'You have to become light or be number one in order to get light!' He said: 'Man, you are light!' If you and I could hear that down in our guts and appropriate it, then we could do what Jesus said — we could let our light shine and people would see the good thing God had made and give glory to the Father in heaven.' " I have no idea why I had never "heard" that word before. All I can report is that in that moment something like fire moved from the top of my head to the bottom of my heart, and for the first time in my life I sensed a worth that was already there — what God had made of me, not what I had to make of myself. This is "the break-through to the already" that Merton talks about, and in my experience it was the first step toward becoming "an amateur" in the original sense of that word. Once I began to recognize that there was worth within and that I did not have to go somewhere else or be something different to have worth, it emboldened me to journey within and begin to discover what was there and what was not there and start playing that hand rather than letting myself be pulled first this way and then that by other people. I began to ask: "What do I want to do? What am I able to do? What is there in me that is crying out to be born?" which was a whole new way of perceiving self and doing life than the old patterns of unconsciousness and unclearness and being driven night and day by forces outside myself. It is by no means an easy or simple mode of existence and by no stretch of the imagination does it eliminate all hassle and struggle, but I am here to tell you it is so much more authentic than "falling short of the glory" by never doing anything really "for the love of it."

Which brings me back to where all this started, and the title "God Is An Amateur." Those words make no sense, given the current understanding of amateur as ineptness or bumbling. But if you go back to its original meaning — "one who does something for the love of it" — then you have the clearest image I know of the mystery of Godness, and a clue to who we are and what we are supposed to do as humans. We were not intended to be slaves — spending our whole lives doing things that have no meaning for us but are externally coerced. We were born to get in on God's

own kind of aliveness — that is, surveying all the options, freely choosing among them, proceeding to act with vigor and dispatch, and then taking delight in what you have done. This is what it means to be an “amateur.” This is what God is and what we were meant to be.

So I ask you — honestly now, how near or far are you from this glory?

Well . . . ?