

# ROGER & PAT AND THE LANGUAGE OF GOD

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THE REV. JOHN WM. BENNISON, REL.D, RECTOR

Texts appointed for Pentecost XV, Year A, Proper 17

Second Lesson: Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

The Gospel: Matthew 16:21-27

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters ... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but ... discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Just in time for the dog days of the summer slump in the local church, we have the reassuring cover story in one of the news weekly magazines dubbed "Spirituality in America." More than just another survey, it attempts to categorize the diversity of religious belief and practice in contemporary American culture. It finds such breadth of spirituality is as eclectic as it is diverse. And, typically American, it is often fiercely individualistic.

We love statistics:

- 84% of us say spirituality is "very important," or "somewhat important" in daily life.
- 71% of us say compared to what we practiced growing up, it's the same or mostly the same.
- 40% feel closest to God when praying alone, while only 21% of us feel the strongest connection to God in church. Just as many (21%) backsliders say they feel equally closest to God in nature.

- 64% of us pray everyday.
- 80% believe God created the universe.
- 67% believe souls go to heaven or hell. And nowadays,
- 79% believe someone of another faith can go to heaven.

An interesting observation:

History records that the vanguard of angst-ridden intellectuals forty years ago struggling to imagine God as a cloud of gas in the far reaches of the galaxy, never did sweep the nation. What was dying in the 1960's was a well-meaning but arid theology born of rationalism: a wavering trumpet call for ethical behavior, a search for meaning in a letter to the editor in favor of civil rights. What would be born in its stead ... was a passion for an immediate, transcendent experience of God. And a uniquely American acceptance of the amazingly diverse paths people have taken to find it. (*Newsweek*)

I suppose it's a little like dining, cafeteria style, at some "Spirituality Café." You've got an all-you-can-stomach smorgasbord of appetizing treats for all kinds of palates, in any combination you like, however you like it. But given such a panoply of religious expression, here's a question: What language do we use to speak of God, our experience of God, the presence (or absence) of God in real, daily life?

In the context of this question, the diversity – even contrast -- of Christian belief and practice could not have been more stark than what we witnessed with two individuals in the news the last two weeks. One is far more well known; the other less so, if only by name. They are Roger and Pat.

Last Monday, TV evangelist and founder of the so-called Christian Coalition, Pat Robertson, called for the assassination of the democratically elected president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez. Why? Because "this man is a terrific danger, and this is in our sphere of influence, so we can't let this happen." According to Pat, "this is a dangerous enemy to our south, controlling a huge pool of oil that could hurt us very badly. We have the ability to take him out, and I think the time has come that we exercise that ability. We don't need another 200-billion-dollar war to get rid of one strong-arm dictator. It's a whole lot easier to have some of the covert operatives do the job and then get it over with."

What kind of man of faith is Pat? Here's a guy who pushes to erect monuments of the Ten Commandments on public government property; yet who has either never read – or at least quickly forgotten – that pesky little commandment # VI; usually simply translated, "Don't kill."\*

[The catechism is our Episcopal Book of Common Prayer elaborates: "To show respect for the life God has given us; to work and pray for peace; to bear no malice, prejudice, or hatred in our hearts; and to be kind to all the creatures of God." (p.848) ]

Instead, Pat issues a religious fatwah against a foreign leader; something he himself wouldn't hesitate to label an act of terrorism by anyone but himself if he deemed them an enemy of God's chosen, righteous ones.

Here's a guy who suggested that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were due to American "feminists and liberals," that true Christians could vote only for one of the last two presidential candidates (it happened to be George Bush), and that the federal judiciary is a greater threat to America than the Al Qaeda terrorists who flew the planes into the World Trade Center.

His fretful worrying over the state of the highest court in the land is so troubling to him, he's led his followers in a televised prayer rally, asking the Almighty to hasten the demise of certain Supreme Court justices, in order to fill the subsequent

vacancies with right-wing conservative judges who will restore America to the kind of greatness God always intended for His blessed ones.

Here's the problem. This is a guy who calls himself a Christian, just as I do myself. And, as such, here's a guy, who must've read today's gospel at one time in his life; about denying self and taking up his own cross and following Jesus. (As I posed the question last week, one might well ask *which* Jesus?)

On Tuesday, Pat Robertson tried to deny what he said Monday, but that didn't work. So by Thursday, he had to publicly apologize. I guess that's the cross he'll just have to bear.

But almost more shameless in his scrambling for cover was Robertson's attempt to compare himself to the once-Christian martyr from Nazi Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Even more so, the contrast by today's comparison in my mind is to be found in the lesser-known figure of a man named Roger. Brother Roger, that is, the founder of the Taizé community in France. A brief biography:

Few people in the past century have done so much to inspire a thirst for unity among Christians. Sixty-five years ago, when Roger Schutz founded the Taizé community, divisions among Christians were formidable. Brother Roger, a young Swiss Protestant pastor, dared to imagine Christianity's healing. The ecumenical monastic community he founded became a center for intimate encounter between Christians from every confession and continent.

In 1940, the year he arrived in the village of Taizé, Brother Roger was only 25. He had come to France from Switzerland, having survived a nearly fatal case of tuberculosis. During his illness, he began to form a sense of his vocation: a call to create a community "where simplicity and kindheartedness would be lived out as essential gospel realities. Aided by a small loan, he bought an abandoned house in Taizé. The building became a house of hospitality for refugees, many of whom were Jews.

In 1942, after Brother Roger was told that he and his guests would soon be arrested, the house was temporarily closed and the guests relocated. When he returned in 1944, several brothers joined him. Today there are more than 100 brothers. They earn their living by their work, refusing donations. If a brother inherits something, it is given by the community to the very poor.

In the 1950s, some of the brothers began living in places where people were suffering from poverty or social divisions. Today there are Taizé communities in Africa, Asia, and South America. The brothers share the living conditions of those who surround them - the destitute, street children, prisoners, the dying, and those wounded by broken relationships.

From an article by Jim Forest, *Sojourners Magazine*

I reflect on the life of Roger Schutz, and then I read again what Paul writes to us:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Brother Roger, the founder of Taizé, was ninety years old when he was stabbed to death in a prayer service two weeks ago by a deranged pilgrim.

Some find it ironic when so often voices for peace and reconciliation are so threatening with their message that they themselves become the victims of violence. Yet it is a long tradition that should not surprise us. It spans different religious expressions, as well, from such people of faith as King, or Bonhoeffer, or Gandhi, or Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus says: "Those who want to save their life will lose it. Those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

In last week's gospel reading Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is, and then praises Peter for correctly guessing his messianic identity. "You are the messiah (the Christ)," Peter says, "the Son of the living God." This savior, the anointed one of God, is the one who reflects the heart of God, what God is most passionate about.

This week's continuation of the gospel text in Matthew goes on to explain what that all means. That the one who reflects the heart of God is one who suffers and dies with those who suffer and die; in order that all might be raised up to that place where -- according to even the latest "spirituality" polls in America conclude -- we all desire to reach: a personal experience of God in our life.

But when Peter objects to the idea of a suffering messiah - and Jesus then likens his beloved disciple to Satan and rebukes him - I wonder if Peter and his ill-conceived notion of the Christ is more like that of Roger or Pat?

The article in last week's news magazine concludes we seem to have come a long way in our search for a God who is very much alive in the hearts of the vast numbers of those who seek the divine. It tells how a generation ago a young Catholic philosopher, Michael Novak said, "If occasionally I raise my heart in prayer, it is to no God I can see, or hear, or feel."

Now 72, Novak today was asked if he wanted to amend or update or revise his thinking. He said no, that God is as far away been. Novak went on to observe religious revivals are always exuberant and filled with spirit; but that "the true measure of faith is in adversity and even despair, when God doesn't show up in every blade of grass or storefront church."

"That's when the true nature of belief comes out," he said. "Joy is appropriate to the beginnings of your faith. But sooner or later somebody will get cancer, or someone will betray you. That's when you'll be tested."

If that sounds bleak to you, I don't think it is; and I'll tell you why. It happens. Those things just happen. For real. But, at the same time, for those of us who still refuse to ultimately despair, I still ask: *what language shall we then borrow to speak of God?*

There's Pat, and all that he rants, and raves, and mutters about. Then there's Roger. There's you and me. And there's the gospel of Christ, *and the language of God.*

Taizé is best known for its music, much of it written by Brother Roger. The simple, lovely chants accompany a form of worship we have even used in this parish many times in prior years. The words to all the music deliberately use Latin texts. Latin, a dead language no one knows, is intentionally used so everyone might learn to sing it together.

The tunes are simple enough so singers can easily learn different parts, or rounds, that weave themselves together, and complete the whole; over and over again in almost mantra-like harmonies. Many pilgrims and sojourners, in their search for a personal experience of God, the heart and passion of God, have found in this music the language of God. Such as what is perhaps Brother Roger's most familiar tune to the Latin text:

Ubi Caritas, et amor,  
Ubi caritas, deus ibi est ...  
Ubi Caritas, et amor,  
Ubi caritas, deus ibi est.\*

\* *Where charity and love abide, God is there.*