

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church

Rev. William L. Love
Sunday, August 23, 2009

TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?

1 Kings 22-30; 41-43
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

Samuel Beckett was a 20th century writer, whose best known work is a two-act play titled ***Waiting for Godot***. Its style is what has come to be called *Theater of the Absurd*. In the play, Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for the arrival of someone about whom we know only the name: Godot.

Early in the play, Vladimir says: *One of the thieves was saved. [pause] It's a reasonable percentage.* And he asks Estragon: *Did you ever read the Bible?*

Estragon says: *The Bible... [he reflects] I must have taken a look at it.*

Vladimir: *Do you remember the gospels?*

Estragon: *I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. ...*

Vladimir: *Where was I...? ...Ah, yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?*

Estragon: *No.*

Vladimir: *Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour....*

Estragon: *Our what?*

Vladimir: *Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other... [he searches for the contrary of saved] ...damned. ...And yet...how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there – or thereabouts – and only one speaks of a thief being saved. ...One out of four. Of the other three two don't mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him.*

Estragon: *...Abused who?*

Vladimir: *The Saviour.*

Estragon: *Why?*

Vladimir: *Because he wouldn't save them...from death.*

Estragon: *Well what of it?*

Vladimir: *Then the two of them must have been damned.*

Estragon: *And why not?*

Vladimir: *But one of the four says that one of the two was saved.*

Estragon: *Well? They don't agree and that's all there is to it.*

Vladimir: *But all four were there. And only one speaks of a thief being saved. Why believe him rather than the others?*

Estragon: *Who believes him?*

Vladimir: *Everybody. It's the only version they know.*

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At the end of the day (the first act), a messenger comes (as had happened the day before) and tells Estragon and Vladimir: *Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely to-morrow.*

At the end of the next day (the second act), the messenger comes again.

Vladimir says: *You have a message from Mr. Godot.*

Boy: *Yes Sir.*

Vladimir: *He won't come this evening.*

Boy: *No Sir.*

Vladimir: *But he'll come to-morrow.*

Boy: *Yes Sir.*

Vladimir: *Without fail.*

Boy: *Yes Sir.*

Each act ends: *Well? Shall we go? / Yes, Let's go.* With the stage directions: *They did not move.*

Estragon and Vladimir had been waiting for someone who never came. And they were paralyzed by an existential dilemma. They sensed a futility in their waiting but were unable to walk away and leave such hope as they had in a world that was devoid of anything else about which to feel hopeful. Their hope had lost its power to give energy – meaning? – to their lives, but there seemed to be nothing else.

And Vladimir pondered the thieves on the cross. One of the gospels offered hope for a thief. One of two – a reasonable percentage, Vladimir thought. It was not entirely without fear (a kind of desperation) that he (and everybody) believed that version.

He could not be entirely sure that he would find any more hope in the Savior than in waiting for Godot.

To whom shall we go? That could as easily have been Vladimir's question as it was Peter's.

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Jesus had fed the 5,000. And he used the bread they had eaten as a metaphor to talk about the Bread of Life.

I am the living bread, which came down from heaven, he had said; anyone who eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh. ...For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. Those who eat of my flesh and drink of my blood abide in me, and I in them.

And many of the disciples, when they heard this, said, *This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?* Not hard to understand. They understood it well enough. Hard to accept.

Whatever expectations they had about the Messiah did not include suffering – even unto death – as the way to fulfill them.

And many of the disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. And Jesus offered the Twelve the opportunity to leave. *Do you also wish to go away?*

And Simon Peter said, *To whom shall we go?*

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And Peter's question could as well be ours.

In 1927, Reinhold Niebuhr made this entry in the record he kept of his pastoral work in Detroit: *[I] talked today at the open forum which meets every Sunday*

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afternoon in the high school. The "lunatic fringe" of the city congregates there, in addition to many sensible people. The question period in such meetings is unfortunately monopolized to a great extent by the foolish ones, though not always. Today one old gentleman wanted to know when I thought the Lord would come again, while a young fellow spoke volubly on communism and ended by challenging me to admit that all religion is fantasy. Between those two you have the story of the tragic state of religion in modern life. One half of the world seems to believe that every poetic symbol with which religion must deal is an exact definition of a concrete or an historical fact; the other half, having learned that this is not the case, can come to no other conclusion but that all religion is based on fantasy.

Fundamentalists have at least one characteristic in common with most scientists. Neither can understand that poetic and religious imagination has a way of arriving at truth by giving a clue to the total meaning of things without being in any sense an analytic description of detailed facts. The fundamentalists insist that religion is science, and thus they prompt those who know that this is not true to declare that all religious truth is contrary to scientific fact.

*How can an age which is so devoid of poetic imagination as ours be truly religious? [Niebuhr, **Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic**, 114]*

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Those who eat of my flesh and drink of my blood abide in me, and I in them.

* * *

I read one man's account of having grown up Catholic. They were taught to believe that the bread and wine were the body and blood of Christ. A wonderful part of Catholic ritual for him was communion: of eating the bread and having the sense that he was taking Christ into his own body, that Christ was working in him.

To whom shall we go?

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Is our future any more meaningful – any more hopeful – than the one for which Vladimir and Estragon wait.

And if our relationship with the future is recast, what of our relationship with others? Do we have any more reason to be kind than to be cruel, to serve others than to be served, to give than to take, to share with others than to acquire more for our own exclusive use and enjoyment?

To whom shall we go? Vladimir and Estragon and you and I ask.

* * *

To whom shall we go? asks Peter. For him, the question speaks of the poverty of the alternatives offered by life – not the inadequacy of Christ.

To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.

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Frederick Buechner talks about the difference between human power and the power of God:

I suppose we might begin by saying that [humanity's] most absolute power, the one that [we] can be surest of because it involved nothing except power, is [the] power

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to destroy. One does not need talent or brains to destroy. Anybody can do it: can destroy an animal, a bird, an object, an enemy or a friend, oneself, Jesus Christ. There is no need to add that as matters stand now [we have] the power even to destroy [humanity]. However, that is only half the picture because in addition to [the] power to destroy, [humanity] also has the power to create. We can make things: paintings and political systems, theological systems, supersonic aircraft.... In other words, [human] power...consists of [the] ability to create and destroy for good or evil, but the one point I am interested in here is something else: that the fundamental characteristic of [human] power, whatever form it takes, is that it tends to be external and coercive. It is fundamentally the power for better or worse to move things around—things and people and ideas. A [person] has power from the outside to push, pull, prod, and mold other [people] to [one's own] liking, for [one's own] good or for theirs, but it is only the outside of these other [people] that [the] power can affect.

A schoolteacher, for instance, has power to educate you, preach at you, befriend you, even make considerable sacrifices for you or ask you to make considerable sacrifices for him [or her]. But if any or all of these things is to affect anything deeper than just your conduct or your vocabulary, it will be not so much because of [that] power but in spite of it. Or one other example. Imagine [someone] invested with every form of human power that you can think of: the destructive power of Hitler, the analytic power of Freud, the creative power of a Shakespeare, the economic power of a J. Paul Getty, the moral and philanthropic power of a Schweitzer, and so on. Then try to imagine what he could do and what he could not do. He could conquer the world very likely, but could he satisfy the deepest longing of his own soul or your soul or mine? Could he satisfy the deepest longing of just one single human being out of all the millions that we can imagine his having conquered, and by "the deepest longing" I mean the longing for love, for deep peace, for meaning? I believe that he could not. This is something that no [one] has power to do either for [oneself] or for anyone else. So in terms of what every [one] needs most crucially, all [human] power is powerless because at its roots, of course, the deepest longing of the human soul is the longing for God, and this no [one] has the power to satisfy.

...[F]or Christianity, the final affirmation about the nature of God is...: God is love. So another way of saying what I have just said is that [the] deepest [human] longing is for this love of God of which every conceivable form of human love is a reflection, however distorted a reflection it may be – "the smallest glass of love mixed with a pint pot of ditch-water", as Graham Greene says.... And it is just for this reason that part of [the human] longing for the love of God can be satisfied simply by [human] love... – the love of friend for friend, parent for child, sexual love – and thank God for that, literally thank [God], because for many people human love is all there is, if that, because that is all they can believe in.

But notice this: that love is not really one of [the human] powers. [We] cannot achieve love, generate love, wield love, as [we do our] powers of destruction and creation. When I love someone, it is not something that I have achieved, but something that is happening through me, something that is happening to me as well as to [the beloved]. To use the old soap-opera cliché seriously, it is something bigger

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than both of us, infinitely bigger, because wherever love enters this world, God enters.

*So the power of God stands in violent contrast with [human] power.... It is not external like [human] power, but internal. By applying external pressure, I can make a person do what I want him to do. This is [human] power. But as for making [others] be what I want [them] to be, without at the same time destroying [their] freedom, only love can make this happen. And love makes it happen...by creating a situation in which, of our own free will, we want to be what love wants us to be. And because God's love is uncoercive and treasures our freedom – if above all [God] wants us to love [God], then we must be left free not to love [God] – we are free to resist it, deny it, crucify it finally, which we do again and again. [Buechner, **The Magnificent Defeat**, 32-34]*

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Do you also wish to go away? Jesus asked the Twelve and asks us.

To whom shall we go? Christ is the love that was crucified. Christ is the love that was raised again from the dead. Christ is the love that enters our spirit and works the work of love there – just as bread, when we eat it, enters our flesh and works the work of bread there.

To whom shall we go? Christ has the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that Jesus Christ is the Holy One of God.