

Points in the Pilgrimage

Presented to Manoa Valley Church

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On a recent trip back from Washington, D.C. I chose a seat on the airplane which was next to the main exit, so that I could stretch my legs and read during the flight. What I read was a book by C. S. Lewis entitled *Surprised by Joy*, an autobiographical account of his childhood belief in God, his alienation from God during late boyhood and early manhood, and his conversion as a young lecturer at Oxford University—when he was about my age. C. S. Lewis has had a profound impact on me in the last year and a half, and this book stimulated me to recall my own journey toward faith. Today I would like to share with you several points or moments in my own pilgrimage. These points were moments of calm, serene, detached understanding which occurred in regard to public recognition, the quest for knowledge, marriage, money, and the sacredness of personal growth. Each of these moments gave me my bearings, and each moved me closer to God.

To give you the setting for these moments, it is necessary to risk boring you with the story of my childhood. I was born with jaundice and an oddly-shaped heart—shaped like a boot, apparently, instead of a valentine. I was a rather sickly child—never seriously ill, but never seriously healthy. Because my father was in the service, we moved every year or two. I went to 10 schools in 12 years—from 1st grade to high school graduation. Because we moved often, I didn't make many friends. Being sickly, I was not any good at sports, so I didn't fit in with the activities of the friends I did have, which meant that they weren't friends for long. I spent most of my time with my family, or alone, reading books...

All through grade school and intermediate school, I craved praise and recognition from adults. I gloried in good grades, plaques, certificates, and accolades from teachers, principals, and my parents. Recognition was my lifeline—my compensation for not having friends, for not “fitting in” with the rest of the kids.

When I entered high school, my desire for recognition was intensified by the fact that there were only a limited number of positions and awards to be distributed. Only one person per year could be class president, or receive the “Outstanding Sophomore” award. I began to fret over the favoritism which went

into the awards— whether a teacher happened to like you or not, or the unavoidable factors in a student body election, such as the fact that my opponent might be a lot prettier than I was. During my three years at Roosevelt High School, I did rather well in accumulating awards— I won awards from school departments in which I was not even taking courses, not to mention three awards that I won at Punahou, where I took a class during my lunch hour. I also obtained the elective positions I most wanted. All this added up to a scrumptious, moderately unbelievable, college application form...

The most important thing which happened to me, however, was the sudden realization that none of the awards and titles were really relevant. I remember a beautiful sunny day in the Spring of 1965. I walked with my homeroom class over to the stadium at Roosevelt, around noontime, for the school awards assembly. I sat down by myself, and watched the students file in. I had looked forward to this day, and had wondered how many times I would be called down onto the playing field to shake the principal's hand and receive an award. Suddenly, sitting there, I realized that it didn't matter. I had worked hard, stood for what I believed in, and done what was important to me. It didn't matter if that was also important to *them*, or if they even knew about it. What they gave me or didn't give me didn't change what I had done— it didn't affect the meaning I had already found. It was a calm, serene moment of detachment from the whole system— not a sense of disgust or rejection of the system, but of being very far away from it, unaffected by it. It was a moment of liberation, snipping off that lifeline and discovering that I could breathe on my own. I didn't *have* to have the recognition any more. What I had to have was a sense of meaning, a sense of purpose, a sense that what I did, in and of itself, was worth it. Recognition was fun, but it was not the point.

Five years later I was at Oxford, studying hard for the first time since my sophomore year in high school. Oxford was a stimulating environment, archaic and eccentric, intellectually challenging, and socially delightful. The academic system is such that there are no tests for two or three years— then you take them all at once at the end, 24 hours of testing in a week. In the Spring of my last year, I began, months in advance, to review my tutorial essays and notes, read things that I had not read, and attend review tutorials in certain subjects I would have to write on during final "Schools" exams. This was a time to assess not only what I had learned— it turned out to be an assessment of academic learning itself.

One evening, a few weeks before finals, I took a stroll out to a nearby park, book in hand, to take a break and watch the sun set. I sat down on a bench at the top of the park, a beautiful, green, suburban park sloping down toward Oxford

town, grassy fields and trees, and in the distance, silhouetted against the sunset, the spires of Oxford churches, chapels, and colleges. I was reading a book on the strife in Ulster, where Protestants and Catholics were killing each other. I wanted to use it as an example in one of the essays I would have to write. As I sat there, I began to think of all that I had studied, and the number of times I had eagerly bought and read a book, only to be disappointed in how little it said to me— how little difference it made. Only eight or 10 books have really made a difference in my life, and none of them were discovered at Oxford. I had read a book by Professor A, in which he takes a jab at Professor B, who then writes a book to rebut Professor A, all of which is analyzed in a book by Professor C. I had no regrets; in fact, I had enjoyed much of what I read. But it didn't offer any kind of "truth" that I could latch onto and make a life out of. It was true that Hume had proved that his chair might not exist, but a greater truth that he sat on it anyway. It was true that there were many causes of the problem in Ulster, but a greater truth that the killing was still going on. I had read books in which philosophers attempted to define the word "good" or the word "duty." They had done so, occasionally with brilliance and always with intriguing logic, without leaving me with any better idea of what is good to do or be, or what my duty is in this life.

As I sat there in the park, watching the sun go down behind the spires, I closed my book. That sense of calm, serene detachment came to me, and I said to myself: The answers are not here. They are not academic, and perhaps not even intellectual. The answers are of both the mind and the heart. Wisdom may be more of an answer than modern science; human sensitivity may be more of an answer than logic. The rational side of human nature may not even be man's highest form. In any event, there are truths which come from other aspects of our experience. These are truths which cannot be proven— they must be believed. Faith may be the only bridge to another world where truth is the confirmation of the fullness of human experience.

The sun set, and I returned to my room. I had not become an obscurantist, nor a mystic. I continued to study hard for the final exams. But I knew that academic knowledge was not going to provide me with the answers I needed in my life.

Four years later I got married. I spent ten years looking for my wife, and I was very happy to find her. The startling thing I found when I got married was that I was not as wonderful a person as I always thought. Being married taught me how selfish, willful, vain, and proud I can be. I could see these bad traits affecting Elizabeth, just as clearly as if she were holding up a mirror for me to look into. I

had never been so close to anyone before, so I had never really known— and I didn't want to know, of course— how awful I could be. There was a very uncomfortable blind spot in my life, and looking into that mirror, I wondered how I had gone so long without any significant personal growth.

A realization came to me while we were at Hawaii Loa College on a marriage enrichment retreat one weekend. Elizabeth and I spent the first day working hard at sharing our feelings with each other. It was a difficult but exciting time to get in touch with each other, and say the things which somehow, betwixt feeding the cats, reading the paper, paying the bills, and rushing around in our jobs, we had never said to each other. At the end of the first day, all of the couples gathered for a short, quiet candle-light worship service. As the service began, I felt how much I wanted to be a better husband, a better person, a source of happiness instead of pain for Elizabeth. When the service concluded, I felt that calm, serene feeling which I could not remember feeling for five or six years. The difference was that I did not feel detached— I was not somewhere else, I was there— at the core— filled with love for my spouse, aware of the love felt by others, and sensing the presence of God more strongly than I had ever sensed his presence before. Here was personal growth; here was truth; and here was God. It was a homecoming.

For some reason, two months later I took *The Chronicles of Narnia* off the shelf and began reading C. S. Lewis for the first time. This led to Lewis' book, *Mere Christianity*, one of the handful of important books in my life. This is the most lucid, logical, tough-minded and attractive presentation of Christianity that I have ever read. The last section, "Beyond Personality," was very moving— about total surrender to Christ, personal growth, and the new men— the transformation from being creatures of God to being sons of God; the prospect of growing toward God, and being made perfect in Him. I read this last section of the book on a flight back to Honolulu from Kona. I remember the plane passing Diamond Head, sun flashing through the window, tears welling up in my eyes as I read on, the flight attendant announcing that we all had to be in an upright position, the bar being closed, the book ending, the plane landing, and me getting out and walking to the terminal in an agitated happiness, half dazed by the images and arguments of Lewis. This agitated happiness led me to sit down and read the New Testament straight through for the first time in my life, and to undertake other religious reading. I read with a sense of excitement I had not felt for years. At the same time, I was teaching— or trying to lead— a Sunday School class on the parables.

The parables are radical and electric, and studying them made me feel more hypocritical than I had felt for a long time. Part of that hypocrisy involved my job

as a lawyer in a rich law firm. As the pressure at work built up, I enjoyed it less and less, but kept hanging on. When it became clear that several of the partners I worked for were unable to be as loyal to me as I was to them, I felt that the human relations in the firm had deteriorated as well. The only good reason to stay, at that point, was for the money. I knew what Jesus said about that in the parables. One day, sitting in my office, I pulled out my calculator and made an estimate: I would make \$2-3 million more in my lifetime if I stayed at the law firm. That sense of calm, that serenity, that almost detached feeling came over me. I put away the calculator. I had decided to leave. I would go where my mind and heart told me God wanted me to be, wherever that was.

... One thing which all these moments, all these realizations had in common, was that they threw me back on my own spiritual resources, such as they were. In high school, I learned that I would not be saved by recognition; I had to have my own meaning or I would be lost spiritually. At Oxford I learned that academic knowledge was not the answer—that somehow, the answers were inside, and had as much to do with faith as with “fact.” In marriage, I learned how much I needed spiritual growth; at the weekend retreat, the conscious sharing of love with Elizabeth and the sense of God’s presence brought me home. C. S. Lewis provided me suggestions and hope for that personal growth, and the parables prodded me into a new context where that growth could take place.

Each moment, each event, turned me away from the offerings of the secular world— recognition, knowledge, money— and preserved me from the destruction of the secular world— selfish alienation from loved ones. I bumped into a wall, got new bearings, bumped into another one, and got my bearings again. Finally, I stumbled onto the oasis, and discovered where I was: in God’s garden, in the middle of a desert. I had experienced something which I identify with what the psalmist related in Psalm 139:

O Lord, you have searched me
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O Lord.

You hem me in, behind and before;

you have laid your hand on me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

Looking back over the past 15 years, I feel that I was hemmed in, behind and before; that He laid his hand upon me, and guided me, and held me fast—in spite of the fact that, by and large, I was paying no attention to Him. (Yes, I was in Sunday School, and sang in church choirs, and so on. But being in church is not the same as paying attention to God.)

My image of those moments of calm, serene understanding is the image of a sailboat turning into the wind and suddenly stopping, sails collapsed and still. A quiet moment is good to get one's bearings and perhaps repair a sail or refasten a line; but the point of a sailboat is to catch the wind, to run before the wind, straining and leaning and racing through the water. And so it is with us: After the moment of calm, getting our bearings, we are off and running again. There are things for us to do, contributions to make, things to build, love to share. When we find the breath of life, we want to catch it at full sail.

That brings us back to the daily duties, the daily decisions, in the real world. It brings us back to the question: How should we live? One concept which I have found useful and extremely challenging is the concept of being *in* the world, but not *of* the world. It seems to me that it is not hard to retreat completely from the world, rejecting it; or completely surrender to the world, accepting secular values. What is far harder is to be *in* the world, right in the middle of it, actively working and living and loving, but not *of* the world, not accepting the world's values. This is what Jesus prayed for his disciples during the Last Supper. At John 17:13 he says:

I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy with them. I

have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is the truth.

As we go forth in the world, we may not behave much differently from anybody else. Personally, I still enjoy receiving recognition; I still seek academic knowledge; and I haven't lately gone in to my boss to ask for a salary decrease. But praise, knowledge, and money are not the answer. Praise is only a byproduct, and knowledge and money are only tools. The answer is God, and the goal is personal, spiritual growth—the kind of growth which cannot take place in a vacuum, and so must take place *in* the world—but the kind of growth which cannot take place unless our eyes are on God. He offers what the world does not. He provides us steady signals for a fixed course which leads toward Him. The signals are not secret: They can be picked up on any instrument of faith.

I do not feel that I am very far along on my pilgrimage. In fact, I feel that I have only started. I have a sense of excitement about what is to come. And I repeat the words of the psalmist at the end of Psalm 139:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Let us pray.

Lord, we know what it is to wander; we know what it is to be tempted by the values of the world. We ask that you hem us in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon us. We ask to be blessed with spiritual growth. As we live *in* the world, help us to keep our eyes fixed on You, so that we are not *of* the world.

Now we pray as your Son taught us to pray: Our Father, who are in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver

us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.
Amen.