Until All Is Accomplished

“We are beggars who are trying to show other beggars where we have found bread.”¹

1. It is impossible to speak directly about God. When it comes to God we have no choice beyond the language of paradox. You may have heard someone say that God does not exist. Most people today mean this in a dismissive way, that God is not real.

But faithful theologians also point out another sense of this phrase. They explain that God does not exist as a thing in a world of things, in the way that a toaster, Rockridge Station, a California Poppy, or a fragment of serpentine rock does. Instead God is the creator, the source of everything, the active energy, the condition that constantly makes possible the world, and everything new. The twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich calls God “the Ground of Being.”²

The other day a pattern of sand on my shoe reminded me of the shape of the constellation Orion and I had this thought. Rigel, one of Orion’s stars, could be as much as 363,000 times as luminous as our sun. And yet those massive stars are more insignificant in relation to the expanse of the entire universe than are these grains of sand to our planetary home.³

Imagine what it is to be God for whom worlds are just specks you find on your shoe after coming in for a walk. Imagine what it is like to be God who comprehends and encloses centuries, millenia, light years, the origin and the outermost limits of all time and space. Of course, we cannot. We can never come close to grasping this mystical, enchanted, interconnected existence of ours.

And we will not be satisfied. In our hearts we experience a striving, a yearning, a longing to be complete or whole or fulfilled. One of the most important ideas for the authors of the gospel is “fulfillment” (or in Greek plēroō). They write about the scripture being fulfilled in what is happening now. They say that Jesus came to fulfill the law. For them fulfillment is what happens when something that is an idea becomes real or is brought to life.
To fulfill a responsibility means to do the thing we implicitly promised to do. Being fulfilled means becoming who we were created to be. The ancient writer Irenaeus says, “the glory of God is the human being fully alive.” This is the challenge of being human.

2. Several months ago the Swiss Consul General invited me to speak about this at the premier of a new German language film about Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531). Zwingli was one of the primary leaders of the Reformation in the sixteenth century from his Grossmunster Church in Zurich. Deeply influenced by humanism and the thought of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) Zwingli had a passion for getting back to the sources of truth (ad fontes). For him this meant the Bible.

In 1519 Zwingli had what we would call a near death experience after becoming sick with the plague. He wrote “Pestlied” or “Plague Song” about what had happened. He fervently believed that his life had been spared for a purpose. He finally understood what would fulfill his life.

Zwingli believed that holy scripture is utterly distinct from anything else in human experience. So he abandoned the regular schedule of readings and began preaching his way through the whole Bible. In today’s reading the Prophet Isaiah denounces religious hypocrisy that cares more about ritual observance than how we treat the poor. Isaiah writes, “Why do we fast, but you do not see?... you fast only to quarrel” (Isa. 58).

This was part of what radicalized Zwingli and led him to strongly oppose the city’s right to impose fasts on the citizens. Zwingli saw life in black and white terms. For him worship is an interior matter. Outward actions are only distractions from true worship which takes place in our hearts. He came to detest repetitive prayers, vestments, art, relics, ornament and even ritual.

Imagine his Carolingian church Grossmunster completed in the year 1215 with interior decorations that had been only finished by 1518. Then between June 20 and July 2, 1524 Zwingli and his committee removed all art from the church. Of all the reformers Zwingli loved music the most and had the greatest skills as a musician, but because he could find no evidence in the Bible of music as part of worship, music was banned in his church for a hundred years.

Zwingli tragically wrote, “Farewell, my temple-murmurings! I am not sorry for you. I know that you are not good for me. But welcome, O pious, private prayer that is awakened in the hearts of believing men through the Word of God.” All week I have been haunted by the mental picture of an organist weeping as the church organ was removed and destroyed.
You might dismiss some of the Reformer’s actions as fanatical, but they were trying to answer the question how can we know God, how can our life be fulfilled? And although there is so much I disagree with them, they continue to help me to grow more deeply into God’s grace.

For instance, John Calvin (1509-1564) writes that, “You cannot in one glance survey this most vast and beautiful system of the universe in its wide expanse without being completely overwhelmed by the boundless force of its brightness.” He points out that in every moment God’s magnificent glory is obviously present to us and yet something about us makes it hard to see God.

Something has gone wrong in us which he describes as sin. But that is not the end of the story for Calvin. Although we are lost and cannot hope to understand God on our own, we have Jesus who shows us God’s true loving nature. Calvin writes that the Bible is like a thread that we can follow to find our way through the vast maze of our life. For Calvin, a moment of instantaneous conversion is far less important than a life of gradual sanctification as we grow closer to God.

3. During our remaining time I want to show an example of how in the face of deep mysteries, God’s word helps us to navigate life. Just as the people of Zwingli and Calvin’s time had blindspots that we recognize as glaring shortcomings, we too are enthralled to myths that are invisible to us.

One of the most powerful illusions of our time is what we call meritocracy. This is the belief that we are entirely responsible for what we become. David Brooks points out the way that this belief distorts our language as economic ideas come to describe non-economic experiences, so that “Character is no longer [about] love, service and care, but a set of workplace traits [such as] grit, productivity and self-discipline.” Many people around us are “swallowed whole” by this illusion and cannot find meaning in anything other than their work.

In the face of our deep tendency to believe that we will only be acceptable or loved if we work hard and succeed, Jesus offers another way, a paradox that holds two truths together. This week at my clergy group we talked about what we had learned as priests. One of my younger colleagues talked about her cousin who never did anything for anyone else and then died of a drug overdose. We talked about how it is possible to waste your life, that what we do matters and has irrevocable consequences.
In today’s Gospel, as we look for a way out of our illusions, Jesus holds this truth together with another, the truth that God loves us just as we are, without exception, no matter what. Jesus says that we are like a tiny bit of salt that has a larger than expected effect on the whole meal. No matter who we are, our life is like a light, that can be seen from a distance and can help someone find their way home. This goodness is so evident that it can no more be hid than Sutro Tower or the skyscrapers of downtown San Francisco.

And yet the corresponding truth holds also. Jesus has not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it “until all is accomplished” (Mt. 5). Our goodness is not what will save us, but we cannot dispense with it either. The Ten Commandments still hold. We are not loved because we are good. Our goodness is deepened because we know that we are loved.

When the children’s television actor Mister Rogers was in seminary he and a friend went out of their way to go to hear a famous preacher. It was not until after the service began that they realized that the famous preacher wasn’t there. Instead the sermon was given by a supply preacher who was in his eighties. Although Mister Rogers said that he had heard great sermons by octagenerian preachers this was not one of them. He called it one of the most poorly crafted sermons he had heard in his life.

When he leaned over to his friend to express his relief that it was over, he noticed she had tears in her eyes. She whispered to him, “He said exactly what I needed to hear.” Mister Rogers thought about that moment for a long time, about how he had come to church in judgment and she had come in need, about how the Holy Spirit was able to take that weak sermon and speak to the heart of his friend. Rogers said, “That experience changed my life. Ever since then, I’ve been able to recognize that the space between someone who is offering the best he can and someone who is in need is Holy Ground.”

We have always been seekers on our way to being fully alive. The oldest human-made image of Orion was carved 38,000 years ago by our ancestors on Whoolly Mamouth tusk discovered in Germany. It is impossible to speak directly about God. But this is the Holy Ground we inhabit. We are beggars trying to show other beggars where we have found bread. We are the salt. We are the light. We will be fulfilled.

2 “Every understanding of spiritual things (Gesteswissenschafte) is circular.” Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Volume One (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 9.

5 “Farewell, my temple-murmurings! I am not sorry for you. I know that you are not good for me. But welcome, O pious, private prayer that is awakened in the hearts of believing men through the Word of God. Yes, a small sigh, which does not last long, realises itself and goes away again quickly. Greetings to you, common prayer that all Christians do together, be it in Church or in their chambers, but free and unpaid; I know that you are the sort of prayer to which God will give that which He promised.” Cited in Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth (Engaging Culture: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).


8 Our belief in meritocracy is why we were so offended by last year’s college admissions scandal.