

A message to make ears ring

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, covers a whole gamut of different concerns/issues. In chapter seven, for example, he speaks of marriage, and how being single is actually a preferable state. He says,

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

So the apostle Paul felt it was desirable to have one's focus on service of the Lord, and not to be distracted by having a spouse, for example, although he didn't discourage it; under certain circumstances, he did encourage marriage. But, generally speaking, he seemed to feel that it was somewhat of a distraction.

Now, he didn't say the same thing about the Christian Church. He didn't say, for example, "I don't want you to be associated with a Christian community. Simply, offer your worship to God in the Spirit, and may it be a wonderful relationship that you have with God, all by yourself." He didn't say any such thing. He recognized, in fact, that, just as in marriage, so also in the Church community, Christ is lived in the midst of us all, rather than just solely by ourselves. And so, the first letter to the Corinthians, is really a depiction of how we can serve God, through Christ, and yet live such a complicated existence, apparently, and be involved in so many different aspects of our lives.

Now, when it comes to "willing one thing"—that is, devotion to God through Christ—we see—sort of—the opposite of this from our Old Testament reading, from the first book of Samuel. Here we hear, indirectly, about the sons of Eli, the priest. They behaved in a way that was certainly out of keeping with being priests in the house of the LORD, which was, at that time, at Shiloh.

Well, we heard the oracle that Samuel received, and which he then transmitted to Eli, the father of these two sons; and the oracle was devastating in its implications—namely, that Eli and his sons would disappear. In fact, his two sons were killed in battle; and the ark of the covenant, itself, was robbed by the Philistines, where it remained for some time, until it was returned again back to the land of Israel. But it did not find a permanent home, shall we say, until David brought it—not to Shiloh—but to Jerusalem.

So we can see the consequence of individuals simply not attending to the will of God. What is associated with them, even a holy site such as Shiloh, was eventually destroyed, and Jerusalem replacing it. Now Jerusalem had its own difficult fate, sometime later. So we can see the consequences, as I say, of not "willing this one thing" above all, which is to serve God with one's whole heart, mind and strength.

However, in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we see not so much a concern for people who do not want to serve God at all, but for people who are distracted from their worship—not only by marriage but by any number of different concerns that they might have.

For example, in the Corinthian community, we learn, early on in the latter—there are divisions. Some people are inclined to side with Peter, some with Apollos, some with Paul. But Paul has to remind them that they were not baptized in the name of Paul, for example. They were baptized in the name of Christ. So, when it comes to serving God, and “willing the one thing”, which is serving him through Christ, these other points of difference between people, in their preferences, ought to take a second place, a distant second place.

Now, of course, we all know of these matters of the division in the Church. It is just the nature of the Christian community that we experience in the world; it has vast number of different groups associated with it. But, as one of my clergy colleagues, Audrey Morrison, puts it, “We all believe in Christ, do we not? And, therefore, shouldn’t that be the determining factor?” And, of course, it definitely should be.

So that is right at the beginning of the first letter to the Corinthians. Right at the end of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, there’s mention of a collection on behalf of the saints in Jerusalem. You may recall that Paul was instrumental in bringing about a collection among the churches he had founded for the saints in Jerusalem—the Christians in Jerusalem—who had fallen on hard times.

He had some directions for the people in their taking up of their offerings. He said—and it’s sometimes written on your offering envelopes that you use—“At the beginning of the week, set aside an amount... so that when I come,” Paul writes, “you are not scrambling to (of course, I am paraphrasing here) get together your offering.” So, as far as he was concerned, offering should be an intentional thing. It should be part of this “willing the one thing”—namely, service of God through Jesus Christ.

I remember talking to the former Clerk of Session of the congregation of St. Andrew’s, Thorold—this man’s name was Bert McGilvray. Bert was not able to go to church; he had to look after his disabled daughter; there was no one else, apparently, to do so. But he sent in his offering all the time. And, as far as he was concerned, that offering was a vow that he made between himself and God. He could have all sorts of other issues about the money he gave. But, primarily, for him—and I think it should be for us as well—offering is to come out of a vow that we have to God—part of our service of God, “willing the one thing”, even in the complexities of the life which is ours.

Now, the Corinthian had a good deal of cultural lag to make up. These people—many of them—had grown up in an entirely pagan society, with its own characteristics of morality. And, when they heard the Christian message, in some sense, they had also to learn about Judaism, and the requirements associated with that, as well as responding in faith in Christ. So, for example, there was one individual in this Christian community—and it may be difficult for us to think of such a Christian community—but, in this one Christian community, a follower of Christ, apparently, had, as the person he lived with, the wife or the former wife (we don’t know: the wife or the former wife) of his father. It wasn’t his mother, necessarily, or not likely; but it was the wife of his father. And this is the person he lived with. Well, that arrangement is prohibited in the book of Leviticus, as characterizing incest, really. And, apparently, in the pagan world, it was frowned upon somewhat as well. But these Corinthian Christians were starting from square one, and learning—really—what is appropriate and what is not.

It may strike us as a bit odd that Paul would have to devote so much attention to saying, “Don’t visit prostitutes.” But that was part of the background of these people. And some of the Christians apparently believed that what they did in the body was relatively insignificant, unimportant. What was important was their relationship with God, in Christ, through the Spirit—and their knowledge that they had, and so on. And so, visiting a prostitute, to some of them apparently, was not an issue.

So you see that Paul had really a lot of work to do in order to bring these Corinthian Christians up to speed, so to speak.

Now, there were issues that hardly make much of an impact on us— the question of eating food that had been sacrificed to idols, and the like. That is not an issue that we deal with in any literal sort of way. But there are issues in our society which some of us may strongly disapprove of; but, on the other hand, there are people who are involved in these sorts of activity. It’s part of their employment.

So, for example, when we lived on the Niagara peninsula—the biggest employer on the Niagara peninsula is not General Motors; it is Casino Niagara. And, to me, that is a shocking state of affairs, in an area that was once an industrial heartland of Ontario. It’s not really something that I, personally, would promote. However, one day I took a funeral for a person who is employed at Casino Niagara. This person had somehow gone off the road on Beaverdams Road, which was near us and within the limits of the city of Thorold. This man’s parents lived in Edmonton—or his father lived in Edmonton, his mother in Calgary; I think they were separated. But they came to Thorold for the funeral service. They had no clue as to who else would be at this service. Well, at the funeral service, the funeral home was packed; and it was packed from people who worked at Casino Niagara—so colleagues of this one man whose car had gone off the road, and was killed. So it just goes to show that we make certain judgements about certain things. But there is often a human side to some of these circumstances, which we need to bear in mind.

Well, there are a number of other elements in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians—divisions between the wealthy and the poor showed up; certain belief systems that they had were really at odds with Christian belief. For example, some did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Apparently, they simply believed in a spirit world. So Paul had to enlighten them there, as well.

So all of this goes to show that, within the complicated nature of human existence, we do have the commission to “will the one thing”, to live “the one thing”, which is service of God, through Christ. But it requires some thinking; it requires some openness to the Spirit to—actually—do that, in circumstances which may seem to distract us from doing “the one thing”, whether it’s handling money, whether it’s because of church divisions, whether it’s because of conflicts which we are encountering, whether it’s because of people’s belief systems which seem to be at variance. In any case, we are called to “will the one thing”, in all these different contexts.

Now, how is that possible? Well, it obviously requires some work. Paul had his work cut out for him; and the Corinthian Church had work cut out for it. But our passage from John’s gospel—and I’ll mention that only briefly—our passage from John’s gospel has Jesus’ encounter with Nathanael, and Jesus says of Nathanael, “Look here is truly an Israelite without deceit.”

Now, those words may seem relatively insignificant, maybe. But the founding patriarch was Jacob, otherwise known as Israel, who was known, principally, to begin with, as the “trickster”, the one who tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright, and so on. But Nathanael, according to Jesus—“Here is an Israelite without deceit, without guile.” And that really becomes possible, that “willing the one thing”, which Nathanael apparently exhibited—that is only possible, thanks to God who has come to us in Christ, and enables us to “will that one thing”, in the multitudinous aspects of our lives.

Indeed, he said to Nathanael, “You will see the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” That is a reference also to Jacob who saw the ladder going up to heaven, and the angels ascending and descending upon it. But now, it’s not a place; it’s a person; it’s the person of Jesus. And, in fact, in the New Testament, it does not say, “Go to this place, and worship God, and only to this place.” But it says, instead, “Follow me.”

And, as we “will the one thing”, service of God through Christ, in the complexity of our lives, God in Christ enables us to hold fast to “willing the one thing”, and also enables us to be people who communicate this reality of God to our neighbour. After all, he called Philip, through Christ, “Follow me.” And Philip went and spoke to Nathanael.

We are called to “will the one thing” and to share that with our neighbour, in the vast complexity of the life that we all share with one another.