

A MEDITATION ON THE WORK OF MATHEW FOX

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I have two stories to tell you. I want you to listen to them both, and compare them. Here is the first story:

In the beginning, God created human beings, men and women. He put them in a very wonderful place, a place like a garden, and he told them, with one exception, to go ahead and enjoy their lives in this place.

But, human beings are contrary, obstinate, and, some would say, fundamentally evil. When they are given the opportunity, people will, by nature, choose to do the wrong thing. This characteristic of mankind is called **Original Sin**. Mankind is a “fallen” creature. From birth, every human being carries this fallenness within him— or herself.

Fortunately, when he discovered this, God chose not to clean out the whole mess and begin all over again. Instead, he took on the form of a human being, came down to earth, and allowed humankind to do its contrary, obstinate and evil worst with him. And they proceeded to do so. They killed God himself, just as though he were a criminal.

But God, called Jesus while he was a human being, came back from the dead after three days. Because he liked his human creations, he promised them that if any of them would “follow” him, they would be forgiven for their contrariness, obstinacy and evil, and that even though they were the way they were, they could come live with him for all eternity.

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This story gets complicated, because there are certain points of confusion which caused contrary, obstinate and evil human beings to argue about the terms of this agreement with God. Among other things, it was not clear whether a human being had to **BE** like Jesus in order to be allowed to go live with him, or whether it was just necessary **BELIEVE** what Jesus had promised. Today, the first group is called Protestants, and the second group is called Catholics. Needless to say, because we are all contrary, stubborn, obstinate and evil, we are still arguing about it.

In much simplified form, this is the story I was told in church when I was a child. It is also the story, very, very much simplified, that I was told as a young man in seminary. I found some parts of the story to be a little puzzling.

- For instance, if God didn't like human beings the way they were and are, why, in fact, **didn't** he scratch the whole thing and start over?

- For instance, exactly how does God's resurrection in Jesus cause my resurrection, even if I do believe in him? Is it some form of automatic magic? How does all this work?

Though some tried very hard, no one in the seminary was quite able to explain this to me. I decided to believe it anyway—that is, I decided to “Have Faith”—since it was obvious from the beginning that I am a contrary, stubborn, obstinate and probably very evil young man.

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Now, however, I have come to believe that there is another story—or at least, there is another way of telling the same story. It can be told something like this:

In the beginning, there was a whirl—wind, a veritable storm of creative energy. The whirlwind of creative energy was with God, and in fact, it was God.

Now this storm of energy created everything! It created stars and planets and galaxies. It created this world and all other worlds. It created the earth and the planets and the oceans and the mountains and the woods and fields. It created plants and animals. And it created human beings, too.

Now this great, marvelous creative energy came into the world. Everything that had life had that light inside of it. If plants and animals had life, why then, they had some of this God—energy, this God—light in them. And human beings have this God—creative energy inside of them, too!

Now there were some people who couldn't see the light, no matter what. There are just some people who can't recognize light for what it is, which is God. But for those who could recognize the light, why then, they could become the very *children* of God!

So now, all you have to do to become one of the children of God is to **recognize** the light everywhere it appears around us. In other words, all you or anyone else has to do to be a child of God is just say **Thank you**.

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Now in my opinion, the person who is doing the best job of telling this story right now is a man by the name of Mathew Fox, who wrote a book called **Original Blessing** which has been creating a lot of excitement for a few years now. Mr. Fox is a Roman Catholic scholar, and he was, while he was doing his work, a member of the Dominican Order. He called his book **Original Blessing** because he wanted to make it clear from the beginning that he wanted to start out with God's blessing of humankind, and not with any propensity on our part to being obstinate or evil. **Life** is itself the **Original Blessing**.

Now my only purpose this morning is to remind you all that there is another way to tell the Christian story. The name Mathew Fox gives to this way of telling it is "**Creation Spirituality**," in contrast to the other way, which is called the **Fall and Redemption** version of the story of Christianity.

The Creation Spirituality version is just as old, and maybe older than the Fall/Redemption version. But down through church history, it didn't get the headlines that the Original Sin version received. Why that is, is a matter of speculation. And it could be the subject of many, many books. But it just might be that the Church authorities thought that people who pay a better return for being saved from eternal damnation to hell than they would pay if they were told that all they had to do was to say "Thank you." I leave it to you to decide if that could be true or not.

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Now I wouldn't pretend to try to tell anyone else which of these two versions of the story about life they ought to believe. But I am convinced that if you start out saying "Thank You" to God for all of creation, instead of "Please Forgive me because I am evil," a lot of things change about the way the world looks. For the rest of my little meditation, I would like to point out what some of those differences might be.

- For a beginning, if you begin by saying THANK YOU for the creation we have been given, it puts a different perspective on things. Creation itself, the world and all there is in it, not just mankind which is but a part of the creation, is seen as the most important thing. That gives a religious credibility to the whole Ecological movement. Our first job as human beings is to appreciate (that's another way of saying Thank You) the world where we are.

We can start right here, in this moment, in this place, as many people have who shared this lectern. Whenever I sit in those rows where you are sitting right now, inevitably my eyes go either to that small patch of green and blue up there behind the altar, or they go out the windows. This Chapel is a place that invites "Thank You's" almost without ceasing. That's the most natural thing to do here.

- If you start out saying thank you for the creation we share, then part of our thanks to God has to be the eager, passionate and excited **savoring of pleasure**. That means we have come to the end of feeling guilty for enjoying the gifts of life we have been given. Fox quotes Deuteronomy:

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“For Yahweh your God is bringing you to a good land, a land of streams of water, of fountains and springs flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, and of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey in which you will not eat bread in poverty, in which you will not lack anything. . . .you shall eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless Yahweh your God in the good land which he has given you.”

“Blessing” is no abstraction. It is about enjoying the goodness of the earth. It is about enjoyment of the material things we each have.

●Or again, if you begin by giving Thanks to God, another thing that might just change for us is our relationship toward ourselves. In an article by the Llama of Tibet in exile, he comments that one of the most incomprehensible qualities of Americans is our tendency toward self depreciation. People of other cultures experience terrible disasters, wars, and natural catastrophes. But **self doubt** is not something they understand easily.

It is the legacy of our training in the sin/redemption theology that many of us, at least, have been taught to **despise** ourselves, and in particular, we are often taught as children to despise our bodies.

Mathew Fox proposes that the correct view of humility is to see ourselves as beings of the earth, of the *humus*. He quotes the Old Testament, from the Song of Solomon one of the most passionate, earthy love poems in all of literature. He quotes the Medieval Saint Julian of Norwich:

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“Our sensuality is grounded in Nature,
in Compassion and in Grace
In our sensuality, God is.
God is the means
whereby our Substance
and our Sensuality
are kept together
so as never to be apart.”

Or, as he quotes a more contemporary poet and philosopher, Wendell Berry:

“You cannot devalue the body and value the soul—
or value anything else. The isolation of the body
sets it into direct conflict with everything else in
Creation. Nothing could be more absurd than to
despise the body and yet yearn for its
resurrection!”

If we are able to give thanks for our bodies, our
earth and ourselves, then God gives them back to us.
We are able to rejoice in them. We are able to stand
straight in any circumstance. To have pride in ourselves,
we need only give Thanks!

●It is a matter of simple logic that if we can give
thanks, we can chase out fear from our lives: Giving
Thanks to God and to all of his creation engenders **trust**.
Here is a series of quotations from the tradition of
Creation Spirituality:

“Trust shows the way.” Hildegarde of Bingen

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. . .
Happy is she who trusts in the Lord. . .
He who trusts in the Lord will be enriched. From
the Psalms.

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You can never trust God too much.
Why is it that some people do not bear fruit?
It is because they have no trust
either in God or in themselves.

—Meister Eckhart

What God does first and best and most is to trust
his people with their moment in history. He trusts
them to do what must be done for the sake of his
whole community.

—Walter Brueggemann

The immanence of God gives reason for the belief
that pure chaos is intrinsically impossible.

—Alfred North Whitehead

Often our trust is not full
We are not certain that God hears us
Because we consider ourselves worthless and as
nothing.

This is ridiculous
and the very cause of our weakness.
I have felt this way myself.

—Julian of Norwich

Where there is fear, there is no religion.

—Mahatma Gandhi

Fear is driven out by perfect love.

—1 John 4:18

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In other words, If we can learn to give Thanks, we can live lives without fear!

●Giving thanks for all the Blessings of the earth, the blessings of our own bodies and the blessings of all the wonderful things that sustain us is a starting point. But any theology that stopped with Thankfulness toward the obviously positive aspects of creation would be incomplete.

Thomas Merton took thankfulness a step further with the following three lines:

“O silence, golden zero
Unsettling sun
Love winter when the plant says nothing.”

If we are to be truly Thankful, then it is necessary to be thankful also for the hidden things and the darker side of life and existence. The mystic and saint Meister Eckhart had this to say:

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This word is a hidden word
and comes in the darkness of the night.
To enter this darkness put away
all voices and sounds
all images and likenesses.
For no image has ever reached into the soul's
foundation
where God himself
with his own being is effective.

Or this line:
We can know the dark, and dream it into a new
image.

Then alone do we know God truly, when we
believe that God
is far beyond all that we can possibly think of
God.

Or, "The ground of the soul is dark."

"I said to my soul, be still,
and let the dark come upon you
which shall be the darkness of God. –T.S.

Eliot

Fox comments that we are all children of the En–
light–en–ment, that is, we are all children of lights. At
night we surround ourselves with light bulbs,
incandescent and neon. Television, he suggests, is yet
another kind of light. And add to that, we have *color*
television. We talk about positivism. The Power of
Positive Thinking.

Fox goes on to point out that the price of having all
our different sorts of lights is that we are afraid of the
dark, and as a corollary, we are afraid of the silence.

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But it is also possible to be Thankful for the silence and for emptiness and darkness when it appears in our lives. One illustration of what that would look like is this quotation from Carl Gustav Jung:

The art of letting things happen, action through non-action, letting go of oneself, as taught by Meister Eckhart, became for me the key opening of the door to the way. We must be able to let things happen in the psyche. For us, this actually is an art of which few people know anything. Consciousness is forever interfering, helping, correcting, and negating, and never leaving the simple growth of the psychic processes in peace.

Giving thanks for Silence and Darkness and Emptiness is to allow space for God to act in our deepest and most hidden parts.

●How about one step further? How about giving thanks for pain?

Meister Eckhart: "Remember this: All suffering comes to an end. And whatever you suffer authentically, God has suffered from it first.

Gandhi: "Suffering is the badge of the human race."

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes of giving thanks for pain this way:

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Oh, tell us, poet, what do you do?

I praise.

But the deadly and the violent days,
how do you undergo them, take them in?

I praise.

But the namelessness—how do you raise
that, invoke the unnamable?

I praise.

What right have you, through every phase,
in every mask, to remain true?

I praise.

—and that both stillness and the wild affray
know you, like star and storm?

Because I praise.

And finally, on this them, Meister Eckhart:
“Everything praises God. Darkness, privations, defects,
evil too praise God and bless God.”

Fox concludes this section with a qualification:

In this reflection on letting pain be pain, I must emphasize how important it is that we not glorify pain or cling to our pain or wallow in our pain. That is not letting pain be pain—that way lies letting pain be our boss. . . . The purpose of letting pain be pain is precisely this: to let go of pain. . . What we must do ultimately is to let go of pain.”

Finally, let me close with a quotation from a source which I cannot locate in Fox’ bibliography. I take it that it is from an Islamic mystic named Kabir:

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Friend, hope for the Guest while you are alive.
Jump into experience while you are alive!
Think. . . and think. . . while you are alive.
What you call “salvation” belongs to the time
before death.

If you don't break your ropes while you are alive,
do you think
ghosts will do it after?

The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic
just because the body is rotten—
that is all fantasy.
What is found now is found then.
If you find nothing now,
you will simply end up with an apartment in the
City of Death.
If you make love with the divine now, in the next
life
you will have the face of satisfied desire.

Kabir (Fox,

p.103)

Let's now go into the day, remembering to give thanks
for as many of the things that you can see, as many of
the events as you can experience. Count them. It will
make you very, very weary. And you can give thanks for
a sound sleep.