

Steering Around Life's Potholes: Getting Permission

Luke 14:1-6

Third Sunday in Lent – March 15, 2009)

For the Pharisees, this incident was about whether Jesus (or anyone else, for that matter) was free to help this man -- a man who apparently had congestive heart failure. What they discovered was that, though it had directly to do with disobedience to one of the Ten Commandments, Jesus didn't wait for anyone's approval or permission to go ahead and do what he saw as needed.

Couldn't he at least have humored them – tried harder to get that permission first? I think that's what I might have tried to do. He might have said, for example: "Gentlemen, it looks like we have one of those gray-area situations here. On the one hand, it IS the Sabbath and keeping the Sabbath "holy" is important. On the other hand, the way this man's breathing sounds, he might not make it until the end of the Sabbath. As devout but also reasonable people, I assume that you would all agree that God will understand if I go ahead and do a little something for him right now. I'll feel a lot better about it, though, if I have your support to do so."

Jesus didn't do that. Not only here, but throughout his ministry, he wasn't very good at waiting for approvals and permissions. It's almost as if he subscribed to the contemporary saying that, "It's a whole lot easier to get forgiveness for something afterwards than it is to get permission ahead of time."

What we're talking about is that confusing, often loaded, matter of approval – of that common wish for someone to give us permission or consent for what we do and how we live.

I loved that bit of ersatz history that Dave Barry, the humorist, tells in his book, "Claw Your Way to the Top." He claims that Attila the Hun had a brother, Bob the Hun, who got lost in history. Bob the Hun isn't remembered because he was a more cautious and accommodating person than his brother, Attila. In fact, whenever Bob the Hun and his bloodthirsty followers arrived at the edge of a new town, Bob would always ask the townspeople for permission to steal everything, to rape the women, and to burn the houses. When the people said "No!," Bob the Hun would apologize and leave. Barry points out that it was because of his need for everyone's consent before doing anything, that Bob the Hun was lost in obscurity. Actually, that's a somewhat flawed example of what we're talking about here, but the problem is, nevertheless, real.

Undoubtedly, much of what turns out to be a powerful need for all the consents and approvals we can possibly get, dates back to when we were young children and we were required to ask permission for virtually everything. Rightly so. Getting it was an important part of avoiding

childhood perils. Unfortunately, some of us never learned to feel okay without it. We simply switched to other larger permission-givers.

If, with this in mind, one listens to us carefully, it's revealing to discover how many kinds of permission people just assume that they DO NOT have.

"I just couldn't. People wouldn't understand."

"My family would think I was losing it."

"I'd have no problem with it, if I knew for certain that a lot of others had tried it."

"Oh, I'll ask my husband and my sister if this would be a good idea for me, but I already know what they'll say."

"I could never make a move like that while Dad is still alive. It would kill him."

And on and on goes the catalog of ad hoc authorities from whom it feels necessary to obtain at least tacit permission. Thus, a lot of energy and ingenuity is spent trying to obtain permissions that we really don't need, fishing for pre-approval before each decision, and refusing to commit without the consent of what we have allowed to be the authorities over our lives. What that adds up to is nothing less than a refusal to embrace the inner authority that God has given to each of us.

Examples? How about the millions of us who can't feel like successful and worthwhile individuals in life without all, or most, of the approved possessions or status symbols that we've been led to believe need to be there for anyone who is really "okay." And from whom does that approval come? As absurd as it may seem, when we're forced to admit it, the approval-givers are clothing designers, automobile manufacturers, real estate developers, ad agencies, and any number of others just as inappropriate to ever be allowed to hold the key to a person's sense of worth. Empowering such trivial, banal authorities to furnish or withhold from us the approvals and acceptances that are then allowed to shape our living makes no sense, but, to an embarrassing extent, they do.

Applying the same quirk in a whole different arena -- the permission to forgive ourselves is one that a great many of us seem to have farmed out to external sources.

Now, it's true that, by its very nature, forgiveness does have to do with our relationship with others. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, no one outside of us should ever have veto power over our feeling that we're forgiven. Nobody outside of us should be able to say whether it's okay now for you or me to let go of what is done and over with. There's no one in your or my world whose approval we should need before moving on, after some remorse and repentance. That's because it's a matter between each one of us and God. There's a second reason. It's that, in addition to all of the wonderfully forgiving people around us, there are also those pathological grudge-holders

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and life-long “resenters” to whom, if it’s left to them, we’ll grovel in regret and guilt forever. So, as important as the forgiveness of each other is, the responsibility for and the permission to be a forgiven person finally has to rest with you and me.

Yet another way it’s easy to see that this troubles our life is in those who lack the permission to take the pressure off themselves. They don’t feel they have the right to do it. It’s not even clear to whom that permission is turned over, but it IS clear that some don’t have it. At its worst and most absurd, the permission to “let up” finally has to come from a heart attack or some other grave, stress-related disability or disintegration. Only when, physically, they can’t go on, does it feel all right to quit being “productive,” to no longer be “achieving,” to not have to be demonstrably “useful,” and, in general, to quit trying to manage the universe. Until the day that the machinery collapses or some other circumstances conspire to call a “halt,” the permission isn’t quite there.

Then, too, are those of us who, if the truth be known, are uncomfortable allowing ourselves a strong, self-generated viewpoint that hasn’t first been approved and validated by the social circle of which we’re a part, or perhaps consented to by one’s husband or wife, or maybe checked out with his religious group or, as in many cases, shown to be consistent with her political party. These are often the same ones who don’t know whether or not they liked the film they just saw, the concert they just attended, or the book they just read -- until they read the reviews. As an “ordinary person,” they believe it to be presumptuous, if not dangerous, to have convictions and passionate concerns purely on their own.

Also common are those tortured souls who, lacking the ability to ever be approving of themselves with their particular flaws, imperfections, and susceptibilities, spend their lives role-playing, maintaining a façade and, in general, running from the unique individuals that they are. Some of the luckier ones, after spending thousands of dollars on therapy, find that approval, but it’s a tragically overdue embracing of the personal authority with which God has endowed us.

Those are enough examples to identify the phenomenon, aren’t they? The sources of it are fairly obvious.

Sometimes, as I’ve already suggested, it’s a matter of never having moved beyond the time in our childhood and youth when consents were still needed. So, instead of discovering themselves as freestanding, adult centers of thought, of intention, of power, of decision, they merely find new authorities to whom they subject themselves. Some, in fact, cling to those early approval sources. Millions of adults – though way up in mid-life – still remain stuck, immobilized, and disoriented in the absence of their parents’ approvals. But whether that, or a replacement authority like a spouse, a friend, or a therapist, it needs desperately to be understood how unnecessary and

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inappropriate it is, and then to drop it and move out of it. The habit (and habit is all it is) of granting others the power to overrule or second-guess or give a final okay to the choices and wisdom God has given us, profanes the very image of God in us.

Another source of the problem is even worse. It's the not-at-all-noble need (as some are fond of describing it) to "always cover our own rear ends" in our acting and deciding. That's what's behind it when someone says, "Well you know, it's not just me. I know a whole lot of people who feel just as strongly as I do," or "I'm only telling you what all the recognized authorities say," or "I'm not going to say anything until I've had a chance to discuss it with people who know all about this sort of thing." It's not, you see, that there's anything wrong with considering the perspectives of others in forming one's own perspective. There's nothing wrong with that, UNLESS, that is, we do it in order to keep from speaking or acting on our own personal authority. In that case, it's cowardice.

Finally, the other major source of a runaway need for approval and consent of others is the simple refusal to believe that God hasn't only given us full authority to think and decide and question and act, but has also given each one of us a unique set of understandings, intuition, imagination, and creativity that is unlike that of anyone else. Refusing to trust and embrace that truth about us is to discard what is most important and exciting about us. What gets thrown away are the distinctive insights, the vital "yeses" or the "no's," the particular wisdom that has unfolded in each of us, and the experiences and "comprehensions" peculiar to each one of us. It's not that our inner authority is always perfectly accurate on all matters, but it's nonetheless always important because it's a part of God's presence and truth being woven into our shared life.

Think carefully about it, then. For example, what two or three permissions might you or I have farmed out to someone or something else?

What is there that we haven't pursued or not offered that we should have because something or someone hasn't yet indicated that it's okay?

Where, if anywhere, have we not yet forgiven ourselves for something, because some unforgiving person is withholding permission for us to do so?

What contentment or self-esteem continues to elude us because certain external indicators seems to tell us that we haven't achieved enough yet or accumulated enough yet to be validly content and at peace with ourselves?

What strong conviction or concern are we keeping under wraps because, since we're not approved experts, we don't feel that it's proper to express it?

Maybe there are none. That's great, if so. But again, think about it. Each of us has more personal authority and freedom than we have likely begun to explore. Moreover, it's God-given. If
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by any chance we're seeing it otherwise, that's a nasty form of sacrilege that we're committing upon ourselves.