

## ANOTHER DAY – AND STILL A DISCIPLE

I do not recall ever thinking that Pegasus might have been greater than my own horse, Becky. On the other hand, Pegasus could fly, and I thought that remarkable. So it seemed like I could have some interest in Pegasus without being disloyal to Becky – who, after all, was never in her life disloyal to me. So not too deeply, but with interest, I got into the story of Bellerophon, Prince of Ephyre – who some said was son of the wicked King Glaucus. Actually he was son of Poseidon himself, which made more sense since Bellerophon was noble and gifted in both body and spirit. Of course, as you will remind me, Bellerophon had a wonderful mother – Eurynome – taught by Athena herself, until in wit and wisdom she was almost equal to a goddess. Deifying the mothers is an ancient urge, and you might think I would be more gracious about it by now.

Glaucus, despite his many flaws, was a great horseman. But he fed his horses human flesh to make them fierce in battle, and the gods did not approve of that. I always suspected the horses did not approve of it much either. In any case, Bellerophon inherited a great love and skill with horses from his supposed father. But he wanted – desired – above all other things to ride Pegasus as his very own. With a little help from Athena – and a golden bridle – Bellerophon and Pegasus formed a lasting bond, and they went through many trials and did great deeds together. Most famous was the slaying of the Chimaera (part lion, part serpent, part goat, with breath of unquenchable flame). But no time today for that, or how pride eventually brought Bellerophon to a very sad end. Or how humility brought Pegasus to the heights of Olympus itself.

Where did Pegasus and Bellerophon finally meet? High on the plain of Helicon, one of the most impressive citadels in the world. Indeed, it rises almost nine hundred feet from the plain below. And Pegasus, by stamping his foot, had created a wonderful spring there – high in the sky, so to speak. So Helicon was nearly impregnable, but it also had a constant source of water – always the great dream of the ancient world. You could build a great fortress on some high spot *or* you could have water, but rarely could you have both together. (The last time Helicon was captured, the siege lasted five years.)

When I had a chance to visit Greece, there were so many wonderful places to see and so little time to see them. And so, from Corinth

(which I loved visiting), formerly called Ephyre, we could look up at the Acrocorinth, formerly called Helicon. There, just a couple of miles away, towering into the sky, was the home of Pegasus. And there, the Peirene Spring that Pegasus brought forth still flows. And the view in all directions, they say, is incredible.

Of course, I was “In the Footsteps of Paul,” as we called it. So I was thinking a lot about Paul and what he must have been seeing and thinking when he was in Corinth (his second longest pastorate). We don’t know for sure that Paul ever visited the Acrocorinth in person. In Paul’s time, there was much up there besides the great temple of Aphrodite. Still, if he visited the famous site (only a two-hour walk from Corinth), it might give the impression that he was going to visit the famous temple. As part of the temple complex, they housed a thousand slave girls up there. And they were not having them sweep the floors and polish the silver. They were selling their own definition of “indulgences” – fourteen hundred years before Luther. It was all for a worthy cause, of course: to maintain the temple and to honor the goddess, Aphrodite (Venus, to the Romans). Some things never change very much. Catering to people’s whims or desires or fears – in the name of the gods – is as old as our records go. And in case you haven’t noticed, it happens no less today than in any former time.

So I was trying to picture Paul in Corinth, the city with the worst reputation for immorality in the Empire. And there, dominating the landscape, would have been the Acrocorinth, with its temple to Aphrodite on top. Clearly, a lot of people were worshipping there. Some of them had great zeal for religion. Problem: Some of them were now converts to the New WAY in Christ Jesus but they did not see – or were not sure they wanted to see – any reason to stop their old patterns or habits. Aren’t we glad that is never true of us?

Nevertheless, with all the grace, mercy, and forgiveness that Paul preached – with all the love and acceptance and compassion to be found in Jesus (unconditional love, we might add) – what could possibly be wrong with spending a little time enjoying the view from the Acrocorinth?

So Paul had some real problems trying to explain the Christian WAY to the Corinthians. If we have eternal life, and since life here is short, and since we care about the spiritual dimension and spiritual truth and not the physical dimension very much – well, why change some very pleasant patterns that we have been using here for years? You probably think I am talking about *them* ...

We don't really know very much about the dynamic between Paul and his Christian friends at Corinth. We just have the remnants of some letters he wrote to them when he was elsewhere (mostly in Ephesus, we assume). And the Corinthian letters are filled with more practical advice on more subjects than any of Paul's other letters. No time to cover the subjects, but if you know that the temple of Aphrodite is on top of the Acrocorinth – a huge reality to every Corinthian – you start to hear some of Paul's letters in a clearer light. For instance:

*“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be enslaved by anything. “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food” – and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two shall become one flesh.” But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”*  
(I Corinthians 6:12-20)

Paul is not even in Corinth at the moment. It's just a letter. But do you think the Corinthians know what he is referring to? Paul tries to show that grace is not separated from behavior. It has been an issue through all the annals of Christendom down to the present day. Many heresies have sprung up over the issue. Then, as now, many Gnostic cults were teaching that sexual immorality was no problem to the spiritual life. Sexuality is clearly part of our makeup, but Paul thinks that the way we live should show gratitude and honor to Jesus. And yet, if it goes back to “the LAW,” then the Gospel is indeed circumvented or destroyed. How is it – *why* is it – that “the church” has had so much grief and confusion over this issue for all these generations? We are celibate; we are promiscuous (the two extremes of “lust”). But we have a hard time connecting sex with true bonds of faithful, nurturing love. Do you know anybody who does not dream and long for a true family? I know some who are not sure it is possible, but I know nobody who does not wish they could be part of a faithful love-bond. How is it that Christians

have had so much grief and confusion over this issue for all these generations? And a third commandment is like unto it: Want for others what you want for yourself.

Well, one suspects that it is hard to see clearly when we keep throwing so much dust in the air. We keep coming up with lists of acceptable behavior and unacceptable behavior. That is, we reduce relationship to lists of rules, which cannot help but take us back to the Law – to thinking about morals and morality. Paul kept trying to make it clear that it has nothing to do with morality. He will not forsake or turn away from the *relationship* between us and Christ. Some kinds of behavior do not further the *relationship* between us and the Holy Spirit of Jesus our Lord. We turn away from such behavior because it causes friction, flak, disturbance, distance between us and Christ. Promiscuity always does that. It does not match the principles of true and loving relationship. It cares about the self, but not about the other. But what is always most important is the relationship between us and Christ. That cannot be reduced to some overt notion of morality. Paul kept saying it and teaching it and showing it in his own life. And some were misunderstanding, either on purpose or in honest confusion, all his days. So why would I expect to be heard any more clearly today? I do not. Yet it is part of our WAY that we never stop trying to be witnesses and faithful disciples of our Lord – who is Jesus the Christ.

When I started smoking a pipe during my seminary days, it never crossed my mind that it had any sort of detrimental affect on my spiritual life. It was not stealing, or murder, or adultery. In my younger days, I thought “sin” had to be big and ugly and obvious. Talk about stupid! It had not yet occurred to me that subtle, quiet, little things could also clog the channels between me and God. Attitudes, moods, inner thoughts, little desires that cut back my eagerness for obedience to the One who is so much wiser and more loving than I – these also are sins. The very definition of sin is “distance” or “alienation” from God – separation from the will and purposes of God. So I smoked my pipe, and also Camel cigarettes, for twenty years. And I still prayed, and the Spirit still answered me far more than I deserved. But eventually, years later, it did become clear to me that tobacco was clogging the prayer channels – not closing them off, just cutting clarity. Lots of other things still do. All of us will live and die here before we clear all the stuff out of the way between us and the Holy Spirit. So I do not have the animosity some of *you* have toward people I run into who still smoke. You think it’s a health issue, so it makes you angry. I have so much sin in my own life

that I cannot afford to look down on other pilgrims who are simply at a different place in their spiritual development. That is, they have cleared stuff out of the way that I still have in my life, and I have cleared some things out of the way that they still have in their lives. But the issue is not morality *or* health – it is our relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

Do you think I would give up smoking or drinking because I'm afraid to die? I came to terms with death back in the sixth grade, and do you imagine that my prayers have changed my mind about it in all the years since? I am still capable of worrying about life – which is a different kind of faithlessness – but not worrying about death. That is, sometimes I worry or wonder if I will be faithful enough, patient enough, courageous enough, or wise enough to respond faithfully to all the stuff that keeps coming toward me. But this world cannot *frighten* any of us into faithfulness. Faithfulness comes from a love-bond we have with Jesus. Our relationship with Him is worth more than anything and everything in this world. What does not feel right in the light of that relationship – what does not serve it, honor it, bear witness to its truth and love – *that* is what we want to get rid of, to get out of our lives. But if you reduce that to morality – to some list of acceptable or unacceptable behavior – you miss the point, and the entire dynamic of the Christian WAY.

That remark that stuff keeps coming toward us is true, by the way. And if we are Christians, it is true that our top desire is to respond *to whatever comes* in some way that is appropriate to our true identity and purpose as God's children – as children of the Light. That normally means we need and want to respond with the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit close and clear to us. So we often reflect about such things, and perhaps no more so than when a new year begins. On the other hand, since we have the temerity to divide time into hours, days, and years – as if that were somehow more real than seeing time as a sequence of events – I suppose it is inevitable that we begin to believe in the myth of clocks and calendars. No harm, unless we begin to let them, instead of God, control our lives. Of course, we still do that from time to time (pardon the pun): “I'm too old ... I don't have time ... I have too much to do ... I'm too busy.” All are statements of faithlessness, or at least a lack of the kind of prayer that puts the Holy Spirit in charge of our lives. Is it God who overbooks you? Who is in charge of your life: the Holy Spirit, or the watches and the calendars? The cell phone was not an invention of the Devil, but he can sure use it if we let him. So can the Spirit.

But let's go with the myth of time, since it has its uses. The new year has begun. Some of us never thought we would see this year. Some are just realizing that with all the trauma and mayhem in the world, they are not so sure they are happy about seeing this year. But do not imagine that it is worse now than at any other time – or better. Conditions in boot camp do not change very much. We are here to learn the basics of LIFE – Basic Training. All the true and biggest issues of life must be represented, or this world could no longer serve its purpose. The Kingdom can come – within us, within our awareness. But it cannot come in the externals, or boot camp would no longer serve its purpose. That is no excuse for us to strive any less to learn or serve our true purpose. But it *does* help us to know where our true LIFE comes from, and where it is going – and where real success lies, and where all the counterfeit values and purposes are going to end up.

So the “new” in this new year is in how we follow Jesus. It always has been. Hopefully, if we have been paying attention in this boot camp, this is becoming more clear all the time. The tides and the currents swirling all around us in the outer world – the ebb and flow going on all around us – that is not the true reality. It is real, and it is important. But that is not the big reality. Nor is it the purpose of our being here.

Some of the issues going on here are huge principles that will be essential for us to understand in future dimensions. So we pay a lot of attention to them: pride; love; forgiveness; being responsible; finding and keeping integrity; learning to *be* truthful (which is a far cry from simply not telling lies); and always and everywhere, learning what works and what does not work in relationships. We have much to learn, and much to occupy our time.

But some things are also a fleeting fancy – a trend, an eddy that will play itself out before this year or this decade can vanish. Have any of your interests waned during your brief life here? Have any of your enthusiasms lost their zeal? If you have moved on to more important goals and values, that is wonderful. And you *know* it is wonderful. You can feel it deep within. But it also reminds you that this place is full of illusion, temptation, false values, and temporary gods.

Is the civil rights movement the hottest topic on your agenda? It was the most powerful item on most people's minds back in 1965. Is World War II the most frightening and important item in your life? It would have been back in 1944. Principles and truths and purposes

within those times are still current in new guises, but time has moved on. And some of what was going on in those times was aberration – a siren song. Some people back then were led astray in the chaos and trauma of what they thought was the only reality that mattered. Was the civil rights movement far more important than the church of Jesus Christ? Almost everybody thought so back then. You may not agree, but almost everybody was wrong. For a time, church and synagogue banded together for values we both believed in, even though for different reasons. For a time, we dreamed of black and white together. But we got so eager for the goal that we lost sight of the faith communities that inspired the goal, and this inevitably pulled the ground out from under both the movement and the faith communities. Slowly the faith communities re-formed. And new movements started up to call forth new allegiance. And the cycles spin on, all over again.

Meanwhile there are always individuals who use this as an excuse to get cynical or uninvolved: “I have problems of my own; all I care about is my own life, my own self-actualization. So the only thing I want from God or the church is what can help me with my own personal agenda, my own problems, my own goals.” It is not Christianity, but it *is* the essence of what we might call “American Religion.”

Always, through all known history, there have been those who have lived long enough or seen clearly enough to realize that the real drama of life here is far bigger than what appears to be going on here. To them, God is like a great rock in a weary land – meaning, there is shade to be found no matter how hot the desert gets. Or to switch metaphors: There is a great River that flows through all times and circumstances – an unseen LIFE and purpose that is always available and always present for those who wish to turn to it. We can stop flopping and splashing about in the grandeur of our own prowess and efforts, and instead move into the flow of the Great River of the Holy Spirit. It is a power – a flow – that is personal and purposeful, and it wants to enhance each one of us. At the core of all its truth and power are the principles of relationship, especially the relationship between us and God. This is very distressing to those who want facts, objectivity, outer power, and outer organizations to be the answers to life. But we are never saved by outer power or outer organizations – religious, secular, or humanitarian. We are saved by the love of God in Christ Jesus. And that is the only River which always flows, never dries up, never fades or betrays.

The River *carries* us; we do not direct or control it. How very difficult for those with Yankee know-how and American pride! Of course, the know-how and the pride can be turned over to the love and guidance of the Holy Spirit. It has happened often enough to make that more than clear. But it has never really caught on in our society or culture. Even when we get religious, we usually want to express it by trying to make some religious organization successful American-style, rather than obedient Christian-style.

Nevertheless, we do not have to be “conformed to this world,” as Paul put it. (Romans 12:2) The Great River of the Holy Spirit always flows, and we have only to move into it. It never goes dry, never fades or betrays – it always carries us, nurtures us, heals us, directs us ... and yes, transforms us.

Strangely – though not to most of you – that River is best revealed, best symbolized, best represented in our world by the body and blood of Jesus our Lord. Here in the beginning of this new year, we turn to it again, and on purpose. We turn away from all things that distract or lead away from it, and we turn our lives back over to the mercy and love of Jesus, the Christ of God. O come to Him, all who are weary or heavy-laden. Come to Him – for the joy and the hope and the endurance that make life here more than we ever expected, and better than we ever dreamed.