

December 4, 2011

INTRODUCTION

A little stage-setting and in the spirit of full disclosure: My name is Kip and I am a covenant member of *The New Church*. I also serve as Chair of the Board of Trustees for *The New Church*. I am a business person by trade and a husband and father by choice and good fortune. I am not an ordained minister. I was raised Catholic and for the past sixteen years have been a member of the UCC (United Church of Christ), which is a mainline Protestant denomination acknowledging the priesthood of all believers. Now I am a member of *The New Church*, which is a nondenominational church cut from much of the same cloth. If you want to know what's not cut from the same cloth, you're going to have to stick around awhile.

I do not have the time, and I'm sure you would not have the interest, for me to give you enough information to fully explain "where I'm coming from," but I do want to say a few things about my philosophical/theological orientation.

I do not know what God thinks or how His plans for the world are working out. I don't even know what his plan for the world is. I do not have your answers. God has your answers. And I believe that working together with God, you can discover them. I will try to the best of my ability to stay out of what YOU should do, and focus on what I am doing and invite you to travel with me in exploration.

I think I understand the phrase "in but not of this world" but feel some angst when I hear most people talk about such things. It almost always feels like pitting "us" against "them" – that is, "Christians" (whatever that means) against some unknown "them." I believe blessing and curse are two sides of the same coin, and every gift/blessing has a dark side that can be misused and hurt us and those around us. Somehow in that belief I find myself frustrated with labels like "secular" because it seems to me God is in everything whether we know it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not. I could refuse to believe or acknowledge gravity, but the physical laws of the universe as being experienced on earth means that if I step off a cliff, I am going down regardless of what I profess or refuse to believe. If physical laws in our realm of space and time are so immutable, what makes us think the same is not true of spiritual laws?

INTRODUCTION

When I pay attention and look for God in everything around me, I see God. I'm not much of a car guy, so when I bought my last car, my kids really wanted a Jeep, so I bought a Jeep. As soon as I did, I couldn't believe how many Jeeps were on the road. Now, I know that those same Jeeps were on the road the week before, but I didn't see them because I wasn't paying attention. Now I see them everywhere. And that is how it is for me with God.

I call myself a Christian because I "believe" – that is, I put my trust – in Jesus. I do not know all that I believe about Jesus and cannot explain it fully, but I know that my trust is in a power greater than me, and I find great comfort and growth in the God that Jesus has demonstrated and described and modeled. I also often feel like I DO NOT want to be called a Christian according to the way much of the world has come to define "Christian."

THE BEGINNING

I want to talk a little bit today about beginning, but “The Beginning” has a funny ring to it, for me. So first I want to read part of a poem by T.S. Eliot called “Little Gidding.” Many of you know that T.S. Eliot was a contemporary and a friend of C.S. Lewis, and he wrote a group of poems called *Four Quartets*. This is the last of the Quartets, and is near the end of the poem:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

I had a friend who was asking me about this service today, and I told him that the Scripture was going to be from Revelation. He’s an evangelical fundamentalist and he said, “Do you love that book of prophecy?” And I told him that I love that book, but I don’t look at it the way most evangelical fundamentalists look at it – as a book of prophecy. It is a book of revelation, and I see the book of Revelation as part of apocalyptic literature. I see it presenting a vision of finality, or at least of eternity, and that vision is glorious, and I love the book. But I don’t see it as the predictor, because I wonder how anybody could know, even if it *were* revealed.

THE BEGINNING

Thinking about T.S. Eliot's poem (about the beginning) and the book of Revelation (about eternity) and tying those together, I thought about Eliot's statement that we don't stop from exploration but, at the end of all our exploration, it is to be at the beginning and to find the place for the first time. So I was thinking about first times and about beginnings, and that's what I want to talk about today.

Have you ever watched kids playing and when something goes wrong, someone cries out "Do-over!" There are times I want a do-over. The great thing about today and the God of my understanding is I get the do-over any time I wake up enough to claim it.

The Greek word for "truth" found in the New Testament is *alatheia*. The literal definition of the word is "stop forgetting." If we are forgetting something, then by logical extension does that not mean that at one time we knew it? We knew it and we forgot it. What are we forgetting?

I was lucky enough to be present for the birth of all four of my children. As each child came into the world, they were immediately handed to Kathy. Each quickly "attached" to her without much fuss and began to be nursed. I don't think these babies gave any "thought" to this. There were no considerations to be made or options to be weighed or negative consequences to ponder. Instinctively they trusted that if they would seek, they would find. They came into this world KNOWING that they would be taken care of and loved.

I know that this is not how it happens for each child born into this world, but what I am focusing on today is not how it is, but how we come into the world.

My life has had moments, and continues to have moments, when it feels so "off track" and dysfunctional. What I've been "remembering" is that when I can be in more of a state of love, everything goes better.

A couple of years ago, I was feeling like I was a worthless guy. I was full of self-pity and guilt and shame and fear. Today, I am not in that same place, although I can get there in any given moment. But, not the point. How did I get out of this place?

When I was talking to someone about these feelings, they spouted a phrase that rolled off their tongue a little too easily; you know what I mean? But I trusted this person so I played it over and over in my mind and reflected on it and pondered it and questioned it. And slowly, it

became more and more true as I lived my life, not as a “saying” or a “platitude” but as a reflection of what was happening. What he said to me was “If I’m OK, you can’t be a problem.”

When he said that to me, I thought to myself, “You’ve got to be kidding. I have people all around me in my life who are a problem.” But the more I came to think about that and ponder it and to work out my own inner struggles, the more that became true. Now, it’s not *always* true, of course. I still get triggered or bugged or annoyed with people around me all the time. But the point is not that I never slip or never have those thoughts or those feelings; it’s that I can remember to get back to that place of love. And what I mean by that is self-love, self-worth: belief that I am a child of God who has been created for great things, and that I have to *remember* what that is and to *discover* what that is – with God’s help. So that’s what I keep doing.

As that meaning started to develop for me and I felt that I could have love for myself, then I was able to love others more. Somehow over the years I had gotten that all screwed up and thought that I had to love, had to do, had to worry about everyone else and that then somehow, some way, I would get what I needed or wanted back. And for me, it did not work out that way. In the process, I lost who I was and had nothing to offer anyone else because I was not the Kip that God had intended for me to be; I was some fabrication of some misguided interpretation of how life was “supposed” to be. But the paradox of getting more focused on me was that I began to care more about others in the process, but in a real-life kind of way, not some banal way of “love your neighbor” that for many people turns into “give everything you’ve got until you’ve got no more to give.”

We get to keep trying to find our way on this path through life and we get to do it with other like-minded folks. That’s the other thing that I’ve been doing that helps me. I get together with people who think like I do in terms of spiritual growth and the spiritual path. I don’t mean people who just think everything like I do and there’s no disagreement or no argument, but people who are seeking and growing and developing on a spiritual path. That’s helpful to me. If you have people in your life who are not loving, then do not go to them for love. If you want love, go where the love is. I’ve heard it said that going to a hurting person for love is like going to the hardware store for a loaf of bread. There may be a lot of great things at the hardware store, but you’re not going to find a loaf of bread.

THE BEGINNING

So each of us has to figure out what that looks like ... to go where the love is. For me, a lot of that is in church community. A lot of that is in spiritual groups and study groups that I'm part of, and I get to talk to people, and I get to work out my feelings and my thoughts and my frustrations and talk about those things in a nonjudgmental, loving way. And the more I get to do that, the more I get to check who Kip is and whether that's true or not. When I first started trying to share what I thought and what I felt, I would say something that would be in my mind that was very real but once I said it and it was out in the universe, I would listen to myself and say, "Wow. I don't even know if I think that." But it took getting it out of my head for me to even be able to take a look at it.

The goal for me is to try to remember that I was created in love, in some kind of spiritual way. And when I read Revelation, I see the love of all nations. What does it say? "*You are worthy to take the scroll and to open the seals because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.*" (Revelation 5:9-10) That's an interesting thing for me, to read about every tribe, every nation, every person. I see that beginning of love. I see that end of love. And so I want to try to figure out the ways that I can remain in that love place – loving myself, knowing that God loves me, and then demonstrating and expressing that love.

I'm going to close with, again, one part from T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding":

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

May it be true.