

WANTING TO KNOW JESUS

There are places and ways and times in life when we get what we deserve. The Hindu concept of “karma” magnifies this into a nearly total and all-the-time law of life. Of all the world’s religions, Christianity, with its doctrine of “grace,” disputes this principle the most. But we do not rule it out altogether. Grace can happen, and comes as a surprise and a gift, but we are not unaware of the natural principle: *“Whatsoever a person sows, that shall they also reap.”*

Specifically: *“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked; for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”* (Galatians 6:7-8) Here in Galatians, Paul’s most adamant proclamation of “Gospel,” we find this comment that seems to revert to “Law,” to works, to “it’s all up to us.”

Sometimes, especially when it happens over and over – when the pattern is clear and repetitive – sometimes we deserve exactly what we get. So I am asking myself: “What kinds of things am I deserving right now?” And of course, I am aware that many things in my life at this time seem way better than anything I deserve. Not only that, but many things on the horizon seem full of promise and possibility that are also way beyond my deserving. I may not enjoy or appreciate absolutely every little detail of every day, and the world all around me seems full of trouble, pain, and numerous threats. But on the personal level, my life is full of blessings, opportunities, people I love, and some challenges and problems to keep it all interesting and exciting.

So mostly I worry that I am not doing enough to introduce others into a life better than they have. I cannot do much for them in the ways I used to attempt. Principles of freedom, personal responsibility, and enabling have made me far more cautious than I was in former years about what it means to help, or even love, another person. There are still ways for all of us to invite and allow the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us. Yet it still seems to me that large numbers of people on this planet do not have any clear notion about such a possibility. If they *have* heard of it, it was so tainted with surrounding threats, demands, or superstitions that they couldn’t trust it. Or it was so laced with extraneous agendas and motives that in reality they have not heard of it

in any clear way. Of course, all of us mix the Message with so much of our own folly and false expectations that the Spirit never has an easy time getting *any* of us into the Life designed for us and waiting for us.

It is sometimes tempting to want to abandon all the familiar language and constructs of the Christian Faith and start over – with a “clean slate,” so to speak. Only, most of us quickly learn that then we cannot find a context or setting in which to speak or comprehend any of the Message itself. Sad as it may seem, there are no other organizations or efforts or religions in our world that are carrying very much of the real Message of what God’s love and what God’s Kingdom can mean for us. Christianity itself is mixed with the residue of what humans already believed and expected before Jesus came to reveal a new Covenant and a new WAY. In the popular mind, Jesus made it all really clear. But the reality is that humans, even Jesus’ best and most willing followers, could not get free from all their old prejudices, fears, and superstitions overnight. Though few seem to think about it, it’s no surprise that what Jesus tried to teach and reveal to us is still mixed with many of the errors and “old ways of thinking” with which we greeted Him. Christianity has *never* been free from all the residue of our old ways of thinking, fearing, and blaming ourselves and each other. And indeed, you don’t have to scratch any of us very deeply to discover that many of the “shadows” of old, primordial guilt and fear and shame are still unhealed within us.

So, I sometimes say to myself: One of the things we deserve is the church as we know it. One of the things we deserve – because we put up with it, endure it, foster it, protect and defend it – is the church with all its foibles, falsehoods, pretenses, and insincere commitments and loyalties.

What are we doing to convince people that Christianity can be honored or expressed in one or two gatherings a year? What are we doing to convince people that this is an adequate and acceptable pattern for those who care about Jesus and His Kingdom? Are we not misleading people – doing them great harm – by telling them they only need Jesus or His church once or twice a year, or casually, or only when it’s convenient? “Oh, but we aren’t the ones telling them such things,” some of us are thinking. Really? I wonder who is. Maybe it’s the barbers. Or maybe all the grocers get together and tell people about Christianity and the church. Somebody must be responsible for dispensing information about Christianity and the church in our society. I wonder who it is?

In any case, I think it's lovely to be back to who we really are: a tiny gathering of a few would-be disciples – in the midst of a vast culture and society that harbors a mostly mock version of Christian faith and fellowship. Authentic Christianity has never been played by the numbers, of course. Oh yes, lots of people have been involved from time to time. Sometimes Jesus drew large crowds, and sometimes He honored “two or three gathered together,” and sometimes He prayed alone. But the action belongs to God, not to us or our promotional theories. Christianity is found in faith and obedience – *not* in earthly success. Christianity's motive for evangelism is to end the suffering, the loneliness, and the aimlessness of people who do not know God's love. The purpose of true evangelism is *never* the making of big churches. Funny how we keep reversing things and getting important truths all twisted around. If we trust God and believe the Gospel, why do we need to grow big? We do not. We are fine. Except for one thing: God loves other people besides us. And some of them are lonely and discouraged, though many of them don't show it – until they find the LIGHT that lights our lives also. And if you have it, and since it does not belong to you in the first place, it is not fair to keep it to yourself. Isn't that true?

I know that life is complex. Yet beneath the complexities, there really are some principles that are within our grasp. For instance, conversion, change, and transformation have been happening to people for as far back as human records go. (This is *not* the only dynamic in the Christian Faith, but we cannot say everything all at once.)

I think what happens on the most simplistic level is that we become aware that life has dimensions and possibilities that we did not know existed. When it comes clear to us that life is more than we thought, we move toward it. We want it. And if we want it badly enough, it is only a matter of time before we stumble (by the Spirit's grace and mercy) into conversion, change, transformation.

People get born into this realm. They look around, watch what is happening, learn some of what is presented to them, and get busy with the business of surviving. If they get any extra time or resources, they seek pleasure – respite from the weary round. There are, of course, many variations of physical survival. Some people who get good at it reduce their boredom by enhancing life for others – by helping others to survive. Nevertheless, as the years begin to flow by, most of us become aware that the physical realm alone is severely limited. Watching somebody like

Jesus introduces endless new dimensions. Suddenly life has possibilities we did not know existed. And while some people are frightened or threatened by that, others want it and go for it – they want what He has; they want some of the quality of life they see in Him. Hence conversion, change, transformation.

For lots and lots of people over many generations now, the Path or WAY has started with wanting to know Jesus: wanting to know Him personally and pretty close up. We sometimes call it “relationship” – just like we do with each other, when we get serious about some form of love. But this is not a tiny “want” among all the other little whims and desires of life. Jesus is the evidence for things our souls have hungered and cried out for all along, only we tried to shut them up or shame them into leaving us alone. Wanting to know Jesus is a passion – a journey into a New Life – and if push comes to shove, it is more important than survival itself. You could feel that as we read Paul’s comments this morning, couldn’t you?

Sometimes I get a glimmer that there are people who read, or in Paul’s case write, this sort of thing on a whole different level from where the rest of us spend our time and our lives. Paul writes: “*I want to know Christ Jesus.*” (Philippians 3:10) I can read the rest of his writings; read about his life; learn about what he did and what happened to him; get glimmers of some of the mistakes he made, some of the decisions he made, and what it was he was about. Long before I have finished, I know it is literally and incredibly true: Paul *wanted* to know Jesus. Do I? Do you?

Every once in a while, I try to think calmly, clearly, and honestly about some of the things I want. Not always a total delight.

I would like to be able to play chess better – I mean, a lot better.

I doubt if that would make anybody love me more, but it would satisfy something inside me.

I would like to move and inspire *The New Church* so much that it would grow to two hundred and fifty committed, dedicated members – *without* compromising its purpose or corrupting its process.

I would like to have some people think well of me, even though they know me pretty well.

I would like to help some people find their true identity and the corresponding relationship that is rightly theirs with God.

Most of the lesser things I think I want are only symptoms or symbols of what I *truly* want. Do I *want* to know Jesus – the One who still lives? Do any of you? This is not true or false. This is not even multiple-choice. This is a whole new WAY of Life.

It occurs to me that some church members I have known think they *ought* to want to know Jesus better, more closely. Lots of people I have known think it would be good for other people – their children, their bosses, or their friends – to be good Christians. It would be good for morality, the economy, the family, or what ails the world if more people would pay sincere attention to Christian precepts and principles. But none of that is even in the same category with wanting to know Jesus.

When I was young, there was a girl my age that my parents liked very much. Those in her family were solid members of the church, like we were. She went to a different high school, but we had seen each other in Sunday School and youth group over the years. It became clear to me that if we had lived in the days when parents arranged marriages, Janet and I would have ended up married.

Janet was a lovely girl: pretty, smart, quiet, shy, well-mannered, well-trained, family-oriented, religious – everything a man could possibly want. Clearly, parents can pick 'em a lot better than the kids can (except some of us get lucky). Anyway, I tried, I really did. Every time I took Janet out, I thought to myself, “This is the perfect one. I’ll never do better. It would please my parents, it would please her parents, it would please her, and doubtless it would please God.” I wanted to want her. I tried to want her. I could find no reason or logic why I didn’t want her. And I was not a rebellious son, whatever you may imagine. The hard and exasperating fact was that I did not want her. I thought she was wonderful, but that was the end of it. I didn’t really want her in my life, not close up and for real. Is that how lots of church members feel about Jesus?

I look at the behavior and attitude of some church members I have known over the years, and I wonder if they have a Janet complex with Jesus. They want to want Him; they try to want Him; their minds are in agreement; their logic tells them it would be very good for them. They are not rebellious children at heart, so they try to be the church – they try to be faithful members. They keep dutifully going on the dates – this meeting, that project, another study group or retreat – but it never really clicks;

it never really happens. Maybe sometimes they get engaged to Jesus. Maybe there is talk of marriage. But they don't actually *get* married. They never really get around to making love, which makes it hard to bear fruit.

Do you *want* to know Jesus? Really!

On the Pastoral Search Committee that brought me to Andover, Massachusetts (forty-eight years ago), there was a Deacon named Vahey Gulezian. He was Armenian. What's an Armenian? I was smart enough not to ask, and stupid enough not to find out. In those days, Armenia was "just out of sight" to the Western World, just beyond where we looked or noticed – over there somewhere between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, but a little too far north of anything we cared about. You know, over there around Mount Ararat, where Noah's ark landed. The apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew (Nathaniel) are said to have carried the Gospel to this region in the first century A.D.

Armenia was, by the way, the first nation to adopt Christianity as its national religion. In A.D. 301, St. Gregory the Illuminator (from Cappadocia) became the first head of the church. (King Tiridates III was the king who converted.) In A.D. 652, Armenia was invaded by the Arabs but kept its Christian Faith. Then it was back and forth – the Byzantine Empire, the Seljuk Turks, the Mongol invasion, the Ottoman Empire.

By the late 1800s, part of Armenia belonged to Russia and part to Turkey. There was concern about the continued persecution of the Armenian Christians in this predominantly Muslim part of the world. In the summer of 1878, in two diplomatic moves (Convention of Cyprus with Great Britain, June 4; Treaty of Berlin, July 13), Turkey promised to carry out reforms in Turkish Armenia. Everybody went home happy, but no reforms took place and the persecution increased. In 1895, two hundred thousand Armenian Christians were massacred in eastern Turkey. A year later, seven thousand were killed in Constantinople (Istanbul); it was not that western Turkey was more lenient, but that fewer Armenians lived there. In 1909, twenty thousand Armenians were killed in Cilicia and northern Syria (home territory of the Apostle Paul). Islam wanted to make sure that no new seeds sprouted from that once-fertile ground. Six years later (1915), having incurred no great repercussions for its sanctions, the Turkish government decided to finish the job. The entire remaining Armenian population of Turkey was killed, deported, or forcibly converted to Islam. Hundreds of thousands were killed or died of starvation. All property was confiscated. A few escaped

through Syria or north into Russia. A handful were rescued by the Russian army moving into Van. As all of us know by now, there has been more than one holocaust.

I knew none of this when I met and later learned to respect and admire Vahey Gulezian. We spent most of our time with the affairs of the church we both tried to serve, and I have been sorry for years that I did not press him more for information about Armenian history. I could tell that history was painful for him, and he did not seem to want to talk about it. It felt to me like he carried some kind of guilt for not doing more – for not being a more outstanding Christian. From my perspective, however, I thought if I could find ten more like him, I could have converted all of Andover, and maybe most of northern Massachusetts.

Then one day I got news that Vahey's father had died. We sat on his sun porch and talked. Were Vahey and his father close? Very close. Not always very demonstrative about it, but very close. I stayed to make sure Vahey was okay. It became clear after a while that the wound was real, but not a problem. There is a difference, a vast difference, between hurting because it hurts, and hurting because your world is falling apart. Vahey's world was not falling apart. He was sad that he wouldn't be able to see his father again for a while. Or perhaps his world *was* falling apart, but there was not much of his life that was based or grounded in this world. He knew, in ways I did not then understand, that on any old day – like April 24, 1915, for instance – your whole people could suddenly be swept away. What could not be swept away, however, was Jesus. That is what he trusted. But it always troubled him that he did not know if he trusted it enough.

I never caught on to what was really haunting him. He seemed so calm and staunch to me. That morning on his sun porch, after we had talked about his father and family, the conversation drifted back to the church and to the Faith. That's what we usually talked about with each other. And toward the end of the conversation, he said, "I want to know Jesus, I try to be a Christian, but I don't know if I really am because *my* faith has never been tested." I looked at him blankly for a moment, then smiled and said, "Your father whom you dearly love has just died, but your faith has never been tested?" Then he looked at *me* blankly for a moment and said, "I don't think of that as a test."

Years later, long out of that parish, I stumbled across a page written by Vahey Gulezian and suddenly understood a little more. Vahey wrote:

When my father was a lad about twelve years old and living in Armenia [about 1815], then part of Turkey, his father was seized (as were many others) by the Turks. As my father watched and stood by helplessly, they began to beat his father, demanding that he denounce his Christian faith and accept Allah as his god and Muhammad as his prophet. My grandfather, in spite of this beating, steadfastly refused to deny his God and his Christian faith.

My father stood by, watching in tears, pleading with his father to accept Islam in order to save his life. My grandfather turned to his son and repeated in Armenian: "*Edis gana char sadana.*" [Get thee behind me, Satan.] He would not be persuaded to give up his faith. My father, rebuked, remained quiet, crying.

When the beating was finished, my father helped his father to his feet and took him to their home. As he lay on his deathbed that day, his last request was that my father read the scriptures to him. As my father read, my grandfather passed on to his eternal life.

So *that* is what Vahey meant about having his faith tested, and why he wondered and worried about how he would do when his turn came.

I have often wondered what Vahey's father was reading as his own father lay dying, those many years ago. Perhaps, "*I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ Jesus.*"

Something about the flavor of this passage is so full of passion that I can hardly stand it. I am told that it isn't "deathless prose" in Greek. It isn't deathless prose in English either, but it feels like it to me. We can feel the passion in the uncompromising way that Paul is turning away from some things, and turning toward others: No confidence in the flesh – I could have it if I wanted to; I used to have it; it is garbage. No righteousness of my own, no trust in the Law – I could have them if I wanted; I used to have them; they are rubbish.

And did you notice that it is not an accomplished fact? It is not all clear, cut-and-dried, over with, and accomplished. On one level, Paul is quite nervous about the whole business. He does not consider that he has Jesus in tow – that he has made the Christian Life his own. He has not yet obtained it, or reached the goal. What he *does* know is that he WANTS it. Paul wants to share in Jesus’ sufferings, taste the power of the Resurrection, respond in some true and genuine way to the love he has been given. Paul *wants* to know Jesus. “*I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*”

What makes the passage powerful is the same thing that makes life powerful: The turning from, and the turning toward. The contrast. When you get right down to it, the LOSS. “*Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ Jesus.... I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*” (Philippians 3:7-8)

No one ever gets truly married without the loss of endless other potential partners. The loss and the attainment go hand in hand. Many people I know would have urged Vahey’s grandfather to turn Muslim to save his life: “What difference would it make? You would leave your family for *what*? We all worship the same God anyway.” But Vahey’s grandfather, probably in his late thirties or early forties, came out of a long tradition of martyrs and witnesses who knew better: Jesus; Peter; Paul; Nathaniel (Bartholomew), who founded the Armenian church. “*I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*”

The American church is trying to invent a religion where there is gain without loss; where we can do everything our neighbors do, and still be people of deep prayer and study and obedience; where we can fill our calendars with anything we like, and still belong to Jesus.

Do you *want* to know Jesus, or do you merely think you *ought* to want to know Him? Are there old gains you count as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Him? Do you press on because Jesus has made *you* His own?

It is a rare and blessed thing when humans know what they really want.