

BOWLING WITH GOD

Sermon for Easter 7B (Ascension Sunday): Acts 2:1-21

LPC, 5/24/09

Teachers and parents know about underachievers and overachievers. There are overachievers and underachievers in religion as well as at school. This sermon is directed primarily at those who tend to overachieve when it comes to church. I leave it to you to decide how much this applies to you.

Religious overachievers tend to make work out of their religion and their relationship with God. They do this in a variety of ways.

When people get especially serious about the moral teachings of Christianity, religious observance can become a checklist of righteous behavior. The more practical among us will stick to physical tasks like going to church, and making sure we fulfill the Ten Commandments and other biblical injunctions. The more contemplative among us will look to spiritual disciplines like daily prayer and meditation.

These things are good! They are intended to promote our relationships with God and with each other. Since we are human, however, we are capable of making our religious practices ends in themselves. Our relationships with God and with each other can actually suffer if we forget the reason for our observances. In the absence of real relationship with God, strict religious observance becomes a chore, or at least no better than a habit. There is no joy, no passion, no peace for us in this. God does not want this.

Another pitfall for overachievers is to become so concerned with righteous performance that you are never satisfied, with yourself or with others. You have what you consider unholy feelings and think you must be a bad person for having bad feelings. Or, you become a perfectionist, and set for yourself impossible standards. Then, when you have a lapse, as you inevitably will, being human and all, you beat yourself up. You can't forgive yourself. Or worse, when other people lapse, as they inevitably do, being human and all, you can't forgive them. You find yourself constantly on the alert for other people's lapses. God does not want this for us either.

Contrast this overachiever's approach to religion with today's story from the Book of Acts. This story takes place after Jesus has risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven. Jesus' followers continue to meet together. In this account there are 120 people in one place. They clearly have some kind of sense of having work to do.

Peter stands up and says that they should appoint someone from their number, one who has been with them from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, to take the place of Judas, who betrayed Jesus and then killed himself. Why it is so important that the leadership of Jesus' followers continue to number an even dozen? We're not told, but Peter's proposal is accepted without question, and two names are submitted for consideration: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias.

Now, what would your organization do if there were two applicants and one position? You would require them to present their qualifications, submit resumes,

interview, answer questions like, “Where do you see yourself in five or ten years?” Does the early church do this? No. They cast lots. They throw dice.

Now, the ancient world was a different place than the world today. People then could not imagine that, in a matter so important to God, that God would leave the roll of the dice to chance. They also clearly had a deep sense of wanting to step out of the way and let God act. They wanted the decision to be God’s, undistorted by human will.

In this day and age, I doubt that we could ever replicate the early church’s simplicity. It’s hard to imagine Commissions on Ministry, for example, willing to step out of the way and let God act, choosing persons to admit to ordination on the basis of thrown dice. Nowadays organizations would be considered irresponsible and incompetent if they left important decisions to chance like that.

There remains something to be said about getting out of the way and letting God act. “Let go and let God,” is a truism, but like all truisms, it is based in truth.

To help illustrate the principle of stepping back and letting God act, I will now tell the Parable of the Bowling Ball. This parable is a true story based on my experience last week at my CREDO conference. This conference was a lot of hard work, designed to encourage Episcopal clergy in their 40’s and 50’s to look seriously at four aspects of their lives: physical health, finances, vocation and spirituality. The climax of the week was the creation of a so-called CREDO plan, for which we prayerfully set goals and objectives in each of the four areas.

The week was frontloaded in intensity and halfway through, all us participants exhausted. At this point the very wise conference leaders took us bowling. Only we were not to play straight bowling. We were given bingo cards with numbers but also squares saying things like “Strike,” “Spare,” and “Split.” The hardest squares by far to cover with token were the 2’s. Have you ever tried to hit a 2 while bowling? Theoretically you can do it by hitting the 7 pin in one corner with your first ball and the 10 pin in the other with your second, but in practice, the task is impossible, at least for the casual bowler. You just can’t do it by trying.

There are some things you can’t do through trying. Relationship with God is one of those things. God has already established a saving relationship with us through Jesus Christ. We can do things that support that relationship, just as we can do things to undermine that relationship, but we can’t create it and we can’t destroy it. It’s already there, and it will always be there. It is possible to work too hard at it. Our own heroic efforts can erect barriers of our own to prevent the full flow of God’s grace into our lives.

As an experiment for those of us who have a tendency to try too hard at God stuff, I suggest backing off and letting God act. Let go and let God. Lighten up. Have some fun with God. Allow God to have fun with you. For the serious overachievers among us, there’s always bowling with God.