

The Search For A Life That Matters

August 12, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

There is a Hasidic story, which tells of a man who went for a walk in the forest and got lost. He wandered around for hours trying to find his way back to town, trying one path after another, but none of them led out. Then abruptly he came across another hiker walking through the forest. He cried out, *Thank God for another human being. Can you show me the way back to town?* The other man replied, *No, I'm lost, too, but we can help each other by telling which paths we've already tried and been disappointed in. That will help us find the one that leads out.*

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his provocative work *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough: The Search For A Life That Matters*, includes this Hasidic tale at the end of Chapter 2, a chapter that begins with the search for *the good life*, the meaningful, satisfying life, one of the oldest and most enduring of human needs. Kushner contends that religion, from its earliest beginnings, has tried to connect people with God. And

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religion has also tried, from its inception, to connect people with each other. Thus religion has provided a means to make *the vast uncontrolled world* less threatening, while also providing human beings mutual support and the reassurance that they would not have to celebrate or mourn alone.

But Kushner goes beyond religion's meeting these basic needs when he speaks of its role in leading people into what promises to be *the good life*. Here religion constitutes the pathway that leads out of human *lost ness*. Religion provides a reliable, true and time-tested direction to people who are over-directed by the world's confusing agenda. Kushner says: *As human beings grew to understand that there was more to life than mere survival, they looked to religion to be their guide in the good life. In Judaism, in Christianity, and in several of the Oriental faith systems, religion is sometimes referred to as The Way, the path to living in harmony with the*

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universe, the guide to living life as it was meant to be lived (p. 33).

The author of the OT lesson (Deut 8:1-10) you heard certainly makes this point. Moses says to the weary Hebrews, who have wandered in the wilderness for forty years, tested and humbled by God, that God's way is their only way out of lostness. But overcoming this lostness is not to be found in material gain alone, as the reading suggests (8:6-10). The troubles of the Hebrew people hardly end when they occupy Canaan. And the whole idea of being faithful to God so that you get the good things of this world is one that bears much scrutiny.

The reality that lies in the hearts and minds of us who gather in the name of Christ time after time after time is that we are looking for Christianity's answer to the *good life*. What is this *good life*? How is it to be lived? We don't live by bread alone, but we don't get

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far without it either. We yearn for the Bread of Life, but every fifteen seconds or so we are thinking about the bread that perishes and how we are going to amass more of it.

We are a confused group of lost hikers. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have erred and strayed like lost sheep, confident in *our* pathways to the good life. But the more we stayed on these errant paths, the more we run into the dead ends of the *filled yet unfulfilled life*. We followed the path that work alone was going to bring about the good life. Or, was it finding the right mate? Or, getting the right degree? Or, having the right looks? Or, having the right resume? Or, driving the right car? Or, having the right children? Or, having the right exercise program? Or, living in the right kind of neighborhood? Or, having the right mutual funds, or the right contacts in the right places? Or, having the right Church? Or, volunteering for the right charity?

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Or, having the right theology, or the right political leanings? We have searched for the *good life* through the forest of the world's promises and we have found ourselves just as lost as before.

What these Scripture readings for today maintain is that pursuing these *good things* as ends in themselves, as **THE DREAM**, is anything but the pathway to the *good life*. The authentic life, the life of depth and meaning, is rooted in our relationship with God. The *good life* is a by-product of our life with God, and how that life is lived with those God gives us. The *bread of the world* while necessary, as an end in itself, ultimately will turn stale. Only the *living bread*, the presence of Christ, has endless survival value. It is the *soul food* that, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, nourishes us to *be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven you* (Eph. 4:32). It is the bread of heaven that sustains us to be *imitators of God, as beloved*

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children, to walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:1-2).

When we have learned, as did the two hikers in the Hasidic story, painfully and with frustration, which paths do *not* lead out of the forest into the *good life*, we will be prepared, with God's grace, to find and to follow the one that does.

AMEN.