



*The Bronze Serpent* by Erich Fromm

Sally May and Mary Hughes were old-maid cousins of mine who lived together in the original ancestral home of my mother's family- a house named "Cedar Grove," between Edgefield and Aiken, South Carolina. Sally May and Mary Hughes both taught school, as single, elderly ladies in the South frequently did. But while Mary Hughes was the good cop of this particular duo, time spent in Sally May's classroom could be very unpleasant indeed, as she was known to punish her students both with a frequency and a severity which would not have been tolerated today. And after receiving a Sally-May punishment, if a child complained that they hadn't done anything bad, Sally May's response would invariably be, "Maybe not, but I bet you were thinkin' about doin' it!"

While I don't necessarily approve of my cousin's style of conducting classroom discipline, her concern about the dangers of malicious thoughts and intentions may have been more justified than I have believed until recently. In a book published in 2013 by the renowned psychologist Daniel Goleman, it's noted that human emotion is incredibly infective, even in nonverbal situations. If you put an assertive personality into a room of

people, the state of mind of that dominant person will slowly influence those around him, even though not a word has been spoken. So, eventually everyone in the room will come to feel the same way as the emotional leader does. This concept is known as "emotional resonance" and it's very powerful.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, from a theological point of view, this observation leaves us with the unfortunate conclusion that sinful thoughts and intentions are contagious. And that's not good news!

There is some negative emotional resonance in Israel going on in the passage from Numbers for today. Just before the episode in the desert with the poisonous snake, the Children of Israel have won a great victory over their enemies, the Canaanites. We read that The Lord gave the Canaanites into Israel's hand, and the Israelites were completely triumphant over their enemies. (See Num.21:1-3)

But then, as usual, Israel starts to get the big head, forgetting who it was that had made their astounding military victory in Canaan possible. And we read that as punishment for their pride, God sent poisonous snakes among the Children of Israel, and many Israelites were bitten and perished. (See Num.21:6)

God's remedy for this situation is fascinating. He instructs Moses to make a bronze snake, and to place it on a high pole. And any time an Israelite was bitten by a poisonous snake, that Child of Israel could look up at the image of the snake on the pole and live. (See Num. 21:8-9)

So, this bronze snake reminded the Children of Israel about the promises of God's faithful mercy and the certainty of their own self-destruction should they abandon the will of God for their lives. Or, at least, it was supposed to. But of course, it would not be enough. There was something else that needed to be lifted up to keep the gaze of Israel's Children fixed on the Creator God. There was something else that needed to be gazed upon so that God's children could remember how helpless they really are against the forces of evil that walk about on this earth, waiting to devour like a hungry lion. (See IPet.5:8)

All of this points to the evil and infectious nature of sin, and our ever constant need to be humbled. That's why letter that he wrote at St. Vladimir's Seminary shortly before his death in 1983 said it this way: "In our perspective, the original sin of man is not primarily that he disobeyed God; the sin is that he ceased to be hungry for Him and for Him alone, ceased to see his whole life depending on the whole world as a sacrament of communion with God. The only real fall of man is his non-eucharistic life in a non-eucharistic world."<sup>2</sup>

For me, the real kernel of truth in what Schmemmann is saying here has to do with the central character of what a "Eucharistic life and world" is all about. Because it all comes down to our ability to express sincere and joyous

<sup>1</sup> See *Primal leadership* by Daniel Goleman, Chapter 3.

thanks, over-and-over again. The original Greek word which Christians applied to the Lord's Supper, the central focus of the earliest Christian worship seems to have been wrapped up in the concept of expressing to God a joyous thanksgiving for His grace.<sup>3</sup> That seems to be what the term "Eucharist" originally meant- a joyous thanksgiving. This must surely be why in the various Eucharistic rites in the Episcopal Church we often proclaim that in the celebration of this Sacrament we are offering to God a "sacrifice of thanksgiving." (See BCP335, 342, 363, 369)

Sincere thanks is so powerful thing. It can convey such a wealth of appreciation and humility. Seen in its purest form, heart-felt thanks is the act of expressing gratitude for a gift or kindness that is perceived as wholly unmerited. In that sense, thanksgiving is nothing less than an acknowledgement of grace: And oh good people, there are probably few things more important in this life than giving and receiving grace!

One more thing I would like to point out about the book I mentioned to you at the beginning of this message. It's something else that Dr. Goleman has to say about the infectious quality of human emotion he calls "emotional resonance." According to his research, the most infective emotion of all is joyous laughter.

Evidently, there's something about rejoicing that seems to completely blow out of the water all the rest of human emotion with regard to the power to change peoples' attitudes. And if we wanted to sum-up all of this reflection in a kind of formula which could be most easily applied toward how we need to be leading the Christian life, it must be those ten words that Paul writes in his first letter to the Church as Thessalonica. Toward the end of that letter, the Apostle Paul encourages us this way: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances..." (1Thes.5:16-18a) What an amazing way to sum-up a fruitful Christian witness!

In the night-time conversation we read about this morning in John, Chapter 3 between Jesus and Nicodemus, there is one of the most famous verses in all the Bible. But it is also one of the most least understood. When Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to see the Kingdom of God he must a person must be born again, that's not really the full meaning of what The Christ is saying here. Because the Greek word used is *anōthen* which means not only "again" but "from above" as well. Thus, in order to truly perceive and understand the Kingdom of Heaven, there must be a new birth in the believer which transcends this mortal world here below, and which takes us to a higher and heavenly place. We must be, if you will, lifted up. Now, Jesus was lifted up so that he might draw all men to him. (See Jn.12:32) But if you and I are buried with him in Baptism and raised with him in Resurrection (See Rom.6:4; Col2:12), then we also have a part to play in drawing souls to Christ. We must be willing to live our lives as such an example of the Christian witness, to be lifted up in the sight of men, so that others may be guided to Jesus by our witness.

In Numbers, God had the people of Israel gaze upon the bronze snake that was lifted high, so that God's children could be reminded of how helpless they were without The Lord, and so they could be kept mindful of what God had done for them in the past, and what He had promised to do for them in their future. But it was not enough. The fickle nature of man is such that memory of God's past favor was insufficient to truly change the hearts of Adam's children. God had to do something more. In the end, God had to provide another sacrifice to be lifted high for all His children to see, a sacrifice so horribly glorious that the hearts of all who witnessed it would be broken wide so love-come-down-from-heaven could truly enter in. And that is what it really means to be lifted up with Christ.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Blessed Lent JWB+ 03-08-18

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.firstthings.com/tag/adam-and-eve>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eucharist>