

January 12, 2025.

Hound of Heaven

I want to thank you for granting me the privilege to give messages. Early on I told the elders that if they ever find a better alternative or feel my messages are lacking then they should not hesitate to pull the plug. I am never totally sure that what I am talking about is correct. I mean come on, I am a math/science teacher and wastewater treatment plant operator. Regarding the latter I can at least confidently say that I know shit.

Giving messages is good for me. It makes me think about scripture a lot. I spend time finding out what other folks have to say about a topic I am considering. I have a greater appreciation for clergy that give messages week after week, year after year. Thank you.

From a traditional Catholic perspective you are breaking the rules. In the Catholic Church and many other denominations the only people considered qualified to give messages/homilies/sermons are ordained clergy. In the Catholic church that means men. In the Catholic church a lay person can't even read the gospel. The light is within all says George Fox. So anybody, man, woman, child or elder might have something important to say. Right on Spokane Friends.

I have not shied away from controversial topics such as substitutionary atonement, universalism, eternal damnation, and literalism. Four hundred years ago I would have been burnt at the stake by now. At home during a discussion at St. Josephs, I brought up the idea of alternatives to traditional substitutionary atonement and was smacked down hard, really hard. I appreciate your willingness to listen. After one message Christa said, "I have all kinds of thoughts running through my head right now. I don't agree with some things you said but it has me thinking." What a refreshing attitude.

Francis Thompson was born in England in 1859. His father was a doctor so they were fairly well to do. Francis was said to be a shy, delicate boy. He loved to read and write. He attempted to follow in his father's footsteps to be a doctor but after 8 years and failing the medical exam three times he gave up. He tried to enlist as a soldier but was rejected for his slowness of stature. Then in 1885 he fled, penniless, to London, where he tried to make a living as a writer, in the meantime taking odd jobs – working for a bootmaker, booksellers, and selling matches. During this time, he developed neuralgia, a painful nerve disorder and became addicted to opium, which was a common medicinal treatment. He lived on the streets with the homeless and other addicts. Thompson contemplated suicide in his nadir of despair. A prostitute, whose identity Thompson never revealed, befriended him and gave him lodgings. Thompson later described her in his poetry as his saviour.

In 1888, after three years on the streets, he was 'discovered' by a couple, the editors of a magazine, who saved him from the verge of starvation, took him into their home, set him on a

path to rehabilitation and success as a writer. Francis died in 1907 of tuberculosis at the age of 48. His self-written epitaph is striking, "Where I find nothing done by me, much may have been done in me." Francis wrote most of his poetry from 1888 – 1897, after which he turned to writing prose. His most famous poem is "The Hound of Heaven" in which he describes the pursuit of us by God. This is from the first section of the poem.

THE HOUND OF HEAVEN

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes, I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

The last line, "All things betray thee, who betrayest Me" was hard for me to decipher. I found this. *At some point in this journey of escape from God, all those things that promised to fulfill the God shaped vacuum in us leave us cold and empty. It's a betrayal because they promise so much, and deliver so little. No matter what he seeks it will betray him unless it is God.*

For Francis Thompson, God was relentlessly, doggedly, inescapably pursuing him. Not to catch and punish him but to catch and embrace him. To give him what he had been looking for all along in the wrong places.

Is God really like that? What does scripture have to say?

Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

There is a section in the gospel of Luke where people have been giving Jesus a bunch of flak because he spends time with the wrong people. He shares meals and fellowship with "sinners", tax collectors and prostitutes. Why the heck does Jesus hang out with those filthy, lazy, addict, drunkard Camp Hope people? Jesus responds to his critics with three parables, the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son.

The behavior of the seekers in the parables is strange. No way would a shepherd temporarily abandon 99 sheep to go look for 1 lost one. Too risky. Better to cut his losses. The woman tears her house apart to find the one coin. We are never told the value of the coin. The prodigal son is a total loser, couldn't wait for his father to die, demands his inheritance now, wastes it and only comes home because he is starving, not because he is sorry. Yet his father has been going to the ridge every day pacing back and forth scanning the horizon for sight of his son.

All the action is on the part of the seeker and Jesus ties it to repentance which is odd. The sheep just wanders, probably doesn't even know it is lost, and doesn't "amend" its ways. The coin just sits there. The prodigal son isn't really sorry. Weird concept of repentance for us but maybe Jesus is talking about repentance in a different way. Maybe repentance has more to do with being found than amending one's life. Maybe the point is letting yourself be seized by him, claimed by him, embraced by him. Maybe we just have to let ourselves be found? Maybe we need to take our arms that we hold tightly against our sides and simply raise them to be embraced?

For the tax collectors and the other sinners they just needed to eat with him to be transformed. I doubt Jesus said a single thing at those dinners about "repent". We just need to let ourselves be found. We just need to stop running and let the hound catch us. We can never run fast enough or far enough. The hound is determined, resolute and relentless. The hound of heaven's eyes burn with an unquenchable fire that is unconditional love.

You might be thinking, "That was nice but I am not running and I am not lost." Have you ever said, "I am so busy. I hardly have time to stop and think." Or "Since I retired I am busier than ever." We are running on a treadmill of busyness. We are lost in a tangled forest of busyness. Busyness distracts us from what matters. Busy doesn't care about outcome. Busy cares about urgent. Busy is all about hurry. Busy has no soul.

Socrates- “Beware of the barrenness of a busy life.”

Warren Buffet- “Busy is the new stupid.”

Stephen R. Covey- “Most of us spend too much time on what is urgent and not enough time on what is important.”

John Kinney- “Urgent will suck the life out of your soul.”

Our culture worships busy. We admire busy people. Multitasking is a virtue. The opposite of busy is idle, passive, dormant, lazy. There is a better state that is neither. It is taking the time to discern what is really important and then giving it your all. It is knowing when it is time to rest. It is working on something intensely while cultivating a spirit of calm joy.

One of the worst things about busyness is that it makes love impossible. To love you have to slow down, take the time to listen, to forget about your agenda, to focus on another, to handle interruptions with patience and see them as graced opportunities. To love you need to slow down and let the hound catch you.

“Hi. Good to see you. How are you?” “Not so good. The cancer is back, my business went bankrupt and my dog got run over by a car.” “Great. Let’s get together soon. I am so busy. Gotta run.” I am exaggerating but how often do we fail to really listen. How often are we focused on the next thing instead of the now? How often do we miss the subtle hints in conversations that tell us the person we are talking to is hurting and needs our attention, the shrug of the shoulders, the down cast eyes? Hurry, urgent and busy are enemies of love.

The hound can’t catch you if you are running on the treadmill of busyness.

Hold your arms tightly to your side. Now relax and raise them a bit. Now picture God embracing you. It is that simple. It is not about being perfect. It is not about getting a bunch of stuff done. It is not about success. It is not about being correct. It is not about never sinning. It is not about becoming worthy. It is about letting go and being caught.

Thank you.

Query: What things in your life are urgent? What are you in a hurry about? Are you too busy? What can you let go of?

Query: All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room-Blaise Pascal. How often do you sit quietly in a room?