

## THE OBJECT OF FAITH

John 15:5, Matthew 17:20, Philippians 4:13,  
November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Let me tell you one of my pet peeves.

I get irritated when sports figures accomplish some great feat - scoring a winning touchdown, or pitching a no hitter, or sinking a game winning basket - and then say, "I give all the glory to God." Those words are like fingernails on a blackboard to me. I always cringe.

They bother me for two reasons. First, because such sentiments imply God had some vested interest in the outcome of the game, that God enabled them to succeed at the expense of their opponents. They're glorifying God because God helped them win. It all sounds noble and humble unless you're their opponent

The problem with such thinking was especially evident when the Colts and the Bears played in the Super Bowl a few years ago. The media made lots of noise about the fact that both Tony Dungy, the coach of the Colts, and Lovie Smith, the coach of the Bears, were dedicated Christians. As background information, that's noteworthy. As an explanation for their success, it's problematic.

When the Colts won, the first words out of Tony Dungy's mouth were "I give all the glory to God." I cringed. I couldn't help but wonder what Lovie Smith was thinking. When he was interviewed, he didn't give all the glory to God. Apparently, God doesn't associate with losers.

If the glory for the Colts winning belonged to God, who was to blame for the Bears losing? Should Lovie Smith have said, "I give all the blame to God?" Whenever people give the glory to God, they imply God chose them over someone else.

But there is second reason I dislike people giving all the glory to God. I think it's unfair. The glory doesn't all belong to God. When the Colts won the game, it wasn't because God liked them more, or because they had more Christians on their team than the Bears, or because Tony prayed more often than Lovie. God didn't catch a pass in the end zone. The Colts won because they prepared and performed at a higher level than the Bears. Indeed, it would have been more honest of Tony Dungy to say "I give some of the glory to Peyton."

Now you may think I'm being too hard on Tony Dungy or others who give all the glory to God. You might argue I'm misinterpreting their words, that what they really mean is that God is important to them and that they believe part of their strength and success comes from having a relationship with God. You'd probably be right. But, if that's the case, I wish they'd say so. My fear is that

the words they speak reflect poorly on them and the God they seek to glorify. I think giving God all the glory is bad theology.

I don't even think God wants all the glory. Part of the joy in having children is in sharing the glory. When my children walked across the stage to receive a college diploma, I didn't insist I walk with them. When my boys won games, I didn't demand the game ball. When my girls sang or acted, I didn't expect people to give me flowers. I never expected any of them to stand at a podium and say, "I give all the glory to my Dad." I would have thought that weird rather than wonderful. My joy was not in thinking they could accomplish nothing without me. It was precisely the opposite. My excitement was in what they accomplished on their own.

Unfortunately, religion has often glorified God at the expense of human accomplishment. This tendency goes way back. Consider the story of the Tower of Babel. According to the Bible, the children of Noah decided to build a great tower. They gathered together, pooled their resources, planned and worked, and built a tower into the sky. When God saw all of this, God said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan is impossible."

Now let's stop there and think. If these were your children and they'd gathered together, pooled their resources, planned and worked, and accomplished some great task, wouldn't you have been proud of them? I was excited when my kids stop fighting. Getting them to speak the same language and work together would be cause for celebration.

Yet, in this pivotal Bible story, instead of being proud, God comes off as jealous and threatened. God confuses their languages so they can't communicate with each other. God keeps them from doing the impossible. Why? Because apparently they weren't giving all the glory to God.

No wonder sports figures give all the glory to God. They are suspicious lot. Some of them won't change their socks during a winning streak. It's better to be safe than sorry. When you accomplish something great, something thought impossible, something like winning the Super Bowl, you'd better give all the glory to God. If not, you're doomed.

Unfortunately, the Bible is full of such messages. Consider the passage we heard from the gospel of John. According to John, Jesus says, "I am the vine and you are the branches. If a person remains in me and I in them, they will bear much fruit." (John 15:5) That sounds like a wonderful description of a symbiotic relationship. The vine needs the branches and the branches need the vine. Together, they grow strong and produce fruit. But that's not how the passage concludes. Instead, it ends with "apart from me you can do nothing."

Is that true? Do we really believe that apart of from Jesus or God, we can do nothing? Certainly we can do something. It may not always be good. It may be imperfect. But sometimes it can be wonderful. There are many people who don't acknowledge Jesus or worship God that accomplish great things. Remember, according to the story of the tower of Babel, God was offended because humans were about to accomplish the impossible. God was upset because they were doing it without God's help.

So why does the Bible often reinforce the idea that we can do nothing without God, that we are evil and worthless, incapable of goodness and mercy, totally dependent upon God to succeed?

I have my suspicions. I suspect many of the passages that argue for human depravity and inadequacy represent religion's attempt to create a co-dependency. I no longer believe God is jealous or threatened by human accomplishment, but I am certain the Church is. Historically, the Church has resisted nearly every human advance. The Church has tried to convince people they can accomplish nothing of worth without the Church's blessing and guidance.

Think about the debate over evolution. Is it really about science, or is it about human capability? If God created human life in a single day seven thousand years ago, I suppose we ought to give God all the glory. But, if life has emerged from millions of years of struggle, humans get to share in the glory. We are capable of changing, growing, and excelling.

This month, we've been talking about living your faith. This morning, I want to ask a question. What is more important? Having faith in our selves or having faith in God?

Growing up, I never would have asked that question since the answer was so obvious. Why would I have faith in my sinful, evil, inadequate self? But I no longer think of myself that way. If God loves me, I must be lovable. If God had in part in my creation, there must be something good about me. Ironically, the more faith I have in this God, the more faith I have in myself.

I'm reading the Bible much differently. Take the second passage we heard this morning. According to Matthew, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:20)

Back when I believed I could do nothing, I assumed Jesus was suggesting if we had faith *in God* as small as a mustard seed, we could move mountains. I couldn't move mountains. Only God could.

But that isn't true. Literally or figuratively. Ask the engineers in West Virginia who are moving entire mountains in order to mine the coal under them. Or ask the people who've overcome great adversity to succeed. There are many who believe Barack Obama moved a mountain.

The closer I've examined what Jesus said, the more I'm convinced he wasn't talking about faith in God. He was talking about faith in ourselves. If we have faith in ourselves as small as a mustard seed, we can move mountains. That's what Jesus said. He didn't say if we have faith, God will move the mountain. He said we could. We could do the impossible. Again, remember the faith of those building the tower of Babel. They believed they could do the impossible and God agreed.

Friends, theologies that diminish human capability in order to give all the glory to God damage us.

My six year old niece Madeline is as about as head strong as any child I have ever met. She and I have been playing chess lately, although you wouldn't recognize it. I play by the rules, only moving my pieces as the rules dictate. She moves her pieces wherever she wants. As you can probably guess, I've never beat her. In fact, after my most recent loss, she looked at me and said, "Uncle Jim, you're not very good at this game."

I love her self-confidence. I refuse to diminish it. The harsh realities of this world will do that quickly enough. When my brother complains about her elevated self-esteem, I say, "Count your blessings. It is so much easier to temper her self-esteem than it is to build up her self-worth."

If I have to choose between having faith in myself and having faith in God, I think having faith in myself is more important. I wish the Bible said, "Apart from faith in yourself, you can do nothing." I wish the Church has spent more time celebrating human achievement and less diminishing it. If so, the world would be a far healthier place.

This doesn't mean I think faith in God is unimportant. The final passage we heard this morning remains one of my favorites. It says, "I can do all things through God who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13) I like that message for two reasons. It expresses such faith in humanity. We can do all things. It also suggests the proper role for the divine. God strengthens us.

It does not say God does it for us, or that God deserves all the glory, or that we can't do it without God. It says that a relationship with God strengthens us. It makes it possible for us to do more than we might, to believe we can do the impossible.

This has been my experience. God strengthens me. God gives me more faith in myself. This faith makes it possible for me to do great things. When I accomplish these things, God doesn't desire all the glory. God, like any good parent, is happy to sit in the audience and join in applause.

If God says anything, God says, "That's my boy."