

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 18, 2009
Fr. Tom Elliott

"I Know Not What"

1 Samuel 3:3b-10, 19
Psalm 40
1 Corinthians 6:13c-15a, 17-20
John 1:35-42

Relationships can be challenging and even awkward, especially if both people are not on the same page regarding the level of their relationship. This could be as simple as one person believing that a particular relationship is meaningful friendship and the other believing that it is a romantic liaison. This can be very awkward. The extreme of this type of misunderstanding might include erotomania or stalking.

In order for a relationship to be healthy, both individuals need to be on the same page regarding the depth of their affection. They must both understand how important it is for a relationship to develop slowly and deliberately, reverencing and relishing each stage of their relationship. The same thing is true in our relationship with God.

In our Gospel reading today, we witness the beginning of two people's relationship with Christ. The two men were disciples of John the Baptist, but once John pointed out to them that Jesus is the "Lamb of God," they leave to follow after Him. It is the beginning of their relationship with Christ. While the Gospel story does not tell us what was stirring in their hearts, we can be sure that they had already experienced God in a profound way before they left John to follow Jesus. Something important was already stirring in their hearts. Jesus actually reverences this fact when He asks the two men, "What are you looking for?" (John 1:38). It is a question about desire, longing, and relationship. For Saint Ignatius of Loyola, it is a question for the "first week" of his Spiritual Exercises.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in his Spiritual Exercises, offers a series of stages or levels that develop in our relationship with God. One of the great benefits of knowing these stages is that it allows us to really reverence where we are with God and receive the graces He desires for us at that particular stage of love. Ignatius simply refers to four of his stages as "weeks." However, before a person can enter into these stages he or she must first have an *affective experience* of what St. Ignatius calls the "Principle and Foundation."

At its affective level, the Principle and Foundation refers to our having one or more profound experiences of God. This does not mean that we *understand* the experiences or even necessarily name them as "encounters with God." Sebastian Moore, in his book, Let This Mind Be in You, explains the somewhat nebulous nature of these experiences by calling them encounters with "I know not what." While we might not immediately recognize our experience as having come from God, we might know that for a fleeting moment we felt created by something Infinite or somehow intimately connected with other people. We might have experienced for a brief second a desire for something that this world cannot offer. The Jesuit author, William Barry, writes about such experiences in this way:

[These] experiences speak of desire for “I know not what”.... The experience includes a sense of well-being. While in the experience, we do not worry about ourselves, our worth, or our goodness, but rather we seem to take for granted our being in the world.

-Letting God Come Close, pg. 61-62

Before we can be a disciple of Jesus, we must first experience the Principle and Foundation. Before John’s disciples could leave everything behind and follow Christ, they had to have experienced God in a way that put a new desire in their hearts; a desire to draw closer to Christ. They expressed this to Jesus by asking Him, “Where are you staying?” (John 1:38). They wanted to deepen their relationship with Christ and they may not have even known *why*! This is what an affective experience of the Principle and Foundation does to us. It puts a desire in our hearts for something more, something Infinite, and something greater than ourselves.

As a way of reverencing where each of us is in our relationship with Christ, I offer these few suggestions. First, if we cannot remember ever having experienced God in a profound way, let’s search our hearts this week and try to answer the question, “Do I desire to experience God in the way that St. Ignatius describes?” If we don’t, then I suggest we ask God for that desire. If we do desire such an affective experience, then I suggest we bring that desire to Him in prayer.

If we have already experienced the Principle and Foundation, then I recommend we spend some time reflecting on this experience. What desire did it stir up in our hearts? Have we responded to that desire? If so, what has our response looked like? Are we following after Christ like John’s disciples did? Have we allowed our hearts to hear Christ ask us, “What are you looking for?”

Not everyone responds to the felt experiences of God. Some people never question the source of their experiences. So, it is important that we check our hearts out in prayer and find out if we have faithfully responded to how God has manifested Himself to us. We can’t wait until we have all the answers or have “figured out” the experience we’ve had, but rather, we acknowledge the profound “I know not what,” and let the desire God stirs up in our hearts move us closer to Him.