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NAAMAN'S RESERVATION

Lately I have been feeling a lot like Naaman. After he was cured of leprosy, Naaman asked a favor of the prophet.

Shall there not then, I pray thee, be given to thy servant two mules' burden of earth? for thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the LORD. In this thing the LORD pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon thy servant in this thing. (2 Kings 5:17-18)

For the past few weeks I have been in rehearsals and performance of the opera *Norma*. The way our director staged it, a couple of us came out as Druid priests carrying a dead eagle (puppet). We then proceeded to pour (fake) blood from its sliced neck to offer to our god. It is highly unlikely that anybody thought, "There is Tim O'Hearn sacrificing an eagle's blood to the Celtic god Irminsul." More likely they thought, "That chorus member is performing a pretty good stage trick. They have a pretty good props manager." Nevertheless, I still felt the reservation that "when I pretend to sacrifice an eagle, pardon thy servant in this thing."

A lot of people are like Naaman, though, in that they present God with reservations about their daily life. "You took away my sins, but when my friends go out to get drunk pardon me if I participate in their riotous behavior. I will just be the designated driver." We understand that sometimes salvation involves a life-change, but we don't want it to be complete.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. In my example above, if you take out the participation in riotous behavior, it might even be an understandable reservation. Modeling a change in behavior, and even looking out for the safety of friends, might be a small step toward being an influence for change in their lives.

Some people think becoming a Christian involves giving up everything they did before. They have heard the lie that Christianity is just a bunch of rules that start with "Thou shalt not." While becoming a Christian is life-changing, it is not necessarily life-discarding.

Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called. Art thou called being a servant? care not

for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant. ... Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned. (1 Cor 7:20-22, 27-28)

Much of what a person did before becoming a Christian may not require changing; may not require Naaman's reservation, even. We are freed from sin, and should not sin. Otherwise, life may continue in much the same way.

Where putting reservation before God is wrong is when we know the reservations to be sin. Naaman was asking forgiveness for going through the actions of his job. He would have been wrong to have said, "I will sacrifice to God, but forgive me if I go on my own to sacrifice to Rimmon as well."

One area where such reservations may need to be made is addictive behavior. Not arguing whether smoking is a sin or not, it is an unhealthy habit. One may decide that being a Christian requires one to quit smoking. It is not easy, or likely, for a person to do so overnight. In this one might make the reservation, "I will obey God, but until I can completely quit smoking, pardon thy servant in this thing."

Naaman asked to be pardoned in that one thing. As long as it is not outright sinful or causing another to sin, there may be instances when we can also ask to be pardoned in one thing. Just don't make it "one, and one, and one."

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KILL THE UMPIRE

It is baseball season again. Nine men to a side, trying to decide whether a pitch was a ball or a strike, whether the runner was safe or out. Many a sandlot game has degenerated into a shouting match because a play was close and each side believed they made the right call, in their favor, of course. "If there were between us an umpire." (Job 9:33, Young's Literal Translation)

The baseball off-season has ended, and the football one has begun. Players, or their agents, have decided what they are worth, and the owners have decided that is more than they are willing to pay. The players want to continue playing (but with higher pay), and the owners want them to continue playing for them (but with less pay than the players want). Impasse. "If only there were a mediator [arbitrator] between us, someone who could bring us together." (Job 9:33, NLT)

The Bible applies to life situations. And since baseball *is* life, the Bible applies to that grand sport. There is more that is interesting about Job's plea quoted above from different translations. It might be enlightening to look at some ways that verse can be translated, and other passages that could tie to it.

Moses was the matchmaker between God and the children of Israel.

The Hebrew Word

The word sometimes translated "mediator" or "umpire" is an interesting one. In English letters, the word is *yakach*. In the King James Version alone it is translated reprove, rebuke, correct, plead, reason, chasten, reprove, appointed, and arguing, as well as nine other miscellaneous words. It is a root word whose original meaning was to be in the front (and, by extension, to be clear). Most of the various translations, therefore, have something to do with making or declaring something to be clear, such as whether the pitch was in the strike zone or not.

Paul was very familiar with the Hebrew language; "A Hebrew of Hebrews." (Phil 3:5) (Sometimes this is interpreted as a Hebrew speaker, a child of Hebrew speakers.) It is possible that he intentionally used several Greek translations of this one word in one passage.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for

instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Tim 3:16-17)

A few verses later (2 Tim 4:2) he says, "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." Reprove, rebuke, correct, instruct, exhort; all are shades of meaning of the one word in Job 9:33.

Job could not understand why God was allowing him to suffer in spite of his righteousness. He pleaded for someone to argue his case before God, or at least to explain God's seeming indifference to him. Perhaps Paul is saying that the scriptures (specifically referring to the Old Testament, but perhaps including the New Testament) are exactly that mediator. God has provided someone/something ("the Spirit which is the word of God"; Eph 6:17) to explain Himself and what he expects of man. Job asked for a mediator, and, ironically, the book by or about him became part of that mediator.

Mediator

In the play *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye the dairyman explains that there are special types of people in his little village. One of the most important is Yente the matchmaker. If a family had a marriageable young girl and another family a man in search of a bride, Yente would try to find the perfect match. (For Avram's son she picks Ruchel the shoemaker's daughter who is almost blind. "'Tell the truth, Avram, is your son so much to look at? The way she sees and the way he looks, it's a perfect match.'" (Fiddler on the Roof; 1960, Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, Joseph Stein)

The Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word Job used carries with it the idea of a go-between, one who negotiates a contract between two parties, a matchmaker. In this sense, Job was asking for someone to go between him and God in order to explain each other's situation.

The Bible has several such people. Abraham sent his servant as a go-between to find a wife for his son Isaac. (Gen 24) That servant found Rebekah and negotiated the match. When Absalom fled the country after killing his brother Amnon, Joab sent a woman to David to negotiate for permission for Absalom to return. (2 Sam 14) Each of the prophets could be considered a go-between, representing God to the Jewish people.

The most famous, and most effective, of these prophets was Moses. He was the matchmaker between God and the children of Israel.

The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. The LORD made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day. The LORD talked with you face to face

in the mount out of the midst of the fire, (I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to shew you the word of the LORD: for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not up into the mount. (Deut 5:2-5)

After the giving of the Ten Commandments, Moses continued to go between God and the people, to obtain the more specific terms of the covenant. He spent so much time with God that the skin of his face shone, and he had to put on a covering on his face so as not to frighten the Israelites. (Gen 34:29-35)

In the prophets, God frequently calls Israel an adulteress for going after other gods. This indicates that Israel was to him as a bride. The matchmaker was Moses, who had to convince the bride to enter into the contract, which was the Law.

Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. (Gal 3:19)

God has another bride whose marriage was negotiated by another matchmaker. That bride is the church. "And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (Rev 21:2) (Some people equate the New Jerusalem with heaven, but contextually it is more likely the church on earth and in heaven.) An interesting thing about the match between God and the church is that Jesus went above and beyond the normal duties of a matchmaker. Not only did he negotiate the wedding, but he also paid the bride-price.

Umpire

Baseball has, unfortunately, gone to using super-slow-motion instant replay in certain instances of disputable calls. Most of the television broadcasts use computer technology to determine the accuracy of the home-plate umpire's ball/strike calls. Soon the human element may be removed from umpiring entirely, at which point we might as well replace the players with robots. In life, though, we don't have instant replay, and may rely on an umpire (defined by Merriam-Webster as "one having authority to decide finally a controversy or question between parties").

There is a controversy between two parties. God has declared what is just and right and good. Man has chosen his own way, often in sin. It is like that sandlot baseball game. God says man is out at first base. Man says in his mind he saw himself safe. We need an umpire. In the New Testament the word is *mesites*, and is usually translated mediator. Paul says that mediator is Christ. "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all." (1 Tim 2:5-6)

Moses served as umpire between God and man. But he was an imperfect umpire, because he died.

Umpires have been injured or gotten sick in ball games and the game had to continue without them or, if it was the home-plate umpire, with a replacement. Since this game has been going on a long time, even Moses' successors had to be replaced. Jesus, however, became the final umpire.

For if he were on earth, he should not be a priest, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law: Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount. But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises. (Heb 8:4-6)

When Jesus became umpire, he not only became one permanently, but he brought a different rule book. He is better because he is forever, but also because he is the

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mediator of a better covenant.

At this time of year it is not unusual to hear someone in the stands heckling the umpire. Sometimes they question his eyesight or insult his intelligence. And every now and then you may hear the old phrase, "Kill the ump." Now most people don't mean that literally, but in Albuquerque the minor league baseball team is installing metal detectors at the stadium entrances, and believes that in a few years it will be standard throughout the industry. This probably is to protect the fans, but it might be possible that someone would bring in a gun to kill the umpire literally.

The strange thing is that in Jesus' case they did have to kill the ump in order for him to become the umpire. His blood was required in order to establish the new covenant. He brought order to the game by dying.

And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. (Heb 9:15)

Jesus has become the mediator of a new rule book. Under that rule book, whenever anyone has aligned himself with the umpire he can legally make the call. When God says man is out, Jesus can make a different call. "Safe." (And that call is not subject to instant replay.)

DESCRIBING LOT

When I started work at a new job some years ago, my new boss and several other people warned me that a certain person in the marketing department and a certain leader in customer service were especially difficult to deal with. Both of these people supposedly had distinctly negative attitudes. As it turned out, I had frequent dealings with both individuals and never had a problem with either. Fortunately, I had reserved judgement until I could experience these people on my own. How often do we judge people based on the opinions of others? When we do so, do we get the expected results because our interactions are tainted by our expectations? There is a man in the Bible about whom it might be easy to fall into this trap.

When you ask someone familiar with the story of Abraham to describe his nephew Lot, what responses might you get? Many people will immediately think of his wife who turned into a pillar of salt for looking back at the destruction of Sodom. But we have enough information to judge him independent of her. Some of the words that come immediately to mind might be greedy, drunkard, incestuous, or whining. These may all be true (although the incest was not his doing; he was raped by his daughters). Peter uses a word that would probably not be commonly associated with Lot.

For if God ... delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;) The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished. (2 Pet 2:4, 7-9)

The words “just” and “righteous” in that passage are the same word (which may also be translated

virtuous). Peter doesn’t jump to the usual conclusions about the character of Lot.

In Genesis, Lot’s actions do not always seem virtuous. When his uncle proposed splitting up, he chose what appeared to be the better land, which is why he is sometimes characterized as greedy. When the men of Sodom demanded that he turn over to them the “men” (really angels) that had come to his house, he offered his virgin daughters to them, causing some to call him selfish and unfeeling. When his daughters wanted to get pregnant even though isolated from other men, they seemingly had no problem getting him drunk on successive nights; hence the accusations of being a drunkard and incestuous. Peter, having only the same information we have, calls him righteous, just, or virtuous. How can this be?

Peter doesn’t address the apparent greed (or are we just projecting our own faults onto Lot?). He doesn’t address the actions of Lot’s daughters, for even the drunkenness was at their instigation. Rather, he concentrates on the visit of the angels. Lot was vexed and distressed over the lives of the wicked. Even the act of offering his daughters to the men of Sodom was a righteous act, because he had learned from Abraham that hospitality was of supreme importance. Lot daily regretted his choice to live in and around Sodom.

Sometimes our actions do not reflect our true character. We make decisions that turn out to be disastrous, but have to live with the consequences. In trying to remove the speck from Lot’s eye, do we ignore the beam in our own? When we jump to a conclusion, do we dash ourselves on hidden rocks? Peter learned to look at who a man was, not just what he did. He had learned the painful lesson about looking before he leaped.

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