

From the very beginnings of our scriptures we are to understand ourselves to be in a very unique relationship with God. The relationship could best be described as “initiative – response.” God initiates, and we respond. According to the Hebrew poets of our Bible God’s first word is “hāyá.” Our English renders this poetically as, “Let there be... .” In the Hebrew it is simply, “be.” Each breath of God in that first chapter of Genesis is a breath that initiates being. Be light. Be water. Be trees. Be sea. Be human. This is God’s initiative: that we be.

But how are we to be? Well, that gets a bit more complicated. Here is the relationship part. To God’s creative initiative a response is required of us. Humans – perhaps alone among all creatures – are given great freedom in that response. We can accept God’s initiatives, or reject them. In large part the interplay of “God’s initiative and our response” is the basis for our Holy Scriptures.

Now perhaps this is a good moment to distinguish between “initiative-response,” and “stimulus-response.” Maybe you are familiar with the latter term from a biology class. The stimulus-response is the most basic interaction an organism can have with its environment. It is what single celled creatures do. There is a wonderful “Far Side” cartoon that shows two paramecium (paramecia?) in a living room. One of the paramecia is sitting in a recliner, wearing an old undershirt, watching TV with a remote in “his” hand. Behind “him” stands another paramecium wearing a dress and an apron and those wonderful “Far Side” horn-rimmed glasses, and “she” has her hands on her paramecium “hips.” And she is yelling, “That’s all I ever get from you: Stimulus-response, stimulus-response.” (I think of that cartoon frequently whenever I am flipping through channels on TV...).

Stimulus-response is not our relationship with God. God does not come at us with a cattle prod. Initiative-response is infinitely more complex. Certainly it is not motivation through pain or fear of pain. As we heard last in last Sunday’s gospel God’s initiative is invitation. With each of God’s initiatives we may respond in any of a variety of ways, which then meets with another of God’s initiatives – most of the time before we have fully responded! – and so on, and so on, a cascading interplay, a weaving together of initiative and response. Rather than the “Dueling Banjos” of “stimulus-response” our relationship with God is the symphony of initiative-response.

Now I am making this distinction because we often feel that obedience to the will of God resembles a cattle prod or “Dueling Banjos” rather than the complexity of Beethoven’s Emperor Concerto. In our gospel reading this morning Jesus gives us a parable of complexity. For the second week in a row Jesus has got us in the vineyard ... . Not an unfamiliar place for Episcopalians, maybe... Last Sunday we heard the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, how they were hired at varying times of the day – even at day’s end – but they all received the same pay. In that parable we heard about this inscrutable landowner who seems to have only one setting on his pay-o-meter: full blast. In that parable Jesus teaches us about God’s strange economy, about how our relationship with God is not dependent on a scorecard of deeds or a timecard of hours worked. We learn that God’s love is fully and freely given. In that parable we learn something about God’s initiative.

Today Jesus teaches us about our response to that initiative. This is a brief parable, a collapsed version of the parable of the Prodigal Son. Here Jesus describes a landowner with two sons. The father calls the first son to work in the vineyard. This son says, “No thanks.” We don’t know why. His answer is simply “No.” Perhaps he is busy with something else, because Jesus goes on to say this son changes, and later goes into the vineyard to work. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates the Greek here as, “he changed his mind.” That would suggest the Greek, “metanoia,” to repent. But that is not the Greek here. The Greek word here –

metamelomai – literally means to “change what one is concerned about.” The son changed what concerned him, and went to work in the vineyard. The father also goes to the second son, calls him to work in the vineyard, and this son says, “Yes. I will,” but the son never makes it to the vineyard. In some way this second son has also changed what he will concern himself with.

If the invitation to work in the vineyard – God’s initiative of love – is equally and fully given, the response is much more varied. We certainly do not respond equally and fully. It may be helpful to note right off the bat that neither of the sons’ responses is perfect obedience. Neither of these are perfect children. Grace is required of the father on both accounts. Our response to God’s initiative – inviting us into the vineyard – will be predictably imperfect as well. I suspect that for most of us our way to the vineyard is a serpentine path woven of broken promises and redirected concerns. Why might this be the case? If we recall that God’s initiative – set forth in creation and continuing throughout our lives – is being, then our response needs to be that of accepting our being before we start doing. Perhaps the wayward way, the serpentine path to the vineyard, results from a confusion between God’s call for us to “be,” and our preoccupying concern with only “doing.”

Dallas Willard, in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, describes discipleship – which is really getting ourselves to the vineyard and staying there – this way: “The underlying issue in [whether one is a disciple or not in the religious tradition] has always been whether or not one was going to ‘make the final cut,’ leaving us uncertain. [and so we “do”]. Now, people who are asked whether they are apprentices of a leading politician, musician, lawyer, or screenwriter would not need to think a second to respond. ...It is hardly something that would escape one’s attention. But, if asked whether they are GOOD apprentices of whatever person or line of work concerned, they very well might hesitate. They might say no. Or yes. Asked if they could be better students, they would probably say yes. And all of this falls squarely within the category of BEING a disciple, or apprentice. For to be a disciple in any area or relationship is not to be perfect. One can be a very raw and incompetent beginner and still be a disciple. The same is all the more true if asked about discipleship to Jesus. *A disciple is simply someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become what that person is.*” Discipleship – our response to God’s loving initiative – is a matter of being. And if God’s initiative is love, then discipleship becomes a response to tend love, to become love itself.

We are called to the vineyard for a reason, a purpose. Recall that in John’s Gospel we hear Jesus describe himself as “the true vine.” “I am the vine, you are the branches,” Jesus says. “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ...As the Father has loved me, so I love you. Abide in my love.” I believe that to fully understand our response to God’s initiative we must first – and perhaps only – own our “being” a branch. This will mean changing what we attend to, changing “what concerns us.” In this parable Jesus is in part convicting the religious elite who define discipleship – following God’s will – in terms of doing. Being is another matter. It requires the monumental shift of humbly accepting our role as vine-branch, as conduit of God’s love. Our response to God’s initiative is to cultivate being, ours and others.

Now the rub comes with our complete freedom to choose our response. And a choice of this magnitude can be frightening, especially when a sense of scarcity lies like a pall over our land. How can I get to the vineyard when I can’t even get gas for my car? How can I be a laborer if I am concerned about my pledge to the church, concerned about feeding another when the mortgage is past due, concerned about praying for a sick friend when my mind is flooded with fear for my job? This is not easy. Here, I believe, lies the real labor. “Metamelomai.” We change

what concerns us, specifically by letting go of the “either-or” mindset. Our mortgage and jobs are not separate from the love of God. Every aspect of our lives are to be woven together with the love of God. And so we stop the flood of worrying and focus on God’s loving initiatives in our lives. And we begin to respond by tending to love. Now this may not pay the mortgage, or put gas in your tank. But in tending love, the love you need and the love those around us need, then we are tending to the very soil that supports the vine. Our occupations become vocations (God infused occupations) when we make them the soil that grows God’s love. This place – with its many financial expenses and obligations – becomes Holy Ground when we make the soil that grows God’s love. We respond to God’s initiatives – and they never stop – when we make “tending love” the concern of our lives, and the lives of those with whom we are closely linked. Regardless of our privations, regardless of employers who fail us, regardless of savings and loans who fail us, regardless of family and friends who fail us, regardless of our church when it fails us, we tend God’s love precisely in THAT soil, THAT field, because the love of God will never fail us. To the contrary God’s love will heal and transform these failing and broken places in our lives, and we will suddenly find ourselves in the vineyard. We will be standing in new life.

God breathes us into being. With each breath God breathes, “You are my beloved child. You are my beloved child. Be. Be.” Let us respond in kind, “Here I am. I tend love. Amen. Amen.”