



February 12, 2024

Faith/Ego Matters

Multiple Choice: When you hear a professional football player thank God for a winning game, your most likely reaction is:

- A. “Great! To God be the glory.”**
- B. “Really? What did God have against the other team?”**
- C. “I’m pretty sure God has more important concerns.”**
- D. “Well, I have my doubts, but at least the football player isn’t taking all of the credit for himself.”**
- E. “And isn’t it nice that the win earns him lots of money?”**
- F. All or maybe none of the above.**

A teacher is best not formulating a question to which she doesn't know the answer, but I the last choice (the non-choice) expresses my own discomfort, amusement, and excessively judgmental attitude. Who am I to say? Surely God is capable of the tiniest or hugest adjustment of destiny. Maybe God's plan *incidentally* requires the win for that team, though God's purpose is much larger, as well as being unfathomable to you and me. Maybe that player and his team prayed that they would make full use of their God-given talent so that they could demonstrate the excellence of His creation. Maybe the player was primarily considering the philanthropic purposes to which he could apply the money.

Maybe! If some of my multiple-choice answers sounded sarcastic, though, I should confess that although I cultivate an image of sweetness as an adult, as a teenager I was once known as Acid Tongue. (Well, who isn't sarcastic as a teenager?) Even several years ago, I responded flippantly to my mother's interpretation of an early-morning rainbow as a message from God that her problem, which was at that moment largely financial, would be happily resolved. I probably mentioned a natural phenomenon or suggested that someone else might see something altogether different in the rainbow. I should have been more sympathetic, even if I doubted that the rainbow was about her. Why couldn't I just say "Maybe"? Why couldn't the rainbow have meaning for her *and* for others? What was the harm? Well, none perhaps, except that the problem wasn't immediately resolved, so she was disappointed in "her" rainbow.

The literature teacher in me can't help thinking about Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, who is so consumed with guilt that he interprets an apparent meteor as a great scarlet letter in the sky, illuminating his sin. The omniscient narrator, in what is basically an aside from the author, suggests that our Puritan ancestors saw spiritual meaning in all manner of natural phenomena, "But what shall we say, when an individual discovers a revelation addressed to himself alone, on the same vast sheet of record. In such a case, it could only be the symptom of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate" (Hawthorne). In that pivotal center of the novel, other people do see something else in the sky, but Rev. Dimmesdale is "disordered" enough to see the heavens as all about him.

The Scarlet Letter, the occasional bane of high-school students, is a novel of great psychological penetration, and it convincingly portrays the distortion possible when we confuse God's will with our own will. So when I hear of an individual's assumptions about a message from God or a manifestation of God's will, I am uneasy precisely when I think I'm hearing egocentrism. Yes, I realize I am in no way superior in my judgment, and probably my own self-involvement leads me inescapably toward adolescent sarcasm or literary references. Still, even as we joke about Presbyterians as God's Chosen People, our team or tribe or political party as the one favored by God, don't we mean it to some extent? (Why else would it be funny?) And shouldn't we beware of the egocentrism implicit in our own interpretations of God's will? Shouldn't we offer a skeptical "maybe" if some of our representatives, avowedly Christian, announce that they intend to govern entirely according to the word of God? Shouldn't we be alert to the beauty, mystery, and meaning of the world but really mean it when we say, "Thy will be done"?

~Written by Maurine Slaughter

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Chapter 12: "The Minister's Vigil"." The Scarlet Letter. Lit2Go Edition. 1850. Web. <<https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/127/the-scarlet-letter/2277/chapter-12-the-ministers-vigil/>>. February 05, 2024.

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