

**"Our Synergism with God"**  
**Sermon for Ash Wednesday**  
**Lectionary Year C**  
**February 17, 2010**  
**Text: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10**  
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What kind of relationship does God want to have with us? What kind of a relationship ought we to have with God? What are the dynamics that should characterize that relationship? I want to suggest a couple of options that some people may choose to take.

Some take the option of an overly independent relationship with God. I dare to say that most people choose this approach. We do our thing and let God do his. Don't bother me, God, and I won't bother you. It's kind of like the relationship many teenagers and their parents have. They live under the same roof, but that's about as far as it goes. There is not much of a relationship going on under that same roof.

If we are honest, I think we have to admit that our relationship with God is characterized by a certain amount of independence, at least some of the time. When is it that we tend to see ourselves as being independent from God? When things are going well for us. When we are prospering and experiencing success, we can get to feeling pretty independent. When we are on top of the world, when things are going our way, when everything is coming up roses—it is quite easy to forget about God and to see ourselves as independently responsible for our good fortune. There are times when all of us take the option of independence with respect to our relationship with God.

There is another option some people take. It is the option of dependence. This option is certainly better than one of independence. In fact, it is fair to say that our relationship with *God must* be characterized by dependence. We need *God* in our lives. We cannot get by without *God*. *God* is our strength, our refuge, our rock, our resting place, our foundation, our cornerstone, our mighty fortress, our home. We are lost without *God's* guidance, and we act in self-destructive ways when we fail to honor *God's* boundaries for our lives. We are sheep in need of the Good Shepherd. *We are dependent.*

There are times when all of us will choose this approach to our relationship with *God*, the approach of dependence. Life has taken a bad turn, and we wind up wounded in some way. We are in pain, we are suffering, we are weary and worn and lack the resources within ourselves to function effectively. Faith in those moments means leaning on the everlasting arms or being carried along the seashore so that only one set of footprints are left in the sand. We have little choice in those periods of our life except to be radically dependent on *God's* care and concern.

However, like independence from *God*, dependence on *God*, when taken to an extreme and when taken too often, can be problematic. Some people choose to relate to *God* in an overly dependent manner all the time. When this approach to *God* is taken, *God* becomes a crutch, an opiate, a means of coping, or a means of escape. While it is entirely appropriate to relate to *God* in this manner in times of crisis, it may not be the best way to relate to *God* at all times. There may be another way yet, a third option, one that is not characterized entirely by independence or dependence. I think that it is to this option the

Apostle Paul is pointing in our passage of scripture from 2 Corinthians.

In verse 6:1 Paul uses the Greek word *synergeo*, and it is translated "working together." The apostle is speaking in particular in this passage of our working together with God. The Greek word *synergeo* is the word from which we get our words *synergy*, *synergism*, and *synergistic*. In case you have forgotten what these words mean, they refer to a "cooperative action of discrete agencies such that the total effect is greater than the sum of the effects taken independently." In other words, in a synergistic relationship, the two parties working together are capable of accomplishing more than they could working apart. And I believe God is calling us to a synergistic relationship with him.

A synergistic relationship with God acknowledges not only that we need God, but it also affirms that God needs us. This understanding of our relationship with God realizes not only that God saves us, but that God also calls us. God has something in mind for us to do for the sake of God's kingdom. God counts on us, depends on us. God trusts us enough to desire us to be partners with him in his creative and redemptive purposes for our world. Our gifts and graces, our talents and abilities, are seen as important in a synergistic view of our relationship with God because in it we see how much God relies on our using what God has given us to work with on God's behalf. A synergistic relationship appropriates fully the fact that we are the body of Christ, his hands and feet, eyes, ears, and mouth in the world, doing his ministry in his name and for his glory.

Having such a relationship with God reminds me of the old story about the young preacher who goes to make a pastoral call on the old

farmer. As they are leaning on a fence overlooking the lower forty acres and the crops that are growing there in abundance, the pious reverend says, "This is a beautiful farm the Lord has blessed you with. I can see God's handiwork in every row of tilled ground." The farmer replies rather indignantly, "Preacher, you should have seen this place when the Lord had it all to himself." There is wisdom and insight in the words of the old farmer. God has chosen to depend on us, to allow us to participate with him in the salvation of the world. God chooses to do more with us and through us than God chooses to do by himself.

It is only a synergistic relationship with God that is able to avoid what Paul warns us of in this passage, namely, accepting the grace of God in vain. What does Paul mean by that phrase? How can we keep from accepting God's grace in vain and making it meaningless?

I think it helps to remember that God's grace comes to us as a gift. It is like a present. But how do presents usually come to us? They come wrapped, so they require opening. And when does a gift actually become meaningful for you? When you use it. Presents become of value only after they are unwrapped and utilized. And the more they are used, the more significant and satisfying they become.

Being saved by God is a gift of God's grace. But it is a gift that works kind of like an exercise bicycle or a treadmill. It can do you a lot of good, so it has the potential for being a quite meaningful gift, but in order for it to have value for you, it is going to take your putting in some time, energy, and even pain. As we often say, "No pain, no gain." The end result is positive—you will be more physically fit, but getting to that end may involve some hardship and suffering.

Look at how Paul describes the ministry of Christ as he has experienced it: great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger. That's the pain that comes before the gain. But then Paul describes the payoff that follows such ministry: being true, being well-known, being truly alive, being saved from death, being able to rejoice in the midst of sorrow, being given the opportunity to give to others so as to make them rich, and winding up possessing everything that is really important in life.

Synergism with God. I believe that is the relationship God is calling us to. We are in partnership with God, not for the purpose of accomplishing *our* wills, but so that *his* will can be done with us and through us. Synergism with God. This is how we are to relate to God, in an active working together with him for the world's redemption.

But we don't fall into such a relationship with God accidentally. We can only get there intentionally, and it begins here. It begins with what we do symbolically tonight. We receive the mark of the cross on our foreheads tonight, imposed on us with ashes. This mark acknowledges that we are forgiven sinners, saved only by means of God's generous mercy poured out on our behalf in the cross of Christ. Our faith in Christ allows God to look over, past, beyond our sin so that we can be in a right relationship with God. The imposition of ashes confirms the fact that we cannot possibly be independent with respect to God, for we cannot save ourselves, we cannot atone for our sins, we cannot bring about our own forgiveness. We are dependent on God to do that for us in Christ.

It is with the imposition of ashes that we begin the season of Lent.

But the ashes are not all we receive throughout this six week period leading up to Easter. We also receive the bread and the cup, symbols of God's continual gift of grace, ingested by us to nourish our spiritual growth. We are not only forgiven by God; we are fed by God. God saves us and sustains us. These acts of worship point us toward the great truth that through our faith in what God has done for us in Christ, God receives us and welcomes us into his arms as if we were God's only begotten son or daughter. And as his adopted children, we are joint heirs with Christ, partners in the Spirit. We are neither overly dependent on God nor overly independent of God. Instead, we are forgiven and fed, saved and sustained, to work together with God in synergism to accomplish what is his will for our world.