



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Taste and See

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him (Ps 34:8).

The best things in life are indescribable.

How do you describe a spectacular sunset, or a powerful piece of music, or an incredibly delicious meal? How do you describe your love for your family and the friends that are dearest to you?

You can't, of course, which is why attempts to tell people about the most wonderful things always fall flat, and even descriptions of mundane things often sound so silly. You go to buy some paint for your bedroom and the colors have names like "Morning Mist" or "Gentle Breeze." The names tell you nothing at all about the colors, except that somebody had to come up with labels for 137 shades of green.

Laughter is like that, too. Good comedians see the funniness in things and they set the gap just right between what we expect and what comes next, so that our laughter leaps across the incongruity like the spark in a spark plug. If you have to explain a joke, it isn't funny anymore, is it? Someone has said that explaining a joke is like dissecting a frog: it can be done, but the thing dies in the process.

When you stop and think about it, it's obvious that explanations and descriptions of things are not the same as the things themselves. That's why so many reductionistic accounts coming out of science these days miss the mark, like the ones that claim religious experience is really nothing but the firing of electricity and the squirting of chemicals somewhere in the brain. No doubt electricity does spark and chemicals do connect when we experience anything at all,

from washing the car to watching a baseball game, but no one would claim that cars and baseball are not real just because something goes on in our brains when we encounter them.

Why, then, should anyone get away with claiming that God is not real just because you can watch parts of the brain light up when people have religious experiences? In a couple of weeks, the new season of *Town Hall South* begins with Dr. Eben Alexander. He's a neurosurgeon who knows all about what goes on in the brain, and he might have been inclined to reduce religious experience to brain science once upon a time, except that he had his own near-death experience where he says the things that happened to him can't be explained away merely in terms of chemistry and biology.

All our most important experiences are like that, aren't they? Even if you could fully describe love, which of course you can't, the description would be an altogether different thing from love itself. Love is a set of feelings and attitudes and actions and commitments—a whole pattern of relating to someone that's hard to describe, but you know it when you see it.

If you come across some remarkable flavor, you can try to describe it, but it's so much better if you just spoon up a bit of it and offer it to the person in front of you and say, "Here. Try this. See for yourself." Something like that is the psalmist's point when he invites people to "taste and see that the Lord is good." The psalmist has a relationship with God; he knows what God is like, and his experience tells him that God is very good.

The difference between believing some things about

God and really knowing God is like the difference between believing that love is a good thing and actually being in love. Having opinions about God is not the same as having faith in God, any more than having opinions about love is the same as loving.

Now the psalmist doesn't claim that loving God keeps bad things from happening to us. On the contrary, he says, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous...." He knows that faithful people suffer the same sickness and loss and hardship as everyone else in this world. The Book of Psalms itself is woven through with lamentations. People who imagine that faith should be a kind of vaccination against troubles apparently haven't spent much time in the Bible, and they don't know much about the lives of the saints.

The psalmist says, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all." God rescues, not in the sense of preventing bad things from happening, but in the sense of seeing faithful people through. In fact, some of the saints find that their troubles only make them love God more, because the harder they struggle the more they realize that, in the end, only God can save us. As long as people think they're getting by on their own, they may not feel much need of God. But when there's nowhere else to turn, we see more clearly that God is there, just as the stars are always there but we see them best in the darkest night.

Speaking of saints, I'm reading a good book by James Martin called *My Life with the Saints*. Martin was a graduate of the Wharton School of Business and started out in a promising career with General Electric, but he says, "The problem was that whenever I considered 'earning a living,' I thought mostly about the 'earning' and nothing about

the ‘living’.... The more important questions,” he says, “were the ones that no one asked me, or rather, that I failed to ask myself: What do you desire in life? And what does God desire for you?”¹

One thing led to another, and by the time he was twenty-eight Martin’s search for meaning led him to enroll in the Society of Jesus. This formerly nominal Roman Catholic was on his way to becoming a Jesuit priest. The point of his book is not that everyone should give up what they’re doing and enter a full-time religious vocation. On the contrary, he says, “We’re meant to be ourselves, and meant to allow God to work in and through our own individuality, our own humanity.”

The psalmist says, “O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.” James Martin was drawn into a closer relationship with God because he wanted the quality of life he saw in people who already knew God well.

The quality of some people’s lives makes us want what they have. It’s a kind of holy envy. Most things people envy are more mundane: they want someone else’s wealth, or their good looks, or the prestige they enjoy. But when we come across someone who has a deep and abiding relationship with God, and we see the peace and courage and joy and strength that come from that relationship, some of us want that for ourselves, too. And promise of the scripture is that we can have it.

When my family lived near the New Jersey shore some years ago, I would go down to the bay and sit by the water’s edge in the morning, not long after the sun came up.

¹ James Martin, SJ, *My Life with the Saints* (Chicago: Loyola, 2006), 45ff.

The thing that always struck me was how, no matter where I was sitting, the sunlight came across the water in a line directly to me. At first I thought it was remarkable that the sun always shone in exactly my direction. I felt very special. Then one day it dawned on me, quite literally, that the sun shines in every direction, so wherever I was on the water's edge, of course the sunlight made its way to me, just as it made its way to everyone else on the shore.

It turns out that other people have noticed this, too. One of them was St. Therese of Lisieux, the nineteenth century French nun who wrote:

Just as the sun shines simultaneously on the tall cedars and on each little flower as though it were alone on the earth, so Our Lord is occupied particularly with each soul as though there were not others like it. And just as in nature all the seasons are arranged in such a way as to make the humblest daisy bloom on a set day, in the same way, everything works out for the good of each soul.²

You might think that someone who writes that sort of thing must be living a comfortable life and everything is going her way. But on the contrary, Therese suffered from a long and painful illness, and she died at the age of 24. Even in her short life, her devotion to God was so compelling, and the wisdom and courage she drew from God were so inviting, that people urged her to write her life's story. Now what she called her "Little Way" has become a model for the life of faith and a modern spiritual classic. In fact, Pope John Paul II formally declared her a "doctor of the church," one of the most eminent teachers in the entire Catholic tradition.

² Quoted in Martin, *My Life with the Saints*, 36.

James Martin found himself drawn into a richer life with God as he got to know other people who already knew God well. The founder of his own Jesuit order, Ignatius of Loyola, had been a valiant soldier and something of a ladies' man when he was young, but over time his great energy and zeal for life drew him closer and closer to God, the source of all life. Ignatius went on to develop a set of spiritual exercises to help people find God in all things. I've begun to use a simpler version of Ignatius's practice in my own life, and it's proved to be enormously helpful.

God always starts with who we are, with our own individual gifts and abilities, but also our limitations and peculiarities, and then God uses these things for God's own purposes. Like the sun shining across the bay, the love and grace of God can light up each of our lives and make them, as Mother Teresa of Calcutta liked to say, "something beautiful for God."

By the way, you may have noticed that I've been talking a lot about faithful people in the Roman Catholic tradition. That's because God's light has often shone richly in that tradition, and our own Protestant church grew out of that tradition. As we say in The Apostles' Creed, we believe in "the holy catholic church" with a small "c"—the one universal church in every time and place. In fact, a great many people here at Westminster come from a Roman Catholic background, and we're glad to be part of the body of Christ together.

The whole point here is to invite everyone to taste and see that God is good. We don't discover that just by showing up in church for an hour and singing some songs and listening to sermons, though we hope those are good things to do. We only come to know the power and peace and love

and joy of God by practicing the presence of God in every aspect of our lives, by finding God in all things. Believing some things about God is not the same as knowing God, any more than browsing through a cookbook is the same as sitting down to a satisfying meal.

So here's the invitation. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Get together with some other people in a class, or a small group, or a Bible study, and learn from one another's experience. Get involved in some kind of mission activity, too, because God shows up in our doing as much as in our believing.

As the psalmist says, "I sought the Lord and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears." Don't be afraid, and don't let all the ordinary distractions of life get in the way. Just do it. Just taste and see for yourself how good God really is.



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