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God is constantly relating to us.

When we act in harmony with the Love that created us, we experience our relationship with God in the form of joy.

When we seek to find fulfillment in things that are tempting but cannot give us peace, we experience the relationship in the emptiness we feel.

God is, in other words, speaking to us in that very emptiness.

Contrary to what moralists would have us believe, the ventures that make us particularly empty are not those little investigations of aspects of our physical incarnation, not those temporary escapes in which we all indulge occasionally to let off steam.

We may allow moralists to make us feel shame over them, but these minor escapes do not result in emptiness of spirit.

Emptiness results from pride, from the conviction that we do not need God, but can do everything ourselves.

In fact, it is a *form* of pride to base one's identity on following the rules, on what one does not do.

I can imagine someone standing before God, proud of never having drunk, danced, or gambled, and God saying, "OK, but what DID you do?"

Because we are at our best when we act out of awareness of our relationship with God, twelve-step programs start with the admission that we are powerless in ourselves and that we need a power greater than ourselves, the power from which we all come and in which we all share.

That is true for all of us, but our pride blinds us to this.

Pride is often misunderstood.

Laying claim to our gifts is not pride, nor does denying them count as humility.

Denying our gifts merely allows us to continue not sharing them with the world, allows us to focus on ourselves alone.

True humility is to acknowledge our strengths and weaknesses, the light and darkness in our spirits,

and remember, the brighter the light, the darker the shadow it casts.

Pride, on the other hand, is ignoring our dependence upon God and imagining that we accomplish things alone.

In reality, we all have strengths and weaknesses because we are what one might call partial incarnations of God.

That is, we were created out of God, but we do not manifest the fullness of God, only part of God.

Whatever particular gifts we have are born in God, in other words, but we do not have ALL of God's gifts.

Because of this limitation, we can accomplish more godly things when we work *together* with others.

In fact, we are indebted to others even for the mundane things of life.

I could not have gone to college had I had to spend my time growing my own food and cotton, weaving my own clothing, and cutting firewood to survive.

I was able to spend time in study because other people were not.

They were growing and transporting the food, building power plants, and cooking the meals that I ate.

This is a challenging notion for those of us who grew up in the shadow of mid-nineteenth century Senator Henry Clay's myth of "the self-made man."

It is no accident that Christ chose sheep as a metaphor for our relationship with God.

Sheep's sole defense is keeping alert and running away.

They are stronger together, therefore—the more eyes watching the better.

They depend on one another.

Sheep form strong bonds and will stick close together no matter what they are doing.

They remember their mothers and their siblings throughout their lives and tend to graze in family units.

One shepherd tells of separating male/female twins at weaning time.

They placed them in different paddocks for two years.

When they allowed them to meet again, they ran towards each other and stood nose to nose for thirty minutes, clearly happy to see each other.¹

When a sheep dies, the others grieve and often return to the location of the death after the body has been removed.

Jesus recognized that our ills come from moving away from awareness of our common good towards a notion of self-reliance.

That is the root of alienation from God and our own created nature.

There is an interesting painting by nineteenth-century French Academic artist, Alexandre Cabanel.

It is called “Fallen Angel” and depicts Lucifer the moment after he is cast out of heaven.

The extra-Biblical tradition is that Lucifer, the bringer of light, was the most beautiful of all angels.

Filled with pride, he decided that he did not need God (even though, like all beings, he was part of God).

He rebelled, rejecting his role among the other angels and challenging God.

He wanted to use his gifts for himself.

1 <https://www.livingwithgotlands.com/2018/07/five-things-you-should-know-about-sheep-behavior/>

The result was that God cast him down.

In Cabanel's rendition, we see Lucifer alone, uncomfortably prostrate on a rocky mount, as other angels flock together in a kind of aerial dance above.

Lucifer's muscles are taught with resistance, straining against his fate, and his hands are clasped together.

He is literally holding onto himself because that is all he has got and is all he thought he needed.

His hair is disheveled, as one who has lost composure and control.

The angels swirling together in the sky are clothed, but Lucifer is stripped naked, his impotence and defeat on display for all to see.

His right arm obscures part of his face, not in shame before God, but because he does not want others to see his humiliation.

Peering over his arm are eyes flowing hot with tears of angry resentment.

There is something of a naive teenager in his look, of one who, when confronted with his limitations, defiantly refuses to acknowledge them, one who would rather lose everything than to face the truth of his dependent nature.

He had been so sure of himself and cannot accept his vanquishment.

Cabanel's work shows that the more we pride ourselves on our independence, the more defeated we are.

The critics rejected Cabanel's painting in part because it depicted Lucifer as very attractive.

We find ourselves wanting to look like him or to be with him, or both, and that was more than nineteenth-century society could tolerate.

They wanted sin to look ugly, easily identifiable, like a Disney villain,² but if pride were not seductive, no sheep would ever leave the fold.

We may imagine turning away from God as some act of obvious and hideous evil, as did the critics of Cabanel's work, but in reality, we are all subject to the temptation of self-reliance.

It promises to maximize gain and minimize loss (the primary goal in our current culture) by relieving us of responsibility to others and freeing us to pursue our own selfish interests.

In reality, however, we are at our most content when we feel the joy of working together, when we see our gifts bearing fruit in the community.

Cabanel grasps the nature of pride better than his critics, but Christ tells us a different story than the tradition Cabanel so ably depicts.

Though many Christians have held that, if we break the rules, God will cast us out for eternity, in today's readings, Christ tells us that God loves us unceasing.

2 Thanks, David Brownfield, for this observation.

When we wander off in pride, God seeks us diligently, tries to return us to the fold.

Our relationship is therefore not merely about obedience, but about joyfully working together.

It is not defined by what we do not do, but by what we do.

Our pursuit of the self-made person has left an epidemic of loneliness.

Pride in our own abilities rather than joy in our responsibilities leads us to stray.

We become isolated monuments to ourselves.

We may appear strong on our rocky mountaintop of prideful self-reliance, but the things we accomplish do not nurture our souls or those of others.

We get more joy out of simple acts of mutual support than out of dramatic accomplishments that benefit only ourselves.

When we forget that we are made out of God, empowered by God, a partial incarnation of God, God always seeks to bring us back.