

World Communion Sunday
October 1, 2006

STUDENTS OF AN ARTFUL GOD

"Whoever is not against us is for us." Mark 9:40

We have a supremely artful God.

Let's say you're in sales for a company that sells software and your company has just come out with a stunning new version of its software. You have to visit a client who's had all manner of problems with the old version, and he's sworn not to buy from you again. He refuses even to see you or take your calls, but your boss has given you an ultimatum: "Camp out on his front lawn, if you have to, but get to see him face to face."

When you arrive early at their corporate office you're waiting in the outer office, begging for a few minutes of the client's time. He is not there yet. You pace around, sending out a silent prayer for help. "Please God, I don't know how to fix this thing. Help me help me fix it, please."

You look down over a balcony to the atrium below, and there's your client talking to someone. It's a middle aged woman with a sales sample case. Against the polished tile floor you can hear the conversation. She's talking about *your* new product—praising it! Who on earth is she? She's not with your company.

"Frankly," she says, "our own product doesn't even come close to this new version of theirs. It's probably the best thing since sliced bread. I wish we'd thought of it." They shake hands and she heads for the glass doors to the parking lot.

You're dumfounded! A major competitor trying to sell your product! You run for the stairs, taking them three at a time, down through the atrium and out the main door, catching up with her just as she's driving off. Too late. What a nerve! You shout something after her, but she keeps on going. Frankly you're really ticked off. Confused, even angry. Something's just not right here.

Back at the client's office you walk in to the outer office. Your client's standing with his back to you, talking to his assistant. He doesn't see you. He's telling her to call your company and order the new software. You're stupefied. You can't decide whether to laugh or cry. You've got his business back—probably lost the commission when the story comes out—but the fence is mended.

Then you remember your prayer.

When Jesus' disciples found other people "selling their product," so to speak. They called them to task. And when they told Jesus, "We found people who weren't with us healing in your name." Jesus is unsympathetic.

"Whatever gets the job done," he says.

We can probably sense how they must have felt, somebody invading their turf.

This is a very ingenious God who doesn't play by our conventions, even our rules. So when you ask God for help, expect God to act in ways that constantly surprise and mystify you. Ways that leave you shaking your head in wonder. "I never would have dreamed that this problem (whatever it is) could have been fixed this way.

This is the same artful God who called a people into being out of slavery, a people raked in from the deserts and wastelands, considered nothing, and forced into labor camps for Pharaoh's monumental building projects. A people cultivated from the dross of the earth, yet whom God chose to make the crown jewel with a message of love and reconciliation to the whole world. This is the same God who slipped among us as the Savior, born into the most abject poverty, yet one whom even emperors would bow to. A God who turned the foremost persecutor of the Christian faith into its most influential apostle. A God with an extraordinary heart for our needs who, time and again, brings victory out of defeat, blessing out of loss, and can find a way through

hard circumstances whose track would have been impossible for us to fathom or devise. This is indeed an ingenious God who is unimaginably resourceful.

I've been asked from time to time to retell part of my own story, and at the risk of over-mining a familiar vein, let me tell it again. As many of you know, I was a cruise officer on Cunard cruise ships for a number of years. After Jane and I first met on the Q.E.2, we had a long distance courtship for a year and a half, typically with about four thousand miles between us. We were able to see each other only rarely, but made plans for me to come to the United States for our wedding in May of 1973.

The relative economies of the United States and the United Kingdom in the early seventies were very far apart, the UK being the poor cousin by then. I had managed to save a mere \$1,200, which amounted to about a third of a year's salary, and the air fare to come over here for myself and my extra baggage was going to consume about \$600 of that. With the remainder, I may have to pay considerable duty on lead crystal and other fine wedding gifts that were given to us by friends aboard ship and by the agents on the islands with whom I had been working for a some years. I was also about to move to a new country, find a job, pay for an apartment, begin to furnish it, and generally begin a new life, and all this without a job and with no chance of a work permit as a new resident until I had been here eight weeks. I had become a committed Christian fifteen months before, and I now did a lot of fervent praying that it would all work out.

The first thing I would have to do was return to the U.K. after docking in Puerto Rico at the end of my last cruise. As an immigrant seaman, I was required to enter the U.S. from my home country. It was awful to be so close, a matter of a few hundred miles away, and yet still have to travel 10,000 miles to land on American soil. I would virtually fly over Raleigh on the way to New York then on to London, before coming all the way back

My last cruise was a very busy charter cruise for the Detroit Chamber of Commerce (an all male cruise, incidentally—if you can imagine such a twist) during which I often worked well into the night, helping to set up complex audio visual presentations. Finally, I grabbed some time to pack on the last night in readiness for the long crew flight back to the U.K. We were to dock in the morning. Then there was a knock on my cabin door. It was the purser who gave me an envelope with my ticket in it. I opened it up, half heartedly and looked confusedly at the ticket. "There's been some mistake," I said, "This is from San Juan to New York."

"Oh, really!" he said, with a benevolent wink, "I must have made a mistake. Just check with the immigration people in the morning. I think you'll find it's O.K."

Suddenly, miraculously, I had been saved three days of travel, seven thousand miles, and \$600 dollars, in fact half my savings. All I needed was to pay for the flight from New York to Raleigh/Durham, N.C., which I knew was exactly \$60.

Later that evening I was heading down the stairs from the Look-Out Lounge when the production director for the charter group stopped me briefly in the flow of people. He palmed an envelope into my hand. "I just want to say thank you for all the help you gave us on the cruise with these set-ups," he said. Then he was gone. I checked the envelope—three twenty dollar bills. I was already in North Carolina!

The following morning I stood on the dock in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, the ship looming over me in farewell in the background, a few friends shouting good wishes and questionable advice to the groom from the upper decks, and my life's possessions surrounding me at the customs check in. In the distance I noticed the Chief Officer passing the time of day, as I imagined, with a senior customs official. Some time later, another customs officer sidled over to my piles of belongings and eyed the boxes of stem ware and other gifts with a luminous eye. I could sense the cash register churning in his head, and I prayed that he didn't work on commission. He whistled an exclamation. "Anything to declare?" he asked with a salivating leer. I fished in my inside pocket for the personal manifest with one hand, and for my wallet with the other. Slowly he looked over the list. Then he folded it and handed it back to me. He broke into a smile. "Have a great life!" he said, and waved me through.

"Thank you, Lord!" I couldn't have arranged all of those circumstances in a million years. I couldn't have conceived of such a flow of grace and opportunity from so many people, so unconnected.

Consider how we normally pray, asking God for specific ends to be met, specific agendas fulfilled. In short, we pray for our specific wants, conceiving God's role to be one of responding to our agendas. The problem, of course, is that we can have no real understanding what is best for us. The best prayer, under most circumstances, is to pray Jesus' Gethsemane prayer (in the moments before his arrest), "Lord, not my will, but

yours be done.” How odd of us to ask God to limit his responses only to those things that we can conceive of. Let God be God, ingenious and resourceful beyond imagining. The possibilities are endless.

To God, our unimaginably creative and underused God, be all the glory. Amen.