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Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957)
Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931)

A few months ago, I shared some of the writings and the impact of Kahlil Gibran upon the Christian community. He was a native of Lebanon. His most famous writing was "The Prophet". At the same time I wanted to share some information about another famous writer by the name of Nikos Kazantzakis. Nikos Kazantzakis was a very well known writer from Greece. I didn't realize until a week ago that both of these men were born in the same year, 1883.

They both had a deep commitment to reflect upon and write about Jesus. They were focused on this in much of their work. It was a similar passion that is described in our reading today from Philippians as Paul writes: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death." Gibran and Kazantzakis had a similar focus on trying to understand the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his sufferings and his mission for the world. Because their search was critical of the church and its leaders, they were persecuted in one way or another. But they are honored today for much of what they wrote many years ago.

These two individuals both came from the Mediterranean Area. They were very spiritual individuals. They both became very popular as prolific writers. While I appreciate Gibran's writings, it was Nikos Kazantzakis that has had a great impact on my own spiritual journey.

It dates back to my decision to attend the National Youth Convocation at Purdue University during college. Dave Brubeck was a featured jazz musician. Part of the program included showing a movie by the name of "He Who Must Die", based on a novel "The Greek Passion".

After viewing this movie with thousands of other young adults, I found myself crying uncontrollably, having gotten in touch with the power of the crucifixion experience and the realization that decent human beings, just like me, could be guilty of such cruelty and in some ways, evil.

The story is centered in a typical small Greek village. Years before they had been spared from some dread disease and in gratitude the church leadership had declared that they would sponsor a passion play every ten years. The leadership of the village selected various young adults to play the roles of the Christ figure and the disciples. They were instructed that they were to live the roles in their private lives in preparation for the public performance of the passion play. One of the disciples was the son of the local banker. As they got into their roles, a crisis came to the community. Turkish refugees were coming their direction. The town fathers were very upset and ordered everyone to ignore the refugees, in the hope that the refugees would pass through quickly.

The disciples learned that they were hungry and in desperate situations. Following their roles in the passion play, they naturally offered to help with food. The town fathers repeated their orders, even going to the point of spreading false rumors about the refugees, that they had dread diseases that would infect the population of the town. The disciples (young adults) continued to help them. Eventually the wealthy young adult gave the refugees a plot of land upon which they could settle.

Tensions increased. The town fathers called in the national military to settle the issue. The Christ figure placed himself between a tank and the refugees. The tank did not stop. He was crushed against a fence. And the movie ended.

It might bring to mind the image of a Seattle woman, Rachel Corrie, who placed herself between a bulldozer and a home that was targeted for destruction near the wall that has been constructed between Palestine and Israel. She was killed for her efforts.

A couple of years later I rented a local commercial theatre in Danville, Illinois, and sponsored the showing of the movie to all who would come and see it. It was fun to fill the theatre with several different youth groups.

Nikos Kazantzakis was best known for his fictional novel "Zorba the Greek". I have shared with many of you that he also wrote a novel that affected me on a very personal level: titled "The Greek Passion" with the movie title "He Who Must Die". In more modern times, one of his novels was produced as a movie entitled "The Last Temptation of Christ". The outcry against this movie, which included pickets and attacks from many churches, closed it down.

The powers-that-be (Greek Orthodox Church) in Greece branded him as a blasphemer and an anti-Christ. He wanted to make religion viable in the 20th century for people who were comfortable with the idea of evolution. While his ideas were radical then, they are much more commonplace now.

It is fascinating to realize that this man was considered so dangerous that he was ex-communicated from his church, which would be the Greek Orthodox Church, and he was treated as a traitor by his national government. When he died he was buried in Crete.

Nikos Kazantzakis was born in Heraklion, Crete, Greece, February 18, 1883 and he died on October 26, 1957, in Freiburg, Germany. He was the author of poems, novels, essays, plays, and travel books. He was arguably the most important and most translated Greek writer and philosopher of the 20th century. Yet he did not become well known until the 1964 release of the film "Zorba the Greek", based on Kazantzakis's novel whose English translation has the same title. In 1957 he lost the Nobel Prize for Literature to Albert Camus by one vote.

The Crete on which Kazantzakis was born was still under Turkish rule, and had experienced repeated uprisings in attempting to achieve independence from the Ottoman empire and to unite with Greece.

When he died he was buried on the wall surrounding the city of Heraklion, because the Orthodox Church ruled out his being buried in a cemetery. His epitaph reads "I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free."

Kazantzakis considered his huge epic poem (33,333 verses long) "The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel" to be his most important work. Begun in 1924, he wrote it seven times before publishing it in 1938. According to another Greek author, "It had been a superhuman effort to record his immense spiritual experience".

Since his youth, Kazantzakis was spiritually restless. Tortured by metaphysical and existential concerns, he sought relief in knowledge, in traveling, in contact with a diverse set of people, in every kind of experience. The influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on his work is evident, especially in his atheism and sympathy for the superman concept. However, religious concerns also haunted him. To attain a union with God, Kazantzakis entered a monastery for a brief stay of six months.

The figure of Jesus was ever present in his thoughts, from his youth to his last years. The Christ of the "Last Temptation of Christ" shares Kazantzakis's anguished metaphysical and existential concerns, seeking answers to haunting questions and often torn between his sense of duty and cause on one side and his own human needs to enjoy life, to love and to be loved, and to have a family. A tragic figure who at the end sacrifices his own human hopes for a wider cause, Kazantzakis's Christ is not an infallible, passionless deity, but rather a passionate and emotional human being who has been assigned a mission, with a meaning that he is struggling to understand that often requires him to face his conscience and his emotions and ultimately to sacrifice his own

life for its fulfillment. He is subject to doubts, fears and even guilt. In the end he is the Son of Man, a man whose internal struggle represents that of humanity.

Many Greek religious conservatives condemned his work. His reply was: "You gave me a curse, I give you a blessing: may your conscience be as clear as mine and may you be as moral and religious as I."

When people attacked the Martin Scorsese film "The Last Temptation of Christ", and copies of the video were vandalized, I was afraid that it would disappear and not be available, so I purchased a copy for \$99 from our local grocery store, later I purchased a second copy for \$19, so it is available for any who wish to share the three hour experience. Like the Da Vinci Code, I have to remind viewers to remember that it is a novel, it is a novel, it is a novel!

While I found much in the movie that I did not "like", over-all it made a very positive impression on me and those who watched it with me. I liked more than I disliked. When I was teaching a college course in Sitka, I learned that the students were so biblical illiterate that they did not know what parts were biblical and which parts were not, so I assisted them in this by explaining what was what as we viewed the movie. "This is in the Bible" and "This is not in the Bible." Being of little courage and not wanting to get fired from the faculty, I showed the movie on a voluntary basis to the students in my home instead of in the classroom.

There are many things in this world that can touch us spiritually: music, novels, a beautiful sunset and periods of quiet reflection. There are those among us who try to limit the ways God can work in their lives and in the lives of other people. Fortunately Kazantzakis did not let them stop his creativity and he had the some good words for his critics: "May your conscience be as clear as mine and may you be as moral and religious as I", as well as "I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free."

When I first decided to share some reflections about these two authors, I focused on this interesting question: What did Kahlil Gibran and Nikos Kazantzakis and Jesus Christ have in common.

Here are the answers:

1. All three were rejected by religious power.
Jesus by various Jewish groups (Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots)
Kahlil Gibran by the Maronite Church.
Nikos Kazantzakis by the Greek Orthodox Church.

Why were these three individuals a threat to the religious establishment of their day? They were willing break new ground in religious thought and practice, plus they were not impressed by so-called established truth.

2. There was a common focus on the humanity of Jesus. Both of the modern writers focused heavily on Jesus the man.

When given the choice between heresy that emphasizes Jesus the God or the heresy that emphasizes Jesus the Man, power opts for God while the oppressed opts for humanity.

2. All were loved by common people. The masses. The poor heard Jesus gladly, with joy. The same was eventually true for Kazantzakis and Gibran. When Gibran's body was returned to Lebanon for burial, the roads were lined for miles by people willing to do homage to this native son. When the Greek government finally realized what a treasure there was in the work of Nikos, they wanted to have his body returned to Greece. Nikos's widow refused to allow his body to be returned for burial on Greek soil, in reaction to their poor treatment of

him in life.

I am grateful that many great individuals in human history are willing to stand up against the pressure to conform, especially when those agencies are trying to protect the status quo of power and privilege. There is a reason that Jesus only lasted three years in his public ministry. He was a threat to some powerful forces in his own day. The church should not get too far from its roots, even in today's world. As we reflect on the story of the passion in the next couple of weeks, I invite you to look through the lens of how Jesus stood up to the power of the state and the power of religion in his own day. But do it very carefully. Those who take Jesus Christ seriously can face great difficulty in life. You may be rejected. You may be ridiculed.

But whatever you do, it is important to gain an understanding of Jesus Christ in your own spiritual walk. Your vision may not be complete, but it will give you guidance for the living of your days.