

Love

**A Sermon Preached by
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This is the last message in a three-part series, entitled, "Eat, Pray, Love."

So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Mark 10:42-45 NRSV

If you were trying to help someone "find" God, where would you send them? We can find God in many places and in many ways. Some find God on mountaintops or at the Shore. Some find God in the smile of a grandchild. Some find God in traditional places – like a church sanctuary – through traditional means – like the Lord's Supper and prayer. And many, many, of us can say that we first felt a hint of God's presence when we first felt the thrill of being in love.

When Elizabeth Gilbert was looking for God she turned to some pretty unusual places. She had gone from a disastrous marriage to a relationship that was just as destructive: her life was falling apart. In desperation she grasped at anything she thought might hold her together. She travelled to Italy, India, and Indonesia in a search for something, someone, some... healing. In her memoir, "Eat, Pray, Love," Gilbert chronicles that quest.

She sometimes identifies the object of her search as God, but I think she just wanted to feel better. Food made her feel pretty good... for a while. So did meditation... for a while. So did a fling... for a while. Now, years later, she is married and living in New Jersey, running a small

import shop with her husband. Her sequel to “Eat, Pray, Love,” is on bookstands. It’s called, “Committed”, and it chronicles her ambivalent feelings about marriage. From the sub-title of the book – “A skeptic makes peace with marriage” – I don’t think that she found precisely what she was searching for on her travels.

And I don’t think she ever will. Not if she keeps looking where she has been. The hunger for healing that we all have can’t be sated by a perfect pizza, a few months of prayer in an ashram, or the love of any person, no matter how romantic or exotic. These things might take the edge off for a time, but the hunger always comes back, sometimes even deeper than before.

Gilbert was right in thinking that she needed God and in reaching out to him but in the end she settled for so much less. Each time she was on the verge of a spiritual breakthrough, it’s as if she said, “Thanks, God, for the help. I’ll take it from here.” It turns out that what Gilbert wanted was someone who could help her manage her pain, not someone who would transform her life. She wanted a servant, not a Savior. After a few pages of her book you realize why she came back unchanged and empty handed from her travels. Her journey was all about finding...herself.

If she really wanted to find fulfillment, maybe Gilbert should have skipped the year abroad and become a football player, one like New York Jets fullback Tony Richardson.



So what do faith and football have in common? Let’s see.

Here's what they wrote about Richardson in a big *Sports Illustrated* story this past August ["Made To Last," Joe Posnanski, August 23, 2010, *Sports Illustrated*]

For 16 bone-crunching [seasons] fullback Tony Richardson has been plowing paths for rushing leaders and record breakers. He knows that one day he'll lose his job ... to someone *he* has trained to take it from him.



It's a rare thing these days to see Richardson actually carrying the football, like in the picture above. Now he's known as a blocking back. Blocking backs make other guys look good.



#49 spends most of his time making running room for others and protecting his young quarterback. That's how he earned the nickname, "Football's Best Man."

This will tell you a little something about [him]. Back in 2005, when [running back Larry Johnson] had Richardson ... [blocking for him] out in front, Johnson ran for ... 20 touchdowns with the Chiefs. That season Johnson had looked... like a modern-day Jim Brown. Things changed, though, after Kansas City didn't re-sign Richardson. ... The year after Richardson left, ... [Johnson's] rushing average dropped almost

a full yard. The next year his yards per carry dropped almost another yard. Two years later [Johnson] was [cut].



[Richardson's] not especially big... fast, or elusive. [But after 16 seasons] what he offers ... are those things football coaches call "intangibles." He speaks up and says the right things at meetings, visits the teammate having a tough time, watches other players to see how he can help. Yes, help even those [young players] who [want] his job.

In 2000 Richardson was given a ... chance to be [the] Kansas City Chief's feature [running] back. [This is a real glamour position.] ... [That year] they also signed a running back from the [Baltimore] Ravens named Priest Holmes. The idea was that Richardson would get the bulk of the carries ... It was like that for the first couple weeks of the 2001 season. Then Richardson [said to Holmes:] "It's time for me to step out of the way. *You* need to be getting the ball. And I'm going to do everything I can to help you." Holmes went on to lead the league in rushing [that year]. The next year he had a season for the ages. In 2003, Holmes set the NFL record ... [for touchdowns]. And [guess] who took the most pride in all that? Tony Richardson. Says Holmes, "He used to call me up and say 'I just saw you on Sports Center!' He was happier for me than I was for myself."

When you ask Richardson about [his self-less attitude], he will tell you [it began with] his father, Sgt. Maj. Ben Richardson. ... [B]efore [Tony's] senior year at Daleville High, [his dad] ... was transferred back to Germany, [where Tony was born]. "He could have taken us with him," Tony says, "but he didn't. He knew how much football meant to me." Tony and his mother, ... stayed in Alabama. Tony explains: "It was such a great

sacrifice—going alone so that I could be my best. But that's what life is all about. Life is sacrifice."

[It has been said that] Blocking a linebacker is like running full force into a garage door. ... [T]here are very few old running backs, and Richardson turns 39 in December. [But] it has been worth it, Richardson will tell you, because of all those players he helped have spectacular seasons. That's what makes him "Football's Best Man." The tailbacks are the grooms. "I can't really explain it," Richardson says. "But it just means more to me to help someone else achieve glory. There's something about it that feels right to me."

He has helped other players rush for more than a 1000 yards in a season *seven* times.

[And] every one of those backs will tell you Richardson's role went far beyond his crushing blocks. He would talk to them constantly throughout games, advising them, pushing them, inspiring them. "He always knew exactly what to say to get you through," Holmes says.

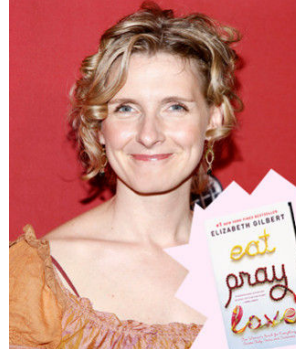
The Richardson stories are legendary: The day after he played in the 2005 Pro Bowl, he flew from Hawaii to Sri Lanka to distribute food to tsunami victims. One year, Richardson flew across the country [from one charity event to another] to be there before it ended. "I'm sorry I'm late," he told the kids when he arrived. "You have to go after every opportunity," Richardson says. "If I have a chance to help someone, how can I say no after all I've been given?"

So [this past summer] Richardson got this call from Larry Johnson, his old teammate, the one whose career nose-dived after Richardson left his team. Tony thought Johnson sounded unusually nervous on the phone. ... "Tony," Johnson said, "I need a big favor." 'Uh-oh,' Richardson thought. 'What kind of trouble is Larry in now?'

Richardson looked down at the screen on his smartphone and a photo appeared. [It was] a picture of a little girl. Richardson

studied it for a moment, then he heard ... Johnson say, "Tony, will you be her godfather?"

"Of course I will," [came the reply]."



Consider how different these people's stories are. Elizabeth Gilbert goes out in search of something and never quite finds it. Tony Richardson, a devout Christian, chooses to make his life about service and finds that he gets more in return than he ever asked for.

What Gilbert *did* discover on her journey was a convenient god, a nice god, a comfortable god. When she was distraught over her marriage, this god told her to go back to bed. When she was angry that the husband she was leaving was putting up a fight, this god gave speed the divorce through. When she was wrestling with demons of guilt over her role in the end of the relationship, this god said to her "go on with your life." In short, this god told her exactly what she wanted to hear.

During four months of intensive prayer for several hours a day in India, this god never asked anything of her that she didn't already want to do. During all that time meditating and retreating in India, one of the poorest countries of the world, this god never once prompted her to do something to lessen the soul-crushing suffering of the servants around her. Toward the end of her time in India she explains what she discovered there, namely that "God dwells within you, as you yourself, exactly the way you are." [*Eat, Pray, Love*, 102] In short, if you want to find god, look in the mirror.

But is that a god worth worshipping?

Why are we so fascinated by people who are completely self-absorbed? We gobble up reality shows about narcissistic celebrities and secretly fantasize about what it would be like to live life with no limits, no commitments, and no burdens. Gilbert's book is popular, I think, because for many it would be the ultimate fantasy to be able to take a year off and travel around the world doing whatever we wanted, not accountable to anyone, just drinking in one experience after another, and have god show up along the way, practically on demand, like a perfect low-maintenance travelling companion. But that's not real life. And that kind of quest for self-fulfillment doesn't lead to lasting joy. Because it doesn't lead to a real god. For God, *capital G-o-d*, you have to be willing to put yourself second, to block for others, to let others' light shine.

Gilbert believes that enlightenment came when she finally realized that she was, in some way, divine. I think true enlightenment comes when we realize that we aren't god at all, that life isn't about us, about getting our needs met and fulfilling our fullest potential no matter the cost. Enlightenment comes at that moment when we see that the path to meaning, significance, and even God, is not in looking out for #1 but in being content with being #2. It comes in recognizing that being Shakespeare's teacher is even more fulfilling than being Shakespeare. We find God, ultimately, not in Italy, India, or Indonesia, but in serving our brothers and sisters in Christ wherever they are in need.

Let us pray. Help us, Lord, to remember that we were created in your image – and help us to not create you in our image. Help us, Lord, to not make the goal of our life to be served, to be completely safe, to be loved, but to serve others, to protect them, and to love them. As we draw near to others, seeking blessings for them, may we be blessed to draw near to You. Amen.

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