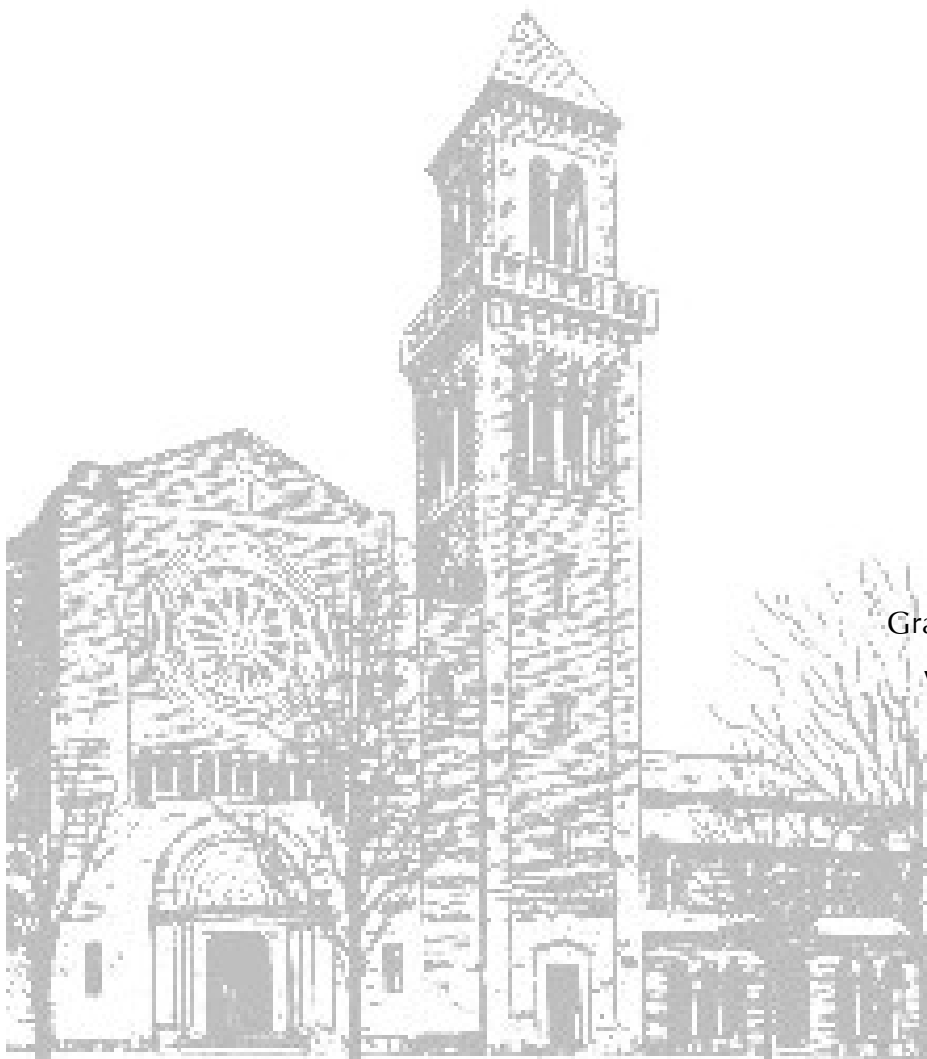


“Life’s Longing For Itself ”

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“Life’s Longing for Itself”

As I was Saying...

I am trying to place firm foundations under the liberal religious endeavor. How can we not have set beliefs? How can this be religious? Are there principles on which we do agree, can agree, should agree?

In previous sermons I have ventured an hypothesis that reality is one thing, and any divinity that exists is inside that reality. That means there is ultimately one truth no matter how various and dissonant particular facts and ideas appear to us. This is an act of faith, for there is yet no proof that this is so. Neither is there any proof it is not so either.

I then went on to say that there is one love. This may seem a wild act of faith, but for me love is part of the connectedness that physics describes as forces of nature, that biology describes as reproduction, that philosophy describes as logic, that art describes as beauty, that ethics describes as morality. Each is a tie that binds.

Last time I asked how I knew these things, and said I do not know them so much as conclude them. My knowledge is as limited as anyone else’s. But all the stuff I know and have learned from others tells me this is a reasonable notion. I examined the idea of revelation, that there is some special knowledge contained in books that, as John Calvin believed, serve as glasses to correct and improve the blurry vision of imperfect humanity. This idea, that a particular book can give us the real truth, however much we want it to exist, is a vain hope. Even a perfect book ultimately falls into the hands of imperfect people. There is no way out of the uncertainty dilemma.

Not inspiring, but as I said last time, theology is digging a well. An apt metaphor in two ways. First, I am seeking the living waters of hope, not the Perrier of skepticism. Religion cannot be about not believing and not hoping, so the challenge is to find the living waters that sustain us. And second, as anyone who has dug a well knows, it is long, dirty, boring work. Not the sort that attracts spectators and cheers. Unless they are thirsty.

This time I dig into human nature, and to get us on our way this time, some words from others better than I.

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is man.
Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the skeptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a God, or beast;
In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little or too much:

Chaos of thought and passion, all confus'd;
Still by himself abus'd or disabus'd;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

Alexander Pope

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles
through the desert repenting.
You have only to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
Over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air
are heading home.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese,
harsh and exciting – over and over
announcing your place in the family of things.

Mary Oliver

Whether the universe is [a concourse of] atoms, or nature [is a system], let this first be established, that I am a part of the whole which is governed by nature; next, I am in a manner intimately related to the parts which are of the same kind with myself.

From the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius

* * *

Confession

My very dear friend,

One again I thought of old Augustine, who sent me on this mission to reveal to myself through you the accumulated debris of my life, the detritus of folly and cowardice and malice and other calamities that I heaped upon myself as surely as Jacob Marley forged the chains he dragged through Scrooge's bed chamber. If I am to run with swiftness the race that is left, these self-made burdens must be named and owned and atoned by this

lengthy disquisition.

In his ancient account, Augustine reflects back on youth, saying, "I now went through a period of suffering and humiliation. I was told that it was right and proper for me as a boy to pay attention to my teachers....But even as a boy I did not care for lessons and did not like being forced to study." This was not true for me, at first. Learning came easily, the facts and figures. What did not come was the will to work. My mind would draw me away (look how I make it sound like someone else did it) to some more exciting thing than arithmetic or handwriting. To this day I cannot do the short form of division. I remember being there, but was absent in mind, wandering beyond the windows of my third grade room. And handwriting required a sort of compression of spirit that was a straight jacket. My mother boasted that I never colored between the lines. That year my teacher marked a D on my handwriting notebook.

Try as I might to pay strict attention and master the exercises and rules, my paper was full of smudges and my mind full of diversions. I circled the classroom like a comet, not physically so much as internally, swooping in and then out, circling the periphery of the subject or the activity. My teachers bewailed my inconsistency, which my mother found more charming than damning. What she did not see was my own frustration at not being able to please, or not being strong enough to discipline the unruly thoughts and whims. She offered forgiveness and I needed direction. My teachers offered judgment and I needed help. A chasm began to open in the world, a space between others and me.

When I was nine we moved for third time in my memory, fifty miles away to Baltimore. My parents came from there, but for me it was where unpleasant relatives lived. They were old, dusty, smelled of talcum and medicine, and so Baltimore became a city of boredom verging on death. To move there was to be condemned. Most terrible was realizing I would have to find new friends, something that was not easy for me somehow. I wish I understood why, but sometime around age eight I was moving to the edges of our neighborhood of children and my younger brother moved to the center. In retrospect I see that he was far more sociable than I. Then, I saw it as failure and betrayal, and its denouement when the circle literally formed one around me to tease me one afternoon, including my oldest friends and my younger brother. There was no violence about it, but the effect of being singled out by the group was devastating.

You would think I would welcome a move away, and with some false bravado I told myself I did. But in my heart there was horror at the thought of starting over. Nonetheless, I did find friends when we moved, mostly girls who were my age-mates in the new neighborhood. At nine this was not yet a strike against me, but that changed soon enough.

I was learning to hide in plain sight, to keep my true thoughts and real emotions out of view. Showing them had produced laughter, confusion and ridicule, not acceptance. I felt like an exile in the world, removed from my home, removed from my friends, alone and without a clear refuge. Over time this became who I was, one person on the outside who was merry and smart, but ultimately phony because inside I was pensive and fearful. A way to stay safe was ultimately a prison from which I am still laboring to escape.

* * *

Profession

Young Friend,

I hope you are hanging in there with me. There is method to my madness here. Whole decades have gone by that I seem to have forgotten since then, but stuff from school days is still vivid. For example, one of the proverbs I remember learning in grade school was the line: "The proper study of mankind is man." Only later did I learn the beginning phrase: "Know thyself, presume not God to scan." But good theology must recognize that Pope is right. It's a version of that plank and speck thing Jesus speaks of.

We began it last time, with the question of epistemology. But there's more to human nature than our ability and inability to know. I am interested in our general place in the scheme of things. And as before, I am not out to prove I am right so much as make a reasonable case, that is, erect a world view at least as possible as yours. In a sense, my liberalism is actually quite conservative, because I am building on the obvious and the self-evident.

That's why I like Pope, Alexander Pope that is. He wants to start with what is in front of us. Most people recognize the circumstance he describes, of humans being on an "isthmus of a middle state." I like the more dramatic form Shakespeare used, "We are arrant knaves all, crawling between heaven and earth." But is this our nature. Are we "darkly wise, and rudely great:...Created half to rise, and half to fall" because that is our nature, or is this state because of some previous state? Are we the way we are for a reason?

Biblical tradition makes us out as special, different from the rest of the world. And we would seem to be different, thinking and so on. But facts belie this. Our DNA is in every living thing, from primates on down to single cell creatures. The same amino acids form the same patterns in us as in amoebae or redwoods. Nor are there chemicals or elements not found anywhere else. Our physical nature is entirely of a piece with the rest of the world, earth and beyond. There's that One Truth thing again.

Yet we are different in some sense, thinking and writing and driving cars and so on. Whatever makes us different must be in our nonphysical nature, the part wrestled over by theologians and philosophers for the last 3000 years. The Bible says God breathed life directly into us, imparting something of the divine breath thereby. That's one possible reason.

A more conservative answer comes from the late Mortimer Adler, the last freelance philosopher, who observed that "In the case of other animal species...nature...is constituted by quite determinate characteristics or attributes. In the case of the human species, it is constituted by determinable characteristics."

There may be more, but what makes us different is our range of potentiality, which is greater than any other species we know. This is not a difference of kind but of degree. All creatures have some range of choice. I mentioned this at the beginning, how animals have choices within limits. Some near relatives show emotion and deliberation. But we humans have the most range. Imagine a carpenter who has only a hammer and another

with a full box of tools. The possible creations of the last are immensely more than the first.

This quality is a fact, not up for debate. Its meaning, though, is very debatable. What does it mean that humans have such range? It is a blessing but also a burden, as when I go to the store and am paralyzed by the choices in laundry detergent or breakfast cereal. To give each one equal weight would take all day. When it comes to moral choices, ones involving other beings, the range is all but infinite. Pope understood the result:

“He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a God, or beast;
In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err.”

One explanation of why we struggle here is one you know. Adam and Eve and all their issue have been blighted, their judgment corrupted. Augustine wrote in a famous Latin epigram: *Posse non peccare; non posse non peccare, non posse peccare*. We were able not to sin (*posse non peccare*), but having sinned can no longer not sin (*non posse non peccare*) and therefore must follow the one who cannot sin (*non posse peccare*).

Another answer is naturalistic, which says that we “sin” because we are alienated from our true nature by society or capitalism or other human corruptions. This is Rousseau and Whitman and other romantics, and well expressed by Mary Oliver.

Both are wrong because they assume the fact is bad. I assume it is neither bad nor good, but simply what we are. That makes the most sense, actually. Equivocation, deliberation, not knowing for sure, seems more consonant with what we have explored thus far, not just for people but for reality at large. A dynamic universe is unpredictable. The more you know the more you have to think about what you will do. And being partially knowing creatures we cannot but make mistakes. We cannot have the freedom reality imparts and not also have the chance of choosing wrong. Jean Paul Sartre said, “We are condemned to be free,” but a gentler face comes from the Peanuts comic strip in which Charlie Brown, as he walked away from school looks out at the reader and says, “There is no greater curse than a great potential.” No wonder so many think we should either surrender to a higher authority or retreat into a “lower one.”

I say, let’s just accept that we are where Pope says we are, and go from there. Human beings are neither fallen from grace nor rising toward the sky. We are exactly where we are, which is consistent with the rest of creation, as it is a “single garment of destiny.” The consequences of that will be pursued later. What remains is to describe what we do with this status. If this is how the universe made us, what are we to do?

Choose. Cut to the bone, every choice we make has a rational, a moral, and an aesthetic consequence. The Platonic trinity of truth, goodness and beauty is on the table at every moment. Imagine choosing your clothing this morning. It may not seem it, but you had rational elements at work, measuring weather and purpose and location. There were moral elements available as you measured how your appearance would affect relationships with others. These were all secondary to the aesthetic choice we all know is there, but all three were in the mix.

The act of choosing is a valuing act. When we make choices we bring value to bear on ourselves and others, both objects and fellow creatures. Those values change the course of those objects, adding purpose to what was merely stuff. Consider how a painting comes to be. Elements such as wood and canvas and paint and brushes must be chosen, directed, used and so on, in ways that less conscious forces would not. Nature has yet to produce a spontaneous object that looks like Rembrandt. (I understand some animals do good abstract expressionist work, but even then the paints and paper come from people.) In every case, the result is a new relationship of elements that now has a new direction in the universe. A painting changes the universe.

All choices have such consequences, whether we notice them or not. The result is that the objects take on new purpose. The name we have for valuing and cherishing is Love. In short, in our choosing we unite Truth and Love. Every decision we make is a place where we connect Truth with Love. We are, quite literally, sewing the universe together. Mind you, the same thing happens at lower scales in the world, but less efficiently because it is less comprehensive. Just as our decision to wear black socks rather than blue is less consequential than whether we rescue the child from the speeding bus, so less conscious acts are less momentous but not less real.

As a clergyman, I see this profoundly through rites of passage. Death, marriage, and christening are when we make a point of uniting things for greater value. No surprise, then, that in christening I cite Khalil Gibran: "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself." That, so far as I can see, is the force that drives the universe, a longing for more truth, more goodness, more beauty, for what William James called "maximum subjective richness."

The universe is driven to surpass the here and now, to grow and reach and deepen and broaden. Our human task is to accept our particular place in this universe, a place where we have the power and the responsibility to unite truth and love. We are not alone in this, as I have said here and shall explore in the next essay, but whether we know that or not, this is what we do.

In a sense, all sensible religion begins with humanism. It is about awakening human beings to their equivocal place in the scheme and telling them to live as consciously free creatures. What we should not do is stop there. First, because there is so much out there we do know that is not human and yet certainly shares the universe with us. To make it all a reflection of us is an arrogance even atheism must admit. Second, there is much out there we do not know. How can we reckon the unseen and unknown into our human duty if we confine religion to the human cause?

So finally, after much digging, we are finding some moisture in this well. We humans shape the world around us, imperfectly it is true, but we do it nonetheless. And it may be that this is our task in the great scheme. But to do it rightly demands we grow in knowledge and wisdom, something that demands humility about our place in the universe. What else could we expect, though, of the "glory, jest, and riddle of the world?"