

The People We Used to Be

Sermon by Mr Jay P. Lavelle

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FIRST READING:

As Jesus was setting out down the road, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit the life of the age to come?”

Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’”

The man said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

Jesus, looked at him with love and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.”

When he heard this, the man was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions and properties.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?”

Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.”

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundred-fold now in this age and in the age to come. For many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

- Mark, 10, 17-31; translated by Rev. Professor N. T. Wright

SECOND READING:

I once heard the novelist Don DeLillo say that a fiction writer starts with meaning and then manufactures events to represent it; a memoirist starts with events, then derives meaning from them. In this, memoir purports to grow more organically from lived experience. When I asked a class of undergrads what they liked about memoir, I heard them echo the no-doubt naive sentiment that they drew hope from the mere fact of a writer living past a bad junction to report on it. "It's a miracle he even survived!" was written on many papers. The telling has some magic power for them, as it does for me. "Tell it," the soldiers in Vietnam begged Michael Herr, and in *Dispatches*, he told it. This confidence of mine in most memoirs' veracity is viewed as gullible. I know. Of course, there's artifice to the relationship between the writer and her reader. Memoir done right is an art, a made thing. It's not just raw reportage flung splat on the page. Most morally ominous, from the second you chose one event over another, you're shaping the past's meanings. Plus, memoir uses novelistic details like cobbling together dialogue you failed to record at the time. To concoct a distinctive voice, you often have to do a poet's lapidary work. And the good ones reward study. You're making an experience for a reader, a show that conjures your past - inside and out - with enough lucidity that a reader gets more than just the brief flash of titillation. You owe a long journey, and most of all, you owe all the truth you can wheedle out of yourself. So while it is a shaped experience, the best ones come from the soul of a human oddly compelled to root out the past's truth for his own deeply felt reasons.

- Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir*

SERMON:

An optimist, a pessimist, and an engineer are looking at a partially filled glass of water. The optimist says "It's half full." The pessimist says "It's half empty." And the engineer says "The glass is twice as big as it needs to be."

A joke, Freud wrote, is the quickest way to the truth. And the truth here is that one event - a glass with water in it - can be interpreted in a number of ways, all of which are accurate. The glass and the water don't have a particular meaning; they simply "are". The things in our lives are like that. And not just the things in our lives - our very lives are the same: a collection of events that can be interpreted in different ways.

Last year, I was part of Rev. Sarah's sermon-writing workshop. During the first

presentation of writings, I was struck by how everyone was writing from an “I” perspective, while I was writing from my usual abstract, anonymous, third-person. I remembered that the psychotherapist Carl Rogers had written, “What is most personal in most universal.” And somewhere inside my head a small voice said maybe you should be writing with an “I”, too.

I thought of an odd event that recurred throughout my childhood. It is certainly not the best thing that happened to me, nor is it the worst. It is, however, something I felt I could fashion a sermon from (and “felt” is the key word - writing is not an intellectual exercise).

My father never talked to me. Well, he did occasionally, but only when he was drunk. And by drunk I don't mean a normal six-shots-and-beers while watching the Red Sox. I mean the sort of drunk that happened every six months or so when he's drink two half-gallons of whiskey in five days. Near the end of this, he'd call me into the living room. He was sitting there, large and impervious, like a bear that had wandered into the house and was surveying his new surroundings. In his hand was a large black book. It was the complete works of Shakespeare. Sticking out of it was a orange card. This was his first library card, with his name written in exquisite penmanship by a steel-nibbed pen dipped in an inkwell. The card always marked the same place, which was Act 5 of *Macbeth*. My father opened the book and said, “Recite!”

In Act 5 of the play, Macbeth's life is falling apart. He is trusting less and less in the witches' prediction that no man born of woman will harm him. And then a scream is heard, and an aide rushes in to tell him his wife has died. Macbeth steps forward and says the only words my father ever wanted to hear from me:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

When I finished, I stood there, the large book heavy in my small hands. My father stared at me, one weary blue eye focused on me, the other on a tree outside the window. If he could manage to fire the neurons that let him speak, he would say, “Again!” And the recitation would continue until the annihilation he so so long sought came over him and he passed out. I would then quietly put the book down and go to my room where I'd sit on the floor and try to cry.

This was never mentioned at any other time. I have no idea why my father was obsessed with the brief bit of poetry. Was it something that he learned in school? Did he somehow identify with Macbeth? Or was it some sort of life lesson that he was trying to convey? I don't know. He died when I was 23, talking his secrets with him.

It was at this point in the workshop that Rev. Sarah said, "That's great, Jay. Now maybe you can continue with how you became the person you are today?"

I was sitting in the Mirick Room thinking, how did I do that? How did I, in the words of the Shaker hymn, "come round right"? And then, the hard work began.

I would like to say that there was a balancing influence to my traumatic family life. I would like to be able to say that my church childhood was idyllic, walking down the tree-lined streets to the white wood church facing the town common - the library and town hall next door, the Congregationalists and Methodists adjacent, and across the common, past the fountain, the purple-doored Episcopalian church. I would like to say that wise lessons were learned, accomplishments were honored, and friendships formed. But that didn't happen. What I do know is that an interest in spirituality was developing, though - of course - I had no knowledge of it at that time.

It attempted to surface in my adulthood in various ways: LPs of British church music on my stereo, paperbacks of Thomas Merton and Simone Weil pulled from the towering stacks at Ephraim's that literally spilled onto Franklin Street, The *I Ching* and the works of Sri Ramana Maharishi on my bookshelf. But Sunday mornings were spent with friends having breakfast at the Broadway restaurant in the Canal District.

Then, about twenty years ago, my friends were all married, and had families, and were otherwise engaged on Sunday mornings. It was not a review of my past and current lives that brought me back to the fold, nor was it a dramatic revelation like St Paul, but something far more subtle than that. And that, of course, leads to another story.

On a very cold New Year's Eve I was at Worcester's *First Night* celebrations, and seeking some relief, I went to the dining room of this church where the youth group was selling hot chocolate. Trying to stay inside as long as possible I began to read the innumerable announcements and sign-up sheets on the bulletin boards. There was a sign-up sheet for a women's retreat and I saw the name of someone I knew. "Wow," I thought, "She goes to this church."

So, a week later I was sitting in the back of the church listening to Barbara. I was very impressed - a lively but constrained service in a lovely, austere setting. Afterwards, I decided to get a coffee - it was still winter, after all. I made my way through the crowds in the Bancroft Room to the dining room.

This was back in the day when we still used the silver tea services and had people assigned to "pour." I was surprised to see my friend from the bulletin board was pouring. I thought, "Great - I'll say hi to her, get a coffee, and make a good day of it." I waited in line. As I got close, before I could say anything, she looked up, saw me, and said in a loud voice, that filled the dining room, "Oh my God. This is, like, so weird!" And those were the first words anyone spoke to me in this church.

I did come back the next week. And the week after that. And in April, when the weather was turning, I decided to sign the membership book. This was back when the book was kept in the Bancroft Room and you just had to sign it to be a member - no interviews, or meeting the staff, or pledge cards, or anything. I tried to do this as inconspicuously as possible, but when I finished, I heard a voice - you know who's - from across the room and filling it, yelling "Attaboy Jay !"

I later told all this to my psychiatrist, saying that it was interesting that my friend popped up these three times. The psychiatrist looked at me and she said in a calm, straightforward way as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, "Don't you know what that was? Your friend drew you to church, she showed surprise that you actually showed up, and she celebrated your decision. If that wasn't the voice of God, then what is?"

It was at that that moment that everything changed. As my great-aunt would've said, "Then came the light!"

The title of this sermon comes from the brilliant California writer Joan Didion. In an essay she writes,

I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 am of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends. We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were.¹

I know that I have forgotten a good part of my life. Someone will mention an event that we were both at, and - even with a prompt - I will have no recollection of it. None whatsoever.

¹"On Keeping A Notebook" in Joan Didion, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, 1968

A girlfriend once talked about something that happened when we went to see "Wings of Desire" and I could not remember anything. Now, "Wings of Desires" is a German movie about angels; you'd think I'd remember *that*. She kept going on and on and I just had a blank spot in my mind. At first I thought that maybe she'd seen it with another guy and was confused, but now I'm not so sure. I look at photographs of myself from 20, 30, 40 years ago and think, "Who is that? That person that has my name? What alternative universe is he from?"

I look at the daybooks I have kept for years, at these little cryptic notes for a certain date, and while many stir fond memories, I have no idea what some of them mean or why I would think that it was important enough to write down.

But, I do keep all these things - photos, notebooks, whatever - because this is my story even if I don't understand it. I cannot pick-and-choose my life; I have to own all of it. I know these things say something about myself that I haven't completely figured out yet.

And, alternately, then there are the things I can't forget. This once was a great, annoying, frustrating burden, but I have learned - all too slowly - that the past is in the past. That if I remember something it is because I was strong enough both to remember it and to live with it.

I attribute this to two things. one was doing an experimental medical treatment that cured the sudden anxiety of my PTSD, and the other was having a spiritual discipline that involves prayer, meditation, and yoga. This truly makes a difference, it really does. Rev. Barbara Merritt said once that meditating gave her two seconds for every year she practiced, and after a while those two seconds add up. They build up enough so that you can hold an event up and look at it before it has an impact on your soul. And you can do something different. Does this work all the time? Not for me, but it works enough to make it worthwhile. I can look at the past - in it's glory, in it's horror, in it's bewilderment - without flinching.

Joan Didion, in her essay, points out this difference - the difference between the past-obsessed and those living in the present - when she contrasts her attitude with that of her daughter:

Although I have felt compelled to write things down since I was five years old, I doubt that my daughter ever will, for she is a singularly blessed and accepting child, delighted with life exactly as life presents itself to her, unafraid to go to sleep and unafraid to wake up. Keepers of private notebooks are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant re-arrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss.'2

ibid

Though I wouldn't say that I'm now "delighted with life," and some might agree that I'm a "anxious, lonely, malcontented rearranger", I do think of myself as blessed and accepting - and most nights now I don't have any problems sleeping.

Two shorter stories to further expand these points. A thousand years ago, somewhere in Tibet, a student asked his teacher, "How long is the road to healing, how long is the road to oneness?" And the teacher said, "Three and a half feet." Now, three and a half feet is the distance between the root chakra at the base of your spine and the crown chakra at the top of your head. All you need to know is that a "chakra" is like a little ball of energy; there are seven of them in your subtle body, and they are connected by channels in which your life force, your prana, moves. These chakras can often get blocked, and a number of meditation and yoga practices aim to open them.

And a thousand years before that, a Pharisee asked Jesus where exactly this "kingdom" was that he was always talking about. And Jesus answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" for behold, the kingdom of God is within you." 3

Sufficient to say, the answer we want, the end of our seeking, the road to healing, the kingdom, is already here, inside us. All of us. The long journey of our lives lead back to ourself. All we have to do is the long, difficult work of realizing that.

The thing to remember today, is your life has a meaning, that there is a path you have been walking along since you were born and that you continue on, one step at a time, into the future. Now you are free to wander off the path a little or a lot. You might never find your way back. You might find your way back by yourself, or you could be so thick that God had to speak through a very cute woman to get your attention and get you back.

And the one thing to definitely remember today is irregardless of how sad, tormented, relentless, painful, incoherent, lonely, or unproductive your life is, there is one thing your life is not.

Your life is not a mistake.

Your life is not petty. It is not a shadow. It does not signify nothing.

Luke, 17:21

The Shaker hymn I quoted earlier ends with the line, "To turn, turn, will be our delight. 'Till by turning, turning, we come round right."

It is this turning where we change from the people we used to be to become the people we are meant to be. When we turn from the debris of the past, from the ghosts, from the newspapers where the news isn't news anymore, and, instead, turn to face the path before us, the path a loving God has given us. And to celebrate that path by living the covenant, by praying, by singing, and by being of service. Then, truly, we've all come round right.

Please join with me in prayer,

God of the universe, creator, sustainer, and comforter - shower us with mercy as we walk the path you have given us. And in your generosity, let everyone know your courage, your strength, and that with you there is no reason to fear. Amen