

A PASSION FOR THE PARTIAL

Come, Light serene and still! / Our darkened spirits fill / With thy clear day:
 Guide of the feeble sight / Star of grief's darkest night / Reveal the path of right
 Show us the way.

Robert II, King of France (d. 1031)

Texts on Sunday, January 5, 2014

Philippians 3: 3-16; Matthew 20: 20-28

There is something we all need before we die, if our last day might approach not as debilitating necessity or worse, an evil night meddling with all our days long before they are full. If you have attended a funeral where memories of the deceased kindled intense gratitude and admiration, you might say we need to live in a way that lights such fires in others. That could be a lovely aim, but not a universal one. There is something far more fundamental to our existence than warming many hearts as we go.

We need first to come to peace with all that is undone. I do not mean “resign ourselves” to the fact that our work will be interrupted. No, I mean real peace now; peace that no part of us or our work is ever done. Everything we are and everything we do which is worthy of the names “being” and “doing” is never full, never perfect. Everything is partial. Death is not at the cause of our partial performance, as if our life were a play of several acts whose curtain falls before the performance is finished. No, the cause of our partial performance is that we have no end. We are an infinitude of ends. We are an open mouth of yearning and desiring and need.

Ecclesiastes says that “God has put eternity into the mind, yet so that we cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end.” Our eye is set on a far thing. If our yearning is base, we call it covetousness. If it is high-minded, the philosophers call it “transcendent”—a fancy word whose roots mean “climbing beyond.” We are always climbing beyond ourselves. It is our nature. Sometimes it seems plain that we cannot finally arrive at anything worth climbing after, but we mostly do not live in peace about this. In fact, all our wars, from the most private torments to the most appalling acts of violence, are driven by the endlessly open mouth of human nature. A Christian’s faith, by contrast—if it is faith and not more duty or a point of pride in climbing over others—mostly shows up as peace in “a passion for the partial.”



When the mother of James and John comes to Jesus to ask a favor for her boys, her timing is very bad. Just before she makes her move, Jesus has taken the twelve disciples aside and told them that they are all on the way to Jerusalem. There “the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and

scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day." Now comes Mom asking a personal favor. "Would you settle it once and for all and put my boys on top forever—next to you of course?"

She and her boys are in the war we are all in, more or less: seeking some resolution to our striving; some completion, some perfection, some arrival, some status, and then some rest. In terms of our agitation, it does not matter whether we think this resolution should come to us or while we live, or politically, or in an afterworld. If our days are bound and determined that this or that must come to pass, then we are a war within, and we make war.

Jesus seems to understand that the two sons put their mother up to this; he addresses them, not her. "You don't know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" Absolutely, say they. They probably think, as we usually do, that "to drink the cup" means to suffer bodily pain for a good cause. They are men loyal and true. They think they are up to it. But bodily suffering is not the cup. To drink the cup is to accept that there will come no completion, no perfection, no arrival, no final solution—but still good decision and right action are needed.

Think of the portrait of Jesus. You see there no desperate striving to finish, no need to know the right people, no anxiety for a politics of identity or revolution, no climb up any ladder save the cross. He did not finish best in show. Not best philosopher, not best orator, not best doctor. So far as the world knew, not best man, but a common criminal. Of him, the Apostle Paul said, "he counted equality with God not a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, and taking the form of a slave . . . he became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Jesus lived a passion for the partial.

Americans generally do not. In a series of 1963 lectures called *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message*, Paul Tillich coined the term "forwardism" to name the basic myth of western society. It is that we will in fact achieve our ends through forward progress in time. The! great! accomplishment is within reach after we . . . do . . . this! In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, the whole family of Willy Lomax is imprisoned by belief that tomorrow will bring the big deal, the pot of money. "It's changing, Willy," his wife comforts him at the beginning of Act II. "I can feel it changing." "Beyond a question!" he retorts. Their forwardism leads down into a hole of tragic despair.

When the people of Riverside, staff or lay, have been most unhappy, forwardism is the disease. Sometimes forwardism shows up as backwardism, that plaintive cry that things used to be thus-and-so, and must be so again.

Other times, forwardism shows as dejection or even fury that this or that function has not been well-served by such-and-so; that our great name or this great cathedral, has been let down. We sound like the ten disciples who got angry with the two on learning that the two sought top honors. Jesus called them all to him. “You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their mega-men use all their powers over them. It will not be so among you.” For there is another way.

There is a way to go whose path is never barred, whose pitch is not too steep, whose goal is never put behind. It is the path that goes lower. On this path, there is no end but God, for no matter how low another creature is or has fallen, you, by the grace of God, can choose to go another step down, to serve. It is not that you always must, but that you always can. This is freedom. It is not life as we knew it—ever upward efforts—but it is the stairway to heaven. It goes down.

Down that road, following the one who lords it over none, is found the only country in which you are no longer bound and determined. It is the land of the free; no other deserves the name. There is no conflict you have in your family or with your neighbor or at church or with your co-worker in which you cannot, with generous genius, find that low door through which you can step down to serve as one looking up. There is not a grievance in your mind or in your body whose pain will not be transformed by your decision to find the lower step. It is often the case that those who are already there—the disabled, for example—are ready to show us how to go, for they have lived their whole lives in the presence of the partial. Already they know so much of the way we have yet to learn.

If in his walk this way, Jesus has caught your eye, blessed are you! This means the bright love for what is partial is already shining in you. Then you have a feel for the paradox of the Christian passion for the partial, for this peace, which is God’s peace, yields no quiet, passive acceptance of the world’s suffering. This love for the world as it is fires and inspires fierce dedication to seek justice and correct oppression, for in its freedom, your will can move unafraid of consequences, untroubled whether you should succeed. Forgetting what lies behind, you can say with the apostle, “I press on”—oh, not I, but Christ in me, as he too proclaimed: “I press on for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ.”

You have heard the song from others’ lips, too. From his last night on earth, Martin Luther King’s words have become an anthem of the paradox of spiritual fortitude in the presence of the partial.

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we will get to the Promised Land. So I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

The passion for the partial funds edgeless compassion for yourself and for all as you run this human race—running not so much forward as inward, finding yourself deeper in the grace of God, ever more willing to give what is needed, and to receive what is given, careless of earthly ends, not anxious to win, nor afraid to let go at the right time of what you hold. Then you are just like the Lord who comes not to lord it over you, not to win, but to win you to the way of peace, through a passion for the partial.

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