

WINGS OF THE DOVE
WORK AND WORTH

Texts on Sunday, September 2, 2012

Genesis 3: 17-21; James 4: 13-17

IN THIS SERIES of sermons titled “Wings of the Dove,” the theme I hope most to excite in myself and in those who listen is a gospel-fired passion for values at the heart of our joined human being—values from which every good action can arise and fly as on eagles’ wings. Desires for compassion, courage, and truthfulness—although not much on display during national political conventions—certainly animate almost all members of our species. Therefore, as Labor Day comes tomorrow—and despite the fact that on this holiday in America, the interests of laboring people are not much heard above the songs of summer’s end—let us today acknowledge, in obedience to virtues of compassion, courage, and truthfulness what some wingtips will not: The gulf between the rich and the rest is becoming so great that it is threatening the whole of our civilization.

Some believe that that chasm is ordained by Providence; indeed, that as the Fall from grace in the Garden of Eden set the conditions of evil in human will ever after, therefore, if in toil and sweat you eat of the ground all the days of your life while it brings forth but thorns and thistles, so be it; the fault is to Adam. Almost half of Americans think this story is an accurate record of things that actually happened on a certain day long ago. Can they then separate themselves from the tragic teachings of Christian and especially Protestant culture which resulted therefrom, namely, that the human will, bound to evil, can only prosper by God’s grace in those predestined to it—and that everyone else is damned? Do you remember with what urgency the poet of *Job* struggled to loose his society from its obsession for visible, material proofs of God’s grace, that each one might stand before God in honesty and freedom? Ah, but the obsession to be freed *from* God in order to stand above all as a self-made man rises again in every age!

Hear how familiar to our own struggles today is this bold assertion from the philosopher Herbert Spencer. It is he who coined the phrase “the survival of the fittest.” These words were penned in 1851, eight years before D Darwin first published. Recall how slavery was then ascendant in America.

The poverty of the incapable . . . the starvation of the idle, and the shouldering aside of the weak by the strong . . . are the decrees of a large, farseeing benevolence . . . It seems hard that a laborer incapacitated by sickness from competing with his stronger fellows should have to bear the resulting privations. It seems hard that widows and orphans should be left to struggle for life or death. Nevertheless . . . these harsh fatalities are seen to be full of the highest beneficence — the same beneficence which

brings to early graves the children of diseased parents, and singles out the low-spirited, the intemperate, and the debilitated as the victims of an epidemic. (*Social Statics*)

In America after the Civil War, the philosophy of Spencer and his ilk was bugled by Democrat and Republican alike, arguing against Lincoln that government must not build public infrastructure, but private interests only; and must not interfere with the rights of men to acquire wealth to any degree by any means open to their skill and power. At Yale in the 1870s, William Graham Sumner, an Episcopal priest, established for the first time the field called “sociology” and taught an idea of which I heard a portion favorably repeated just days ago by Congressman Paul Ryan: “Let it be understood that we cannot go outside of these alternatives: [either] liberty-inequality-survival of the fittest; [or] not-liberty, equality, survival of the unfittest. The former carries society forward and favors all its best members; the latter carries society downwards and favors all its worst.” Some gospel, that!

Despite the efforts of progressive reform at the beginning of the 20th century, the quasi-religious belief that rich men should have politics and policies constructed to their desires ultimately dashed this nation into the awesome Great Depression. If this very edifice beneath whose arches we worship had not been raised from that fund of 19th c. wealth amassed by the “fittest,” the project of The Riverside Church would surely have stalled for a generation, all cranes in the air, while America undertook to rebuild its vision of “all people, created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights.”

As it was, we struggled hard for fifty years to right the ship of state, to bring balance between two ideas—government of the people, for the people on the one hand, versus government of the weak by the strong on the other. From 1950 through 1980—in the main, a period of greatly expanding income for millions—the top marginal tax rate was at first 91%, then 70%. Do you feel the message in such law? It was not primarily an instrument to fund the national treasury. Rather, it was a guide and a warning. It was the voice of a people saying that we believed that no person should be paid hundreds of times more than another, for no one can be valued so much more greatly than another; that we together had a feeling for what a human life is for, and it is not for gain at any cost; that we together have built the structures that make great wealth possible; and that therefore, the work of the laborer will not be ground into meaningless dust, for all from dust come and must to dust return; therefore, we—yes, with the government as our instrument—will relieve the topmost riches from the richest, lest in false distinguishment their wealth erode the fabric of our social contract.

But now we must acknowledge, with William Faulkner, that “the past is never dead; it’s not even past.” That predestinarian desire to lionize the

“survival of the fittest” returned with force in 1981 and a certain kind of religion with it. The top personal tax rate was slashed to 28%, far below that of any other industrial nation. Debt and deficits became our fate as the rich fed. Here is the story written since those days:

- From 1973 to 2011, the productivity of American workers grew 80%—but the average worker’s wage has fallen by 7%, adjusted for inflation
- The American economy is growing, but most Americans can’t feel it. Why? In 2010, 93 percent of income growth went to the richest 1%. The bottom 90 percent got zero dollars extra from the growing economy.
- When the minimum wage reached its peak value, the year was 1968. Measured in today’s dollars, that wage was \$10.55 per hour. Today, the minimum is \$7.25. No industrial nation allows its workers to be paid so little. The American dream is a nightmare for many, for we have let the standard of worker income slide deep into the muds of poverty.

These are facts. Some claim that talk about wealth disparities is “class war.” I call that claim a “fact war” obscuring the real moral question: whether compassion, courage, and truthfulness will inform our political will.

Look! Caring about the justice of one’s nations is a matter of first order for religion, and it must begin with getting clear about what a human life is for. But when some people are paid a million bucks for a week of work and we the people don’t tax that fat away to say it clear that nobody is worth a thousand times more than another body, then we have forgotten what a human life is for. When we the people don’t make it law to pay every last human a living wage, but make some sweat a hundred hours a week to put bread in their babies’ mouths, then we have forgotten what a human life is for. When some people in their weakness, whether material, or medical, or moral, are allowed to die of their diseases because we the people refuse to carry our brother and our sister through their trial, then we have forgotten what a human life is for. If we have forgotten so much, not only are we cast out of the garden, but we have already built around ourselves the walls of hell, and locked the doors, and cast the key into a lake of fire.

Friends, do not underestimate the power of religion to bring good and to bring ill. The new atheists think the world would be better off without any religion; that reason is enough to guide society in good paths; that religion is the cause of distorted reason, leading to injustice and atrocities. But they have it backwards. Religion does not cause the evils for which its adherents are so often tragically responsible. Rather, religion magnifies tendencies and desires already present in human spirits. Religion is the *only* symbolic instrument more powerful than governments to effectuate human will.

Therefore, understand that you yourself are entirely responsible for your interpretation of God's word; how you think, what you ignore, what you choose to do according to what you hope is God's light, and whom you associate and organize with to reveal God's will on earth. I am not saying that God does not guide our mind and heart and will. But as God does not force our mind or heart or will, but leaves us free, it follows that some of what humans do in the name of religion is just their own will, much magnified. And that some of what we do rises in God's own light, much magnified. Where humans dispute what is the divine will, there can never come mere detente, agreement, or compromise. But when we oppose those whose wills and aims seem to us shadowed by lesser gods, we ought not simply plan to win, and they lose, like boxers in a ring. No, aim rather to convert them—not to our religion, no, but to the joy and freedom which God has visited upon us who, against so much of the tragic course of church history, see, with our Lord, all people seated at one table on earth as it is in heaven. To get there, you know, they're going to need a living wage; they're going to need money for the train.

The language and the symbols and the commandments for conversion to the practice of a politics of love and justice is already there in the Bible and in our traditions. You have no need to find a different book or another god. All those people who seem lined up on the other side of these great questions—they're not so far away. Most are in the movable middle. They are yearning to hear their own good news and their own religion interpreted in the terms of the compassion, and courage and truthfulness which are the very blood of the human heart.

So here we are, on this Labor Day, just like the man and the woman in the Genesis legend: bereft of the Garden, working hard for the money, drawing thorns and thistles in our flesh, somehow aware that life ought not be so cruel—if not for ourselves, then for others; aware that time is all we have now; and aware, finally, that much as we are powerless to unmake the past (and no matter how the demagogues hoot about taking the country back, we know there's no going back) we *must* make the future new; and make converts anew to the gospel of God come down from heaven, no more dwelling there as "a large, farseeing benevolence," but come down now, ever more to live and to walk with us and with all, *our Emmanuel*.

O people, what is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Do not make your plans alone. "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.'" Amen.

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