

THE GENEROUS EYE

a sermon preached in the

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by

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Scripture: Matthew 6:19-25

Thirty years ago there came to the American stage a remarkable play by Thornton Wilder, Our Town, which reaches into the past of America and portrays a New England village between the years 1901 and 1913. Wilder brings to us the wind blown hills, the plowed fields, the sound of the early train and the school bells--the quiet serenity of Grovers Corners, a little village in New Hampshire. We glimpse the town's untarnished life as in the first act we arrive at breakfast time and are carried through an entire day in the lives of such people as the milk man, the paper boy, the general practitioner and the local editor. Act II, appropriately called "Love and Marriage," celebrates the wedding of George Gibbs and Emily Webb.

The last act is laid in the village cemetery on a windy hilltop where the people rest from the cares of life on earth. But there is a new grave, for Emily had died in childbirth. In a strange re-take of human existence Emily is told that she can re-live a day in her life, and with childish ecstasy she chooses her 12th birthday. At first it was exciting to be young again, but soon the day held no joy, for now with the knowledge of the future it was unbearable to realize how unaware she had been of the meaning and wonder of life when she was alive. Emily says:

Live people don't understand, do they?
We don't have time to look at one another.

As Emily leaves the world of Grovers Corners to return to the company of the dead she bids farewell by saying: "So all that was going on and we never noticed. O earth, you're too wonderful for anyone to realize you. Do human beings ever realize life while they live it?"

The passing years have underscored the relevance of this play. Today we have become habituated to a kind of cinematic, restless vision that leaps about on the surface of things, with neither the time nor the disposition to penetrate beneath the circumstantial levels of reality. Indeed, we are reminded of Captain McWhirr in Joseph Conrad's Typhoon:

Captain McWhirr had sailed over the surface of the oceans as some men go skimming over the years of existence, to sink gently into a placid grave, ignorant of life to the last, without ever having been made to see all it may contain of perfidy, of violence, of terror.

We need not marvel, therefore, that we must depend upon our highly paid professionals to guide us backward through half lived events to recover their content and meaning.

Today we attach ourselves to whatever passes by, so that we are "distracted from distraction by distraction." We hope that reality can be affirmed outside. Yet how often the things we miss seeing are the things we miss being. Being is conscious existence; it is the capacity to respond to reality. Life is what we are alive to. No wonder St. Teresa said, "I require of you only to look."

My mind is drawn to a remarkable saying of Jesus: If your eye be generous your whole body will be full of light. To be sure, the original context of this saying is not known. Matthew and Luke place and understand it differently. Some versions speak of the eye being single and of the eye being evil. In Jewish metaphor the evil eye was a grudging or jealous spirit. The word in this context translated "generous" can also suggest sound, healthy, single, sincere. It would seem to me that here Jesus is saying, at least in part, "If your eye be generous--wide open, undistracted--you will have a clear and undistorted view of life." By the same token, the grudging and ungenerous spirit will distort and blur your vision of reality.

How much of real life is a matter of attentiveness and hospitality. Even on that elementary level of nature itself there is an aristocracy of the attentive. Within the animal world the ultimate aristocrats are those who pay enough attention to their environment to survive and leave some descendants. Consider the new-born infant. He is literally in a state of suspension--born and yet not born--a creature in the physical world but yet to be born into the successive worlds of meaning and value and relationships.

Surely the generous eye is essential in the realm of intellect. We often speak of the "play" of the mind, by which we mean its animal spirits and its restlessness and activity. This gives range and momentum to the mind, for it lures us beyond pedestrian trails. One

does not need to be indiscriminately open to the clutter and clatter of life, but we do need a wide hospitality to ideas and an explorative thrust to the mind. I am persuaded that too many men become too certain about too many things too soon in their lives, and they lack both the wisdom and the knowledge to expose their hastily adopted ideas to further doubts and reflections. In these immature absolutists lies the seed of tragedy.

To have a generous eye--to look at things freshly and truly and to see them as they really are--is nowhere more needed than in our human relationships. If the Christian faith confers anything upon a man surely it ought to be that vision of humanity described by St. Paul. Henceforth we regard no man from a purely human point of view.

We live and work within a network of mutuality, perceived by John Donne when he wrote: "No man is an island entire of itself, for every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the mainland. Any man's death diminishes me, for I am a part of all mankind." One of the real tragedies of our era is that we have tried to strike at the primordial oneness of man and have sought to split on the circumference of life that which cannot be split at the center. In the valiant struggles of minorities for recognition and dignity are they not saying to us: open your eyes. Look at us from God's point of view. Our human dignity is a divine bestowal; it is not the grudging concession of sinful men. Surely justice is a vision of the mind and heart long before it is a law on the statute books.

Love by its very nature is a way of seeing: it is the capacity and willingness to penetrate objectively and feelingly the individual self-awareness of another person so that we see the world through his eyes, even when they are petty, mean, or dull. Love sees something of the might have been in every life. This love is more than a diffused essence of amiability--it is an invincible good will, an unconquerable benevolence, an inward openness to the needs of others, a constructive set of mind and a hard headed intention to do for another what can be done to achieve his total good, as nearly as we can discern it. Love in any meaningful sense is a communion of being, the sense of the human burden and the burden of being human.

A recent Broadway musical, "Lost in the Stars," based upon Alan Paton's great classic of South Africa, Cry, the Beloved Country, has a stirring song about the power of love to bridge distance and silence and years. Stephen Kumalo has left his little valley church in Natal to search for his wayward son Absalom in the Babylon of Johannesburg. This humble man--always God's servant, though often his bewildered servant--sings

How many miles to the heart of a son?
Thousands, thousands of miles.

Each lives alone
In a world of dark
Crossing the skies
In a lonely arc
Save when love leaps out like a leaping spark
Over thousands, thousands of miles.

Not miles or walls or length of days
Nor the cold doubt of midnight can hold us apart,
For swifter than wings of the morning
Are the pathways of the heart.

Now consider one further dimension of experience that requires the generous eye. It is suggested by our Lord's conflict with the Pharisees and the Sadducees in Matthew's gospel. No doubt Jesus lived among people who could neither read nor write, but the illiteracy he deplored was an inability to read the signs of the times, an essential blindness to what is happening around one. He said to the Pharisees: You can discern the clouds and the fact of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. Certainly it is not easy to read the signs of the times in today's cosmic hallowe'en of dark witchery and fear. Neither is it easy to discern God's glory, for his glory never looks the way we think it ought to look. There are many epiphanies through which he reveals himself, but often there is no sign on the door, no notice in the paper, no spire on the roof. When our Lord came to this earth there was no Hollywood stage setting for this biblical extravaganza. God's attack of grace upon the human scene took place on a tiny human stage--on a little postage stamp of earth. Perhaps today he comes again into human life, not in the noisy and the boisterous and the bizarre but in the quiet and unobtrusive events of daily life. If only we could read his coming!

We are all easily preoccupied today with what Wordsworth called "the burden and the mystery, the weary weight of this unintelligible world." In the crisis of hope we are experiencing I see a continuing peril--the possible defaulting of individual man. Sir Kenneth Clark, in his monumental study of civilization from the fall of the Roman Empire to the present day, concludes his great work by saying that, while we might not be entering into a new period of barbarism in the human pilgrimage, there is a crisis of confidence and that we can destroy ourselves by cynicism and the disillusion as effectively as by bombs. And I do firmly believe that the tragedy of life is not in the fact of death itself but in that which dies inside a man while he lives--the death of faith and hope and human response. Death comes when we no longer care--when the forces that make for righteousness and truth and beauty die in the hearts of men. In this day of such widespread lassitude and failure of nerve our faith calls us to the enlargement of life in God and to the discovery of our representative capacity.

We make no plea for superficial optimism but neither do we have to settle for a disspirited "waiting for Godot." When our Lord walked upon this earth he read the cosmic weather map and knew that there was turbulence ahead. Did he not say, "The rains will fall, the floods will come, and the winds will blow"? But he also said, "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." He leaned more toward the celebration of life than toward the sad endurance of it. St. Paul had something of the same spirit when, after surveying his own "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," he exclaimed: "We may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out."

Negro spirituals are for witness, and one affirms that history can be incredibly harsh: "Nobody knows de trouble I see." But it ends with as brave a line as literature could invent: "Glory, hallelujah." And only generous eyes can see both the trouble and the hallelujah.

PRAYER: Eternal Father, grant us the gift of the generous eye and the courage of the open road, that we might come to true understanding before thee, for in thy light do we see light. Amen.