

“The Revival of Religion”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Recently I came upon a book, entitled *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*, written by Elizabeth Sifton, the daughter of Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr. Sifton remembers as a child the great throng of people who gathered at the family home in Massachusetts during the summer months to converse with her mother and about some of the most pressing issues of war and peace during the period of the mid 1930s to the mid 1950s. Some of the greatest religious figures in this country and throughout the world gathered there: Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. There were also political figures present who longed for a way to relate the faith of the church to the problems that our nation faced during World War II and the Cold War that followed: Hubert Humphrey, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. In addition, there were literary figures such as W. H. Auden and Alan Paton. The common thread that drew so many of these people together was an attempt to address some of the most important questions of meaning by some of the best minds that America had produced.

Today, it is hard not to ask the question as where this kind of engagement takes place-- the best minds of religion, government, and the arts all brought together to pursue questions of the ultimate meaning of human existence, particularly in a culture where religious endeavors have been reduced to Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*, Mel Gibson's "The Passion of Christ," and Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*.

Somewhere along the line there is a disconnect between our faith and the most pressing questions of human life. This was brought home to me last weekend when I attended the graduation service of my daughter Lucy at Duke University. One of the highlights for me was the Baccalaureate service held in the Duke Chapel. The setting was stunning; the music was uplifting. Will Willimon, the Dean of the Chapel, preached a wonderful sermon based on Jesus' parable of the "Buried Treasure" encouraging these student to pursue their ideals. The President of the University, Nan Keohane, spoke to a class of students who entered the University in the Fall of 2000, who could have never imagined that a year later, on September 11, 2001, their whole world would be shattered and forever changed.

There was, however, one thing that struck me in the worship service. Except for the sermon, and the Kurie Eleison, there was no mention of Jesus Christ. None of the hymns mentioned Christ; none of the Prayers were made in the name of Jesus. There seemed to me to be a conscious effort to divorce the Baccalaureate service from Christian worship.

I.

One of the most pressing questions that each person must ask himself is the question of the meaning of life. Nowhere in Scripture is this question found to be more prominent than in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most puzzling books in the entire Bible. It is part of the so-called "Wisdom Literature" that includes the Book of Proverbs and Job. The "Wisdom Literature" is not centered in the salvation history that defines the rest of the Bible. It is rooted more in creation and in the common life of Israel. The word "Ecclesiastes" refers to the one who gathers a congregation or group around him. Thus Ecclesiastes is sometimes referred to as the "preacher" or the "teacher." Traditionally, the book of Ecclesiastes has been attributed to Solomon, but it appears to represent a much later period in Israel's history.

One of the disturbing aspects of Ecclesiastes is his assessment of human life. "Vanity of Vanities", says the Preacher, "All is vanity." The word "vanity" is derived from the little Hebrew word "Hebel," which means "breath," "air" or "vapor." The major portion of this book concerns an experiment in which the author of the book seeks to find some meaning in his life. He experiments with wealth, power, and even work. He seeks wisdom and knowledge. In the end all of these fail. He comes to a conclusion that is as contemporary as today's newspaper. Life is inconsequential, futile, and vain.

"Vanity of vanities," says the preacher, "All is vanity."

II.

So let's be honest. There is a deep impartiality of life that affects us all. Ecclesiastes puts it like this: "All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full." Or, "What has been is what will be; and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1: 7,9).

But that same thought is found in the teaching of Jesus. Jesus observed "God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends the rain on the just and unjust alike." One of the most pervasive themes in all of religion is the notion that all suffering is the result of sin. But Jesus, like Job, refutes that notion. Not all suffering is the result of sin.

All through his ministry Jesus dealt with that superstition. Once the tower of Siloam fell and crushed a group of men, and the rumor spread up and down the streets of Jerusalem that these men were the most wicked in the entire city. But Jesus said, "Those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and killed them, do you think these were offenders above all the men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, 'No.'" And when his disciples saw a man on the roadside who was born blind and asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man of his parents, that he should be born blind?" Jesus answered and said, "Neither did this man sin nor his parents."

In the end there are some things over which we have no control or knowledge. We do not know why some people get sick and others do not. We do not know why in tragic circumstances some live and some do not. Ecclesiastes is right. There is impartiality in life.

III.

But while Jesus acknowledged the inherent impartiality of life, he took it a step farther. He saw that are aspects of life that are not equal. All of us die, but all of us do not die in the same way. Both Benedict Arnold and George Washington died. But they died under very different circumstances. Benedict Arnold betrayed his country. He died in London. They say that to the final day of his life he kept the American uniform, in which he had fought so magnificently in Saratoga, and that in the closing hours of his life he took it out and held it in his hands.

George Washington also died, but under very different circumstances. He died having served his country all his life. Each year we observe his birthday and each year thousands of pilgrims journey to Mt. Vernon where in a small room he fell on sleep.

Adolph Hitler died and Winston Churchill died, but they did so under very different circumstances. Hitler committed suicide in a Berlin Bunker, as his whole world and the devastating defeat of the Third Reich was falling in on him. Winston Churchill died at the age of ninety, revered by a free world that admired and respected him for his great courage.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once observed that we ought to work hard in life to keep our troubles clean. There are some misfortunes that cannot be avoided. There are others that can be avoided. Fosdick observed that it is one thing to be the mother of Jesus and have to turn broken hearted from a cross, yet to thank God all your days that it was your honor to bear him. It is another thing, Fosdick observed, to be the mother of Judas, and all your days to carry the terrible consciousness that this was your son.

There are some things that we cannot help happen to us, but there is one thing in our power, to try to keep our troubles clean.

This past week, when the terrible revelations of the prison abuse at Abu Grabir came to light, our government was caught in a terrible web. We went to Iraq to find weapons of mass destruction that are not there. We went to free the Iraqi people of the terrible torture chambers of Abu Ghraib, when suddenly we found ourselves in the midst of the same activities that Saddam Hussein engaged in for twenty years and now we stand accused by an international community of all the crimes we had blamed on others.

The Greeks believed that there were two very powerful forces at work in the world. One was the force of "hubris" or "pride." It was a result of human arrogance and power. But the Greeks were convinced that there was another force at work in the world that was called "Nemesis." It was the antithesis of pride so that pride was always destroyed by this counter force. The Apostle Paul put it slightly differently when he said, "Whatsoever a person sows, that shall he reap." This past week our nation witnessed at Abu Garib the forces of "pride" and "nemesis" as our nation brought a terrible judgment upon itself.

IV.

Then, finally, we come to the heart of the matter. No generation in history has been more affluent than the present one. No generation has had more of the means to live but has lacked the meaning by which to live. Long ago Jesus raised one of the most fundamental human questions when he asked, "What does it profit a man to gain the world and lose his soul?" What does it profit a man to be a huge financial success and lose any sense of compassion for those who were not born with the biochemistry to ever become a success? What does it profit a woman to live in a large house, wear designer clothes, drive an expensive car and have no earthly idea what the homeless and indigent of this community experience every day of their lives?

Today, there are those who believe that our country is on the verge of a revival religion and let us pray that this is so. For if a revival of our spiritual life should really come, think of what we could do. Now when I say revival of religion, I do not mean emotionalism, ecclesiasticism, or rigid creedalism--God forbid! I do mean a revival of ethical Christianity that will lay its hands on this amazing wealth and technology that we possess today and dedicate it to human good. There has never been an opportunity like the one we face today. Our nation has the military power, the economic power, and the intellectual power to be a tremendous positive force in the world against the forces of poverty, illiteracy, violence, totalitarianism, and human suffering.

The trouble is not with our means. It is with our end- and there is no cure for this difficulty except the revival of a genuine Christianity with the effective intellect to make it work.

And that is where Jesus comes into the picture. He may not be able to tell us a lot about the means by which we live, but he can certainly tell us about the meaning of life. That is his realm. What does it profit a person to gain the whole world, and lose his soul?
Amen!