

“Real Religion”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

July 9, 2006

Text: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

This past Wednesday I attended the funeral service for Joe Martin at Covenant Presbyterian Church. I met Joe Martin in the fall of 1961, when I was a freshman at Davidson College and became a member of the fraternity of which Joe served as President.

I knew Joe Martin in a number of ways, not only as the member of the same fraternity, but later as a community leader, churchman, fellow trout fisherman, and friend. For almost twelve years Joe suffered from Lou Gehrig’s disease (ALS), which is the most debilitating illness I have ever witnessed. During the course of that illness he lost his ability to move any part of his body (except his eyes), though he did not lose his spirit nor his love and concern for our community. On Wednesday eleven hundred people gathered at Covenant to pay respect to the life of an extraordinary member of our community.

I.

This morning I would like to place before you two texts that present two very different ways of viewing the world around us. The first is from Ecclesiastes 9:2ff: “All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean and to the unclean; to him who sacrifices and to him who does not; as is the good, so is the sinner. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one event unto all.” That is a text that is filled with cynicism, disbelief, and despair.

The other text is from Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

The Book of Ecclesiastes has always intrigued me. There are many who have wondered how such a negative and cynical book ever found its way into Scripture.

There is one theme that characterizes the book of Ecclesiastes and it is found in the first chapter. “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:1). The God of Ecclesiastes is a God who is very far removed from creation. It is not as if Ecclesiastes does not believe in God. He does. He also believes in the purposes of God. The problem for Ecclesiastes is that the purposes of God are unknowable.

The same is true with death. Ecclesiastes does not believe in immortality. For him there is a cruel impartiality in life. The evil die, but so do the good. “All things come alike to all,” he concludes. “There is an evil that is done under the sun, and there is one event unto all.”

Now all of us know that this is true. When Hurricane Katrina ravished the coast of Louisiana and Mississippi, there was no discrimination between rich and poor, black and white, good and evil. All suffered. And when Lou Gehrig’s disease or some other terrible illness strikes, it can strike any person at any time. Ecclesiastes is right. All things come alike to all.

And yet, when one comes to Paul’s great letter to the church at Rome, there is something very different at work here. He is dealing with the very same fact that Ecclesiastes dealt with, but he comes to a very different conclusion. “We know,” writes Paul, “that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

There is one thing that we can say with certainty about the Apostle Paul. He did not live a Pollyanna existence. He had experienced suffering firsthand. Listen to his words in II Corinthians: “Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked: a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from the gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at seas, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (II Corinthians 11: 24ff.).

Paul knew what Ecclesiastes knew. All things come alike to all. That is the truth, but it isn’t the whole truth. The whole truth is that all things work for good for those who love God.

So what is it that undergirds this conviction of Paul?

II.

For one thing, Paul understood Jesus’ teaching on the impartiality of life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus observed that “the sun rises on the evil and the good and that God makes the

rain to fall on the just and unjust alike.” That is what Reinhold Niebuhr meant when he spoke of the “impartiality of God’s providence.”

One of the most persistent themes in the Old Testament and New Testament alike is the notion that not all suffering is traceable to sin. That is the point of the Book of Job and of much of the Wisdom Literature. That is the point Jesus made when, in his day, the great tower of Siloam fell and crushed a group of workmen and the rumor ran up and down the streets of Jerusalem that these were the most wicked men in all of the city. That tragedy prompted Jesus to say, “These eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and killed them, do you think they were offenders above all the men in Jerusalem? I tell you, ‘No.’”

On another occasion, when Jesus was confronted with a man born blind and asked by his disciples, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” He replied by saying, “Neither did this man nor his parents” (John 9).

But Jesus did not only speak about this notion that all suffering is related to sin. He demonstrated it in his death. He was unjustly charged with crimes he did not commit and punished for misdeeds he did not do. Shall we say that Jesus’ suffering was a result of his sin? Of course not! He was holy, guileless, undefiled, separated from sinners.

There is, as Paul understood, an impartiality to life. Bad things happen. Good people suffer. All suffering is not a result of sin.

III.

Then, too, Paul saw something that Ecclesiastes could not see. Paul understood that “all things come alike to all people.” But he saw something else. Not all people respond the same way.

Take death, for example. All of us will one day die. But not all of us will be remembered in the same way. Both George Washington and Benedict Arnold died. But they left two very different legacies. Benedict Arnold was a traitor to his country. He died in London, an outcast from his own country. It is reported that he kept to his final day the American uniform in which he had so magnificently fought at Saratoga. But as for George Washington, we remember his birthday even today and each year thousands of people make a pilgrimage to Mt. Vernon to pay respect to the man who was known as “the father of his country.”

But what is true of death is true of life. There are different kinds of trouble that come upon people. There are some people who suffer from things over which they have no control. They incur disease or misfortune, but it is a form of “clean trouble” that does not bear with it the stain of moral corruption. Others suffer from trouble that is complicated by sin, stained by guilt and remorse, so that it breeds an entirely different set of circumstances.

One of the great heroes of the Presbyterian Church in the South was a man by the name of James Woodrow. He was the uncle of Woodrow Wilson. In 1860 James Woodrow was named

Professor of Natural Sciences at Columbia Seminary, which was then located in Columbia, South Carolina. Woodrow had studied in Germany and when he returned to this country, he brought with him the knowledge of Charles Darwin's momentous study *The Origin of the Species*, in which Darwin articulated what was to be later called the "theory of evolution." James Woodrow quickly came under attack for his belief that the new science was not in conflict with religion. He was tried for heresy and acquitted, although his enemies hounded him for the rest of his life and he was finally removed from the faculty of the Seminary. He later became Dean and President of what is today the University of South Carolina.

James Woodrow has been called an "apostle of Freedom." He stood for the value of free inquiry in the church. He was opposed by those who were threatened by the views he expressed. During his life, James Woodrow suffered from the attacks of many of his contemporaries. In the long run, he was right and they were wrong. He left a legacy that is as valuable for us today as it was then.

All lives do not end the same.

IV.

Then, too, Paul brings to the discussion an element that is sadly lacking in Ecclesiastes, a confidence that all things work for good for those who love God and who are called according to his purpose. For Ecclesiastes, life is a series of circumstances that happens to us. For Paul there is something present in life that transcends circumstances. He calls it "the love of God that is in Christ Jesus."

It is very fashionable in theological circles today to criticize the teachings of Paul. Some theologians view him as a misogynist who hated women. Others believe that Paul distorted the teachings of Jesus. But it is hard to imagine how Christianity would have ever reached the world of the Roman Empire without someone with the spirit of Paul. He was a Roman citizen, a world traveler, and a person conversant with the thought forms of the Greco-Roman world. In many ways, he was the one who took the words of Jesus and translated them into a new form for a new age.

But Paul's great contribution was not only in the letters he wrote, it was primarily in his life. All things had happened to him. He had experienced joy and sorrow, prosperity and failure, ill health and good health, love and hate. He had been worshipped as a god and stoned as a felon. He had been welcomed as a savior and imprisoned as a criminal. But in spite of all that had happened to him, Paul never lost the central conviction of his life that nothing could separate him from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

That is real religion. It is not the "the gospel of wealth, success, and happiness." It is the inner confidence that whatever happens to us in life cannot shatter from us the absolute conviction that in life and in death we belong to God.

George Matheson was a well-known minister in the Church of Scotland. As a young minister he went through a terrible period in his life. He began to lose his sight and knew he would one day be blind. The girl whom he loved turned her back on him. In a great fit of despair he wrote his Presbytery to resign his call as a minister. But his Presbytery refused his request and urged him to hang on.

Later he reflected on his life in a hymn that he wrote:

“O love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

That is real religion and it is religion that will not let us down. If you have it, keep it. If you lack it, pray that God will give it to you. It is a gift and it is the one thing in life that will never disappoint you.

Amen!