

The Care of the Earth

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A sermon may move from idea to fulfillment in various and sometimes strange ways. It may be useful as an introduction to the theme of this sermon to say how that happened in the writing of it.

In April of last year I read a poem in the New Yorker magazine; the poet is Mr. Richard Wilbur. What the poet was saying struck and stuck for several obvious reasons. Beneath the quite clear apprehensions that float about just under the surface of our minds there is a root apprehension that churns deep down at the center. It is vague, but it is also relentless and undismisable. And the poet's words interest this inarticulate anxiety, stop it cold, give it a "local habitation and a name." The substance of this anxiety is common to us all, and it is heavy. It is the peculiar function of the poet sometimes to say out loud and with resonant clarity what we all would wish to say had we the dark music and the language.

The substance is this: annihilating power is in nervous and passionate hands. The stud is really there to incinerate the earth-and the certainty that it will not be used is not there.

Nor have we anodyne to hush it up or power to run away from it. We can go skiing with it, trot off to Bermuda with it, push it down under accelerated occupation with the daily round, pour bourbon over it, or say our prayers-each according to his tactic and disposition. But it goes along, survives, talks back.

Not in abstract proposition or dramatic warnings but in powerful, earthy images the poet makes his point. The point is single, simple, and absolute: man's selfhood hangs upon the persistence of the earth, her dear known and remembered factualness is the matrix of the self.

When you come, as you soon must, to the streets of our city,
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,
Not proclaiming our fall but begging us
In God's name to have self-pity,

Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range,
The long numbers that rocket the mind;
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,
Unable to fear what is too strange.

Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the race.
How should we dream of this place without us-
The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,
A stone look one the stone's face?

Speak of the world's own change. Though we cannot conceive
Of an undreamt thing, we know to our cost

How the dreamt cloud crumbles, the vines are blackened by frost,
How the view alters. We could believe,

If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will slip
Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy,
The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,
The jack-pine loose its knuckled grip

On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn
As Xanthus once, its gliding trout
Stunned in a twinkling. What should we be without
The dolphin's arc, the dove's return,

These things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken?
Ask us, prophet, how we shall call
Our natures forth when that live tongue is all
Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken,

In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean
Horse of our courage, in which beheld
The singing locust of the soul unshelled,
And all we mean or wish to mean.

Ask us, ask us whether with the wordless rose
Our hearts shall fail us; come demanding
Whether there shall be lofty or long standing
When the bronze annals of the oak-tree close.

By sheer force of these lines my mind was pushed back against the wall and forced to ask: is there anything in our western religious tradition as diagnostically penetrating as that problem, as salvatory as that predicament?

Out of these back-to-wall reflections I therefore ask your attention to several statements that seem to me alone deep and strong enough to make adequate sense. These statements have in common this: they deal with the enjoyment of things and the uses of things. And together they add up to a proposition: delight is the basis of right use.

The first statement is the celebrated answer to the first question in the Westminster catechism. No one will question the velocity with which this answer gets to the point or that the point is worth getting at! The question is: What is the chief end of man? The answer: To glorify God and enjoy him forever!

The first verb, to glorify, is not primarily intellectual. It does not concern itself with the establishment of the existence of God, or with a description of his nature. The verb is not aesthetic either. It is not concerned to declare that God is good or beautiful, or propose that it is a fair thing to worship God. Nor is it hortatory, that is, it does not beat us over the head with admonitions about our duty to God.

The very "to glorify" is exclusively and utterly religious! The verb comes from the substantive "glory": and that term designates what God is and has and wills within himself; it announces the priority, the ineffable majesty, the sovereign power and freedom of the holy. Glory, that is to say, is what God is and does out of himself; and when we use the term for what we do in response, that response is given and engendered by his glory.

The priority-in-God, and the proper work of this verb may be illustrated by its function in the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah. The young prophet, rich and eager in his expectations of the new king, Uzziah, is stunned when the king dies. He goes into the temple, and then comes the vision of the glory of whose ineffable power the face of the king is but the reflection.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory."

The glory is the light the holy give off. The earth is a theater of the glory; it is rich with the ineffable glory because God, the holy one, has made it.

The holy is a numinous and absolute word. It is not contained within other categories; it is a category. The holy both evokes and demands thought, but it is a misunderstanding to assume that thoughts can contain the glory and the holy. The holy certainly has the effect that Professor Rudolph Otto in his great work, *The Idea of the Holy*, calls *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*-but there is an unseizable plus to the term that eludes even the image-making genius of the Jews.

The holy invites prayer, but rejects such an understanding of prayer as would make prayer a tool for working upon the holy, a device for making the holy disposable by man. The holy demands service, but no service adds up to a responding equivalent-just as in our human love one serves the beloved but never affirms his service to be the measure of love.

The chief end of man is, then to glorify God, to let God be God, to understand and accept his life in ways appropriate to the imperial, holy singularity of God. The meaning of this has, to be sure, ethical, psychological, even political implications. But the center is categorically religious.

But this statement about God and man, thus elevated, tough, and absolute, is conjoined in the catechism with a concluding phrase, "and enjoy him forever." The juxtaposition of commands to glorify and to enjoy is on several grounds startling to our generation. To enjoy is a strange thing, that is to say, to do about the holy God before whom even the seraphim do hide their faces. This joining of the holy, which is what God is, with joy, which designates what man is to have and do in him-this juxtaposition, in that it is startling to us, says a good deal about modern American understanding of the Christian faith. How it has come about that we are startled by what our fathers joined together without batting an eye is a matter we cannot now go into, but only observe it and ask after its significance. For we may have missed something. If the gravity of the

glorification of the holy and the blithe humaneness of "enjoy him forever" seem strange, our churches in the very form of their buildings may be partly to blame. There is the clean, shadowless, and antiseptic colonial, the monumental melancholy of the Romanesque and Gothic adaptations-bereft of the color and ornament which in other lands are so devoutly joined in these forms. Our traditional churches affirm a heavy kind of solemnity that leaves us indeed with a lugubrious holy, but defenseless and aghast before the joy of, for instance, a Baroque church. Such a church is luxuriant, joy-breathing, positively Mozartean in its vivacity-replete with rosy angels tumbling in unabashed enjoyment among impossibly fleecy clouds against an incredible blue heaven.

We shall not draw conclusions from that-only observe it and let it hang-that the gravity of a life determined by God, lived to the glory of God, is not necessarily incongruent with abounding joy. It is interesting to recall that the most rollicking music old periwig Bach ever wrote is not dedicated to the joy of tobacco (although he did that) or coffee (and he praised that) or the inventiveness among his fellow musicians, nor dedicated to the levity of the Count of Brandenburg, but *In Dir is Freude* ("In Thee is Joy")!

The second statement is ascribed to Thomas Aquinas, surely not the playful or superficial type. Thomas did not affirm Christianity as a consolatory escape hatch, or an unguent to the scratchy personality, or a morale builder to a threatened republic-all contemporary malformations. But he did say, "It is of the heart of sin that men use what they ought to enjoy, and enjoy what they ought to use." Apart from the claim that it is sin that men do that, and apart from the seriousness of the situation if that statement should turn out to be true, is the statement reportorially so?

Yes, it is so, for all of us, and in many ways. Thomas is simply condensing here the profound dialectic of use and enjoyment that distorts and impoverishes life when it is not acknowledged and obeyed. To use a thing is to make it instrumental to a purpose, and some things are to be so used. To enjoy a thing is to permit it to be what it is prior to and apart from any instrumental assessment of it, and some things are to be so enjoyed.

I adduce a small example: it may bloom in our minds into bigger ones. Wine is to be enjoyed; it is not to be used. Wine is old in human history. It is a symbol of nature in her smiling beneficence-"close bosom friend of the maturing sun." That is why it has virtually everywhere and always been the accompaniment of celebrative occasions, the sign of gladness of heart. It is to be enjoyed; it is not to be used to evoke illusions of magnificence, or stiffen timidity with the fleeting certainty that one is indeed a sterling lad. Where it is enjoyed it adds grace to a truth; where it is used it induces and anesthetizes a lie.

Observe in Psalm 104 how the Old Testament man who sought to glorify God and enjoy him forever stood in the midst of nature. "He . . . gives wine to gladden the heart of man, and oil to make his face shine." "This is the day which the Lord has made;" he exults, "Let us rejoice and be glad in it." Why? Not primarily for what he can turn the day's hours into, but rather on the primal ground that there are days-unaccountable in their gift-character, just there. And here he is permeable by all he is sensitive to: texture, light, form, and movement, the cattle on a thousand hills. Thou sendest forth thy Spirit and they are! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

I thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

It is of the heart of sin that man uses what he ought to enjoy. It is also, says Thomas, of the heart of sin that man is content to enjoy what he ought to use. Charity, for instance. Charity is the comprehensive term to designate how God regards man. That regard is to be used by man for man. That is why our Lord moves always in his speech from the source of joy, that man is loved by the holy, to the theater of joy, that man must serve the need of the neighbor. "Lord, where did we behold thee? I was in prison, hungry, cold, naked"-you enjoyed a charity that God gives for use.

If the creation, including our fellow creatures, is impiously used apart from a gracious primeval joy in it the very richness of the creation becomes a judgment. This has a cleansing and orderly meaning for everything in the world of nature, from the sewage we dump into our streams to the cosmic sewage we dump into the fallout.

Abuse is use without grace; it is always a failure in the counterpoint of use and enjoyment. When things are not used in ways determined by joy in the things themselves, this violated potentiality of joy (timid as all things holy, but relentless and blunt in its reprisals) withdraws and leaves us, not perhaps with immediate positive damnations but with something much worse-the wan, ghastly, negative damnations of use without joy, stuff without grace, a busy, fabricating world with the shine gone off, personal relations for the nature of which we have invented the eloquent term, contact, staring without beholding, even fornication without finding.

God is useful. But not if he is sought for use. Ivan, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, saw that, and Dostoevski meant it as a witness to the holy and joy-begetting God whom he saw turned into an ecclesiastical club to frighten impoverished peasants with, when he had his character say, "I deny God for God's sake!"

All of this has, I think, something to say to us as teachers and students to whom this university is ever freshly available for enjoyment and use. For consider this: the basis of discovery is curiosity, and what is curiosity but the peculiar joy of the mind in its own given nature? Sheer curiosity, without immediate anticipation of ends and uses, has done most to envision new ends and fresh uses. But curiosity does this in virtue of a strange counterpoint of use and enjoyment. Bacon declared that "studies are for delight," the secular counterpart of "glorify God and enjoy him forever." The Creator who is the fountain of joy, and the creation which is the material of university study, are here brought together in an ultimate way. It is significant that the university, the institutional solidification of the fact that studies are for delight, is an idea and a creation of a culture that once affirmed that men should glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Use is blessed when enjoyment is honored. Piety is deepest practicality, for it properly relates use and enjoyment. And a world sacramentally received in joy is a world sanely used. There is an economics of use only; it moves toward the destruction of both use and joy. And there is an economics of joy; it moves toward the intelligence of use and the enhancement of joy. That this vision involves a radical new understanding of the clean and fruitful earth is certainly so. But this vision, deeply religious in its genesis, is not so very absurd now that natural damnation is in orbit, and man's befouling of his ancient home has spread his death and dirt among the stars.