

This Quiet Dust

A Littlefair Legacy, 3

Ecclesiastes 3; II Corinthians 4:16-5:5

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I don't know how many years ago it was that I first received the ashes on my forehead with those somber words, "Dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return," a good number of years ago now, but it happened here. It had never been a part of my tradition growing up in the Reformed Church, which is liturgically challenged. I would rather have thought about it as some *hocus-pocos* Catholic sacramental act with which I would have no truck, being a good evangelical and reformed minister. Then, I experienced it one day, experienced the momentous impact of that honest moment, "Dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return," a moment of honesty in a world of superficiality.

Perhaps it is that I have moved into the latter decades of my own life that I appreciate it so much. I have come to value it and to treasure it as a pastoral moment, as well, a moment of absolute honesty as I look into your eyes, place the ashes on your head and say, "Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return." We acknowledge the reality of our humanity and our mortality. It is a beautiful moment; this service is an oasis, a sanctuary. It is a quiet place away from a world that is so bombastic with media blitzes, its constant barrage of commercials, its excessive celebrations of Super Bowls and All-Star extravaganzas, of Emmys and Golden Globes, Oscars, and all of the superficiality of those so-called celebrations that mark our society. How different is a moment like this.

I don't know whether Dr. Littlefair would enjoy this service or not. He never attended an Ash Wednesday service. And he had pretty much done away with the sacramental and the ritualistic in the worshiping community at Fountain Street. And yet, he loved to sit out there and even on the high holy days when we got out all of the pageantry and all of the symbolism of the tradition, I know how much he enjoyed that. We used to speak about the fact that he was fascinated that we could have translated the understanding of the faith while maintaining those accouterments that have been a part of the tradition down through the centuries. So, I don't know whether he would like this service or not, but I do think he would affirm the honesty and the reality of the moment of our facing each other in the face of our mutual mortality.

In preparation for the memorial service while I was in Florida, there were those who very kindly sent me some pieces that were important to Duncan. Jo Earl, his secretary, his friend and his caregiver of over fifty years, sent me some of his favorite poems, and when I read "This Quiet Dust," which is on the cover of your liturgy, I knew that I would be speaking about that this evening, having that be the center of our reflection, although at that time I had not yet thought in terms of a series of messages on *A Littlefair Legacy*. But, I knew tonight we'd be centered around "This Quiet Dust." It was Duncan's favorite poem, because it expressed so eloquently his faith and his understanding.

Before I knew Duncan, I knew of him only by reputation, which of course in Western Michigan was not good. An enemy of the faith, to be sure, one who denied and betrayed the great Christian tradition. I suppose that non-Fountain Street folks got exposed to Duncan most often at funerals where there was a kind of obligatory attendance, therefore the necessity of being submitted to whatever it was that came forth from that pulpit, that infamous pulpit. I do remember, on occasion, people who attended funerals at Fountain Street who would come away saying, "That was awful. There was no comfort, there was no word of hope." I didn't know any better until I came to know Duncan and to know him intimately and to come to understand the nature of his religious faith and experience and expression, and then, of course, I came to understand quite a different picture than that which had been rumored about.

I got called this afternoon from an old and very dear friend of mine, John Richard DeWitt. We were classmates together in college and seminary, and he called me from South Carolina where he is now serving as a pastor. He had been in Grand Rapids for a few years at the Seventh Reformed Church. The irony was that Dick and I were just the best of friends, loving each other, and in constant contact and communion over all these many years. He was anchoring the most conservative Reformed Church in the nation and I was anchoring the most liberal. When he came to Grand Rapids, Duncan's dear old friend Lester deKoster joined the Seventh Reformed Church which created quite a stir because he is a person of no mean estate in the Christian Reformed Church. Then he brought Duncan to the Seventh Reformed Church to hear Dick preach because Dick is one of the great preachers in the nation. Duncan loved to hear him preach. The people of Seventh Reformed Church were so thrilled that there was Duncan Littlefair in worship and they began to pray for his soul. Fortunately, he didn't get "saved." But, Lester and Duncan, who had lunch together over all those many years, invited my friend Dick to the table at Duba's, and then Dick invited me and that was the original quartet in the corner of Duba's bar. Dick, a conservative, Reformed, erudite scholar and a gentleman. Lester, a dear, crotchety Calvinist of unbending will. Duncan, off the charts. And when I first came to the table, he said, "Now, tell me who you are," and I said, "Well, I was where Dick still is." So this was the table. I'm telling you this simply because today, unannounced, Dick called from Carolina and, of course, we talked about Duncan. I told him how I concluded the memorial message saying that I wanted to share a secret with you that Duncan

was a man who lived in constant God-consciousness, that he was a man drunk with God. My friend Dick said, "You're right."

Now, that's quite remarkable, isn't it, when you think about it? Quite amazing, really. Two people raised in a very conservative tradition, one remaining there, faithful to that tradition, one having traversed the whole spectrum to quite another position. But, nonetheless, both of us bearing witness to the God-consciousness of Duncan Littlefair.

If you were here on Sunday, you perhaps got at least a hint of the nature of that God-consciousness as Duncan experienced it. It was a God-consciousness that was experienced within the one reality of which we are a part. I understood a liberal as one who recognized that the sciences were laying bare the mysteries of the natural world, and the liberal religious scholar was one who finally gave up trying to find knowledge of the world in the Bible, gave up this authoritative text in terms of the knowledge of reality and nature, the universe, and instead listened to what the scientist had to say about the nature of this reality and then sought to find the way to live religiously within that reality.

That reality which was laid bare was a miracle, full of mystery, full of wonder. The reality of which we are a part fills one with awe and no one lived with a greater sense of the wonder and the awe, the miracle of life, than Duncan Littlefair. But, as I said on Sunday, if you were a particular kind of liberal, a Chicago School liberal, a modernist, then you didn't look for God in some other realm, you didn't posit a dualism, a realm of nature and a realm of spirit, a realm of the natural and a realm of the supernatural, but you experienced or looked for the Mystery, the creative center of reality within the structures of nature itself. That was the core and the key to the religious experience of Duncan Littlefair, that eloquent spokesman of that Chicago School, that found the richness of life as the location of the mystery of God, that creative center of things, that creative ground of things, that unfolding miracle which we are all living together. It was that which created wonder and awe and caused one to live with growing awareness and appreciation, and consequently, with reverence and with gratitude.

When I read "This Quiet Dust," it was as if Duncan had written it himself.

*Here in my curving hands I cup
This quiet dust; I lift it up,
Here is the mother of all thought;
Of this the shining heavens are wrought,
The laughing lips, the feet that rove,
The face, the body that you love;
Mere dust, no more, yet nothing less,
And this has suffered consciousness,
Passion and Terror, this again
Shall suffer passion, death and pain.*

*For, as all flesh must die, so all,
Now dust, shall live. 'Tis natural;
Yet hardly do I understand –
Here in the hollow of my hand
A bit of God himself I keep,
Between two vigils fallen asleep.*

I read that and I said, "Wow". Is that not a magnificent and profound expression of a religious naturalism that understands the unitary nature of reality? This cosmic process of which we are the unfolding part, the emerging wonder, this 13.7 billion-year process in which that dust and matter, that material has emerged into life and into conscious life, suffering consciousness, pain and terror and death, this dust reflective, of course, of that creation story as the Creator scoops a handful of the dust of the earth to create the creature, and reflective, too, of that most profound insight of the Christian tradition, that eternal word or intention of God becoming flesh. God becoming human. No one has ever seen God, the one who dwells in love, dwells in God and God in that one.

This quiet dust with the potential of the divine in the human - Wow! That's amazing.

The writer of Ecclesiastes was a thinker, a poet, a skeptic, sometimes almost a cynic. It's really interesting that that Hebrew writing made the cut in the canon. As I read, he was talking about the fact that animal breath and human breath are the same, an insight way beyond his time of the unitary structure of reality. And then raising the question, even his recognition of the animal nature of the human and the continuity between the animal and the human, and then wondering what happens to that breath or spirit, because in Hebrew it is the same word, *Ruach*. What happens to that *Ruach*? Who knows, he says. Does the spirit of the human go upward and the spirit of the mere animal go downward to the earth? He didn't know.

The Christian tradition, of course, centered on the resurrection. Paul speaks about something more. He talks about this earthly tabernacle being dissolved. There again, "Dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return." But, of course, with his encounter with that visionary experience he has of the risen Christ, he speaks of being clothed upon. Well, he doesn't know what he's talking about, either. But, he's wondering, and of course we wonder, don't we?

Duncan loved "This Quiet Dust" because it spoke so eloquently of the unitary nature of reality that emanated in the miracle of life which was to be savored, tasted, lived fully, celebrated to the miracle, wonder, glory and joy of life. Is that enough? I think we who have been so conditioned by a very traditional Christian understanding speak about something more and when we face death with one another, the clichés trip off our tongues rather lightly, clichés about which I think we don't often think deeply, and I'm not here this evening to tell you about your

own hope of something more or confidence in something more, or to be honest with you, perhaps your journey has been something like mine where I have come to an awareness of the miracle of life and the living of that in all of its wonder, more and more wondering myself, if this isn't enough, I really don't know. No one knows. This quiet dust now between two vigils. "Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return," but will that dust return again to life and the miracle of it all? You see, we wonder about things beyond our knowledge very naturally.

Duncan perhaps could have lived a while yet, but he bargained with his doctor to let him go home, and his daughter told me when I called from Florida that when they took him out of the ambulance on the gurney and brought him into his home, he had the most serene smile on his face. He was home.

But, he was home because he was always home. Dear God, what a gift, his life, this life.

A year ago, perhaps on All Saints Day, my sermon subject was "The Secret of Dying Well Is Living Well." Duncan lived so well. He died so well, and when I see that, then simply for me, it is enough.

References:

John Hall Wheelock (1886-1978), "This Quiet Dust."