

To the Wonder, Glory, Miracle, and Joy of Life!

A Littlefair Legacy, 1

Ecclesiastes 3; Philippians 4

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is good to be back home. Not to say that Nancy and I were sorry to miss this wonderful January winter you had, and not to say that we were unable to make do with this extended period away with nothing to do, but it is so good to be back. In all honesty, it is so good to be back because of the place to which we come. Yesterday morning the sun caught the ice floes on the lake and it was so beautiful. Ordinarily I would have called Duncan Littlefair to say, "Dunc, you should see what I see," and he would have said, "Ahh, it's beautiful." I thought to myself it may be cold, but it is pretty. And then to be able to come home to my wonderful family - we're going to gather in a little bit. It's so wonderful to have such a great family and such a wonderful community, to come back to you. Nancy tells me that I was more relaxed this time away than ever before, and I did take as many books, but I didn't get them all read, and I think I was relaxed because of how I feel about this community. I feel so good about the fact that we are in such positive territory, feeling so good about the excellent leadership we have, a wonderful pastoral/program team in place that keeps things going and even getting better when I'm gone, Ian and Meg Lawton on their way, feeling so positive about that. I am eagerly anticipating this time of transition and then the next stage of the journey. So, blessed, indeed, I am delighted to be back here in your midst.

As you know, while I was gone, I received word of the death of my dear friend Duncan Littlefair. I think the first week or ten days of our vacation we sort of crashed and didn't do much of anything, but then we got the call that Saturday night that Duncan had died. You know what he meant to me and so many of you have given expression to that, and I do appreciate that. The request was that I should do his memorial service. It was his request that I do that for family and a circle of friends, but we all know that the whole community had, somehow or other, to find some closure with this one who had been larger than life in our midst, and so on Friday I did lead that service at Fountain Street, and I suppose you can imagine that after getting that call and knowing that that was my assignment, my mind could not register on much else. I think I preached about a hundred funeral sermons from 3:30 to 5:00 in the morning every night, it

seemed. I had not submitted my preaching for my return. We had left somewhat early and I thought I would have time down there to worry about that, as often I do. But, I just couldn't determine what to do. I was so filled with thinking about Duncan and the whole impact of his life on my life and the larger community. Finally, I said to Nancy, "I think I'm simply going to do three sermons on Sunday mornings, 'A Littlefair Legacy,' and then on Ash Wednesday night concluding that series," because it's really all I could be thinking about. Thinking about last Friday, I couldn't possibly somehow or other turn around the furniture in my mind and come up with something new this morning.

Some of you were there for that service on Friday and I have to apologize to you because you will hear some of the same things, but not entirely so, because there was a special relationship that Duncan had to this community. He loved this community very much. He loved to worship here. I would bring him a tape every Tuesday of the service and the next Tuesday I would pay for it. He could really get after me when he saw me slipping back into the slough of orthodoxy. But, he cared a great deal for this community and he saw here hope for his religious vision to be perpetuated. So, I thought, not only will it be good for me, but I hope it will be good for you as a community, as well, to reflect for these weeks on A Littlefair Legacy, to reflect on the impact of this most remarkable human being whom it was my rare pleasure to come to know intimately and to love and respect very deeply. I want to begin this morning where I began on Friday and that is simply to share with you what he taught me, and the heart of what he taught me was to live fully and richly, to enjoy life and to enter it with zest, to live with wonder and awe, with awareness and appreciation, with reverence and thanksgiving. I have to say to you honestly, it was that which impacted me and has changed my life over this past decade.

You know because of my frequent references that Tuesday was "Tuesday's at Duba's" and you know that those were sacred times and we kept that religiously and as we gathered, we spoke often of the fact that when we would awaken on Tuesday morning, those few individuals that were so blessed to be there, we would say, "Ah! It's Tuesday," and with every passing hour our anticipation grew until, all of us at our places, Duncan would lift his glass and say, "To the Wonder, Glory, Miracle and Joy of Life!" The glasses would clink and it was a holy moment. It was good, it was just very good. And then that serious conversation would begin, and it was serious conversation. But, the thing that happened in the clinking of the glasses was that the radical diversity of that table became a community, and a community in all of our diversity in which we came to love one another and care for one another in a most remarkable way.

As I came to know Duncan, I came to realize that that toast was the theme of his life. It was the very essence of his being. That man lived with a constant sense of wonder every day and throughout the whole day, in all of the varied circumstances and situations into which I ever saw him, he was one who lived with wonder, with awareness, with appreciation, with a sense of reverence and of

deep gratitude. Duncan never had a bad day. He was the most unusual person I have ever met. The fact of the constancy, the consistency of that sense of living as a miracle, was contagious. You couldn't be around him without feeling your own spirit rise and your own sensitivity heightened. And I began to see things that were always there but had never seen before. I began to live with a kind of awareness and appreciation that I'd simply never experienced before. It was because, in being with him often enough, long enough, in so many different situations, I saw him notice everything - a rosebud on a table set, the chorus of birds on his feeder outside his kitchen window which he delighted to watch, a sunset, a starry heaven, the lawn laid with newly fallen snow, a rainy day when he could pull up his rocker to his fireplace and to the crackling of the fire have a good book on his lap, enjoying and savoring the grayness of the clouds. If you would ever have called him in January to complain of a Michigan winter, he would have said, "It's Wonderful! I love it!" Every day, he had no bad days; he had no desolate seasons. He was totally unimpacted by the external situation of his life because he lived out of an internal miracle that was always going on, of which he was always aware, and which he continued to bring to expression.

One of his favorite poems, by poet Grace Crowell, has these lines:

*This day will bring some lovely thing,
I say it over each new morn
Some gay adventurous thing to hold
Against my heart when it is gone.
And so I rise and go to meet
The day with wings upon my feet.*

*I come upon it unaware,
Some hidden beauty without name,
A snatch of song, a breath of pine,
A poem lit with golden flame,
High tangled bird notes keenly thinned
Like flying color on the wind.*

*No day has ever failed me quite.
Before the grayest day is done
I come upon some misty bloom
Or a late line of crimson sun.
Each night I pause remembering
some gay adventurous lovely thing.*

That is exactly how he lived more consistently than anyone I've ever known. As I came to know him and to experience him more and more, I found my own awareness and appreciation of life growing. He changed my life.

In Florida I did take down Gary Dorrien's second volume of *The Making of American Theology*, and I went back over some things I had read before about the Chicago School. Duncan graduated from the University of Chicago, did his doctoral work there, getting out around 1939-1940, somewhere in there. The Chicago School was a famous school of theology at the time. It was really the center of theological ferment in the country, a pioneer in the movement they called Theological Modernism, and I was re-reading again the story of that. There was a theologian-scholar there named George Burman Foster, and I identify with Foster, because Foster, coming out of a very pious and orthodox Baptist experience, moved across the whole spectrum of religious experience to a naturalist-humanist kind of understanding, and yet he wrestled through it all. As I was reading Gary Dorrien's account, I read of Foster, who said the content of revelation is in holy personalities. When I read that, I thought, "Dear God, that's true." He went on to say ideas are important, but we are not saved by ideas. We are saved by persons, by personalities who embody the ideas. He said as fire kindles fire, and not some theory about the flame, so people save people. I thought, "It's true." And then I thought of my own life.

While I was in Florida a week after Duncan died, another great friend of mine, Dr. Eugene Osterhaven, died at age 88. Dr. Osterhaven was a professor at Western Seminary for many, many years, he was a great friend of this congregation, he was a dear friend of mine, he married Nancy and me in 1972, and we have been in contact ever since. He prayed for me every day. In the opening years he prayed thanking God for me, in latter years he prayed petitioning God to save me. But, he was one of my dear, old friends who never forsook me, even though he couldn't believe that I was really as bad as rumor had it. So, I thought of Gene Osterhaven. He was teaching an adult class here in 1960 and was the one that engineered my call here in 1960. And then he was teaching again in 1970 when you were without a pastor, and once again he was an instrument to bring me back here. So, Gene Osterhaven played a big part in my life, and I loved him. He was a beautiful, beautiful human being. He was an orthodox Reformed theologian. I learned my Reformed theology from Gene Osterhaven. I put my mind on his desk and asked him to shape it and to form it. I was totally brainwashed, at my request. That's where I came from.

Then, after about seven years of pastoral work, there began to be some cracks in the armor and I began to have more questions than I had answers, which was a relief to my people, because when I came out of seminary I had all the answers and didn't even know what the questions were. It was my privilege then to go to the Netherlands and there I had this good fortune of another Professor, Hendrikus Berkhof, whom I have quoted here again and again, again what a beautiful human being he was. He also was a Reformed theologian, but a Reformed theologian who had brought a critical view to the faith and fresh insights and new formulations, and he led me into the place where I could do my own theological thinking.

Maybe you remember that just a few years ago before he died, he was 80 years old and the University of Leiden celebrated him. They had a big day arranged with a panel of scholars, and I was the only foreign student to be invited back, and I got to say a few words. I didn't talk about him in terms of his theology, I talked about him in terms of his personhood. I talked about the fact that in the crisis of my own life, Henk Berkhof was a pastor and was full of care and compassion, and I concluded my remarks with "Thank God for the man!" And the Dutch paper the next day, in telling the story of that event, used that phrase in the headline - "Thank God for the Man!"

He was brought to the occasion from a nursing home where he was at that time, and I knew as I was with him, it would be the last time I was with him. I spent two hours with him and I wrung every bit of wisdom and insight I could out of him. Then I said to him, "You know, Henk, when I was studying here in the 60s, you were looking in this direction, and now as we talk, I sense that you are looking in that direction." He said, "Say that again."

I said, "Well, you were talking much more about Karl Barth now than you are about Kuitert and I just sense that there has been some shift as you have come to the end - have you moved?"

"Ah," he said.

I said, "You know, I feel so close to you it's like if you drew a circle, we would be in the circle, but I feel like you're looking in one direction and I'm looking in another."

He said, "Yah, and that's the way it should be, for a student must go beyond his teacher."

Now, there's a teacher for you. There's grace for you. He gave me permission to go on and I did go on, and this last decade, having encountered Duncan Littlefair, it was a transformation, the next step, moving from orthodoxy to critical Reformed reflection to religion that is natural and human, for I saw in Duncan that his life was the fruit of his theological religious understanding. He was deeply rooted theologically, philosophically. He never talked about it. He didn't preach about it. He didn't burden his people like I have burdened you. He celebrated life with them, but when I probed because that's who I am, I kept probing to say, "Okay, tell me. How does this blossom form?" And I realized it was because he wasn't looking for God outside of the world, some kind of supernatural being in control, now and then intervening. He saw the mystery of the holy and the sacred as the unfolding of this cosmic drama of which we are a part. Religion for him was totally natural and wholly human, and it was the appreciation and the awareness and the wonder of this cosmic miracle into which our lives are woven and we, as that emerging consciousness of this whole drama.

And so, little by little, I began to see that that beautiful life was the consequence of a consistent vision.

Sometimes on Tuesdays all hell had broken loose somewhere in the world, evil had been perpetrated on other human beings, and we would raise our glass in the somberness of whatever event might have been, and then Dunc would say, "Even in the darkness ..." because he accepted life, not as he wanted it to be, but as it is, and even in the darkness it could not cloud the joy or remove the miracle. So, I read Ecclesiastes 3. He could have written it, all of the diversity of human experience. I owe to Don Hoekstra that translation. If you read it in your scriptures, it says there is a time to do this and a time to do that. I always winced a bit when it came to "There is a time to kill and a time to make war." Don's translation helps me to see that what that poet was saying is not there's a time to do this, as though it ought to be done, but as a matter of fact, that's what we do. This is the way life is. This is the human condition, and it is this that Duncan was able to embrace. His religious vision enabled him to transcend that darkness and to live in the constant light of the unfolding miracle.

The Apostle Paul wasn't too bad, either. He said, "Rejoice. Again, I say rejoice. And don't worry about anything, but by everything with prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God that passes human understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ." And then he went on to thank them for the gift they had given them, the Philippian congregation, and he said to them, "But, don't think I need your gift." (That reminds me of Duncan. He lived with such detachment.) "But, thanks for the gift. It was good of you. I didn't really need it. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound. I know how to be full and I know how to be empty."

Some think they get a hint of stoicism in Paul. I think Duncan was even better than Paul, because I never got the sense of stoicism, not like "I'll grit my teeth and get through this day." Rather,

"So, this is the day. This is the day that the Lord has made and I will rejoice in it and be very glad. So, it's raining or snowing or hailing, so it is winter or summer or spring or fall. I will live in the wonder, the miracle, and the glory and joy of life."

Wow! That's a life.

References:

Grace Crowel (1877-1969), "The Day," 1926.

Gary Dorrien. *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.