

Living Before the Face of God

Baccalaureate Sunday

Text: I Timothy 6:11-16

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

But you, man of God, must shun all this, and pursue justice, piety, fidelity, love, fortitude, and gentleness. Run the great race of faith and take hold of eternal life. For to this you were called; and you confessed your faith nobly before many witnesses. Now in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Jesus Christ, who himself made the same noble confession and gave his testimony to it before Pontius Pilate, I charge you to obey your orders irreproachably and without fault until our Lord Jesus Christ appears. That appearance God will bring to pass in his own good time -God who in eternal felicity alone holds sway. He is King of kings and Lord of lords; he alone possesses immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light. No man has ever seen or ever can see him. To him be honour and might for ever! Amen. ... I Timothy 6:11-16 (NEB)

Commencement is a time of the giving of many speeches and most of them can be lumped in the category of moral imperative, an urging of graduates to plunge into life with seriousness of purpose and diligent effort, to pursue lofty goals, to live by high ideals and to strive for nobleness of life. Who could argue with that? Surely this is a good occasion for such stirring rhetoric.

What is usually missing, however, and in the context of public education necessarily is missing, is any foundation for such moral urging. One might well raise the question to much commencement speechmaking, "Why?" It is the "Why" I want to address on this Baccalaureate Sunday. From the perspective of biblical faith, the reason one ought to enter seriously into life with discipline and purpose and live fruitfully, creatively and significantly as a catalyst for the betterment of one's world and society is *because one is not one's own; rather life is a gift and is lived before the face of God*. It is the consciousness of God, the Living God, the Creator of the Universe, the gracious, saving God revealed in Jesus Christ, that shapes human life into a faithful response, pointing one to the highest and best and fullest realization of one's potential.

The text this morning might seem to lead us down the pathway to another instance of moralistic cheerleading:

Pursue justice, piety, fidelity, love, fortitude and gentleness. Run the great race of faith and take hold of eternal life.

Good counsel, to be sure; who would argue with such encouragement? But, again, why?

Let me try to answer that and thereby avoid the pitfall of another blind call to goodness and duty. The call to serious, disciplined living here is based on the assumption that one is not one's own. Note the address, "But you, man of God." Is that a technical designation of one in Christian ministry? Perhaps in this instance. Yet it is not to be so limited. The biblical assumption from beginning to end is that God is God and the human person lives before the face of God. That is stated expressly in verse 13:

Now in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Jesus Christ...

The solemn charge to duty is given "in the presence of God," but what is explicitly stated as the context of this charge is true for us all at all times and in all circumstances. We live before the face of God. God is the great reality embracing all of nature and history and God is the ground and goal of our lives as well as the origin, preserver and finally the goal of all existence.

Since the 18th Century, the Enlightenment Movement in France and Germany, our thinking has been secularized. Reality has been bifurcated in such fashion that the world has been viewed as a self-contained system running on its own with its own natural law and bound together in a chain of cause and effect. God, if God is still retained as a reality or possibility, is outside the reality of history and nature. If God is given place at all in the natural world and the drama of history, it is at specific points of intervention, still maintained by the religious but even that is denied by the thoroughgoing naturalist.

In the philosophical movement, which gradually filtered down to popular thinking, this removal of God from historical existence and the natural world was spoken of as emancipation. Just as Lincoln's *Emancipation Proclamation* freed the slave, so clearing the world of God was thought to give space to the human person to develop potential and carve out a destiny free from the oppressive restraints of religion.

Much religion was and is oppressive. Much coercion and manipulation by religion has done untold damage to human personality and bound the human spirit in a strait jacket of fear and guilt and neurosis. Let that be freely acknowledged.

But, that being candidly admitted, it must be recognized that a godless world and a godless existence is a dismal business leading not to creative freedom and self-expression, but rather to a dead end of hopeless futility. It is the absence of a sense of the reality of God that is responsible for much of the malaise, the ambiguity, the confusion, the moral crisis of our present world.

In a *Christian Century* editorial (June 1, 1988), James M. Wall addresses the loss of the transcendent source of moral values, the loss of a norm beyond the standards of individuals or communities. Entitled "Ed Koch, Call Your Office," the editorial suggests that from time to time one ought to check in to determine if one is still aligned with what is true and good and right - call your office. Koch roused the Jewish community in New York City against the black democrat candidate, Jesse Jackson, in the recent primary. Wall suggests Koch acted as though a moral compass were irrelevant. He goes on to declare,

The ethical crisis in our public life stems not from the lack of parochial ethical standards but from the failure to turn to *any* transcendent standard in making decisions as individuals or as communities. We are not calling our offices because there is no one there to take the call. And if we did call, we would get only a recorded message we ourselves had made, advising us to do whatever will enhance the bottom line, make us feel good or guarantee a profit and/or a victory, preferably both.

Examples of this attitude abound in contemporary society. In addition to Koch, they include Ed Meese in the Justice Department and Ivan Boesky on Wall Street. The dominant operative mind-set tolerates and actually encourages a rudderless moral climate.

Modernity has brought us incredible advances in the way we live, but it has left us in a situation where we do not know *how* to live. The prevailing standard is victory, not values....

Wall quotes a Czech-born novelist, Milan Kundera, (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 2) who regards Cervantes, the author of *Don Quixote*,

... Kundera regards Cervantes, the author of *Don Quixote* as the first novelist of the modern era who captured what it means to exist in a society that puts all its emphasis on knowing a lot about little pieces and cares nothing about the largest piece of reality. It was during Cervantes's era that Western civilization began to assume that the only reality that matters is that which is subject to measurement.

The central authority for all existence had once been called God, and that authority's representative on earth was the church. Both of these entities were pushed into a sacred reservation to keep them out of harm's way, while rational and wise men (never women) pursued knowledge. Or as Kundera puts it:

As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era... [p. 6].

I cannot begin to draw out and document the disillusioning end of the demise of God in the modern world, but if you are really interested in one person's account of where we are after a century of Nihilism filtered down to popular understanding, read Allan Bloom's book. *The Closing of the American Mind*, whose subtitle reads, "How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students."

Nihilism is a philosophy, a world and life view that denies any reality beyond the human mind and system of values. There is no God, no ultimate source of truth or goodness. It is all simply human devising. Nihilism means Nothingness. Hans Küng, in *Does God Exist?*, defines Nihilism as

"The conviction of the nullity of the internal contradiction, futility and worthlessness of reality." (p. 388)

Bloom traces the line from Nietzsche's philosophical ideas to contemporary American Society where the denial of any Absolute is a given, but where the resultant chaos of right and wrong, truth and error has led to the recognition of the need for values clarification. The problem is there is no transcendent reference, no absolute standard or norm. Consequently, one must determine one's own values and then live authentically in the light of those values. Since there is no norm, one value is as valid as the next and tolerance rules over all. Bloom writes,

My grandparents were ignorant people by our standards, and my grandfather held only lowly jobs. But their home was spiritually rich because all the things done in it, not only what was specifically ritual, found their origin in the Bible's commandments, and their explanation in the Bible's stories and the commentaries on them, and had their imaginative counterparts in the deeds of the myriad of exemplary heroes. My grandparents found reasons for the existence of their family and the fulfillment of their duties in serious writings, and they interpreted their special sufferings with respect to a great and ennobling past. Their simple faith and practices linked them to great scholars and thinkers who dealt with the same material, not from outside or from an alien perspective, but believing as they did, while simply going deeper and providing guidance. There was a respect for real learning, because it had a felt connection with

their lives. This is what a community and a history mean, a common experience inviting high and low into a single body of belief.

I do not believe that my generation, my cousins who have been educated in the American way, all of whom as M.D.s or Ph.D.'s, have any comparable learning. When they talk about heaven and earth, the relations between men and women, parents and children, the human condition, I hear nothing but clichés, superficialities, the material of satire. I am not saying anything so trite as that life is fuller when people have myths to live by. I mean rather that a life based on the Book is closer to the truth, that it provides the material for deeper research in and access to the real nature of things. Without the great revelations, epics, and philosophies as part of our natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside. The Bible is not the only means to furnish a mind, but without a book of similar gravity, read with the gravity of the potential believer, it will remain unfurnished.

The moral education that is today supposed to be the great responsibility of the family cannot exist if it cannot present to the imagination of the young a vision of a moral cosmos and of the rewards and punishments for good and evil, sublime speeches that accompany and interpret deeds, protagonists and antagonists in the drama of moral choice, a sense of the stakes involved in such choice, and the despair that results when the world is "disenchanted." Otherwise, education becomes the vain attempt to give children "values." Beyond the fact that parents do not know what they believe, and surely do not have the self-confidence to tell their children much more than that they want them to be happy and fulfill whatever potential they may have, values are such pallid things. What are they and how are they communicated? The courses in "value-clarification" springing up in schools are supposed to provide models for parents and get children to talk about abortion, sexism or the arms race, issues the significance of which they cannot possibly understand. Such education is little more than propaganda, and propaganda that does not work, because the opinions or values arrived at are will-o'-the-wisps, insubstantial, without ground in experience or passion, which are the bases of moral reasoning. Such "values" will inevitably change as public opinion changes. The new moral education has none of the genius that engenders moral instinct or second nature, the prerequisite not only of character but also of thought. Actually, the family's moral training now comes down to inculcating the bare minima of social behavior, not lying or stealing, and produces university students who can say nothing more about the ground of their moral action than "If I did that to him, he could do it to me" - an explanation which does not even satisfy those who utter it.

Bloom concludes,

Thus our use of the value language leads us in two opposite directions - to follow the line of least resistance, and to adopt strong poses and fanatic resolutions. But these are merely different deductions from a common premise. Values are not discovered by reason, and it is fruitless to seek them, to find the truth or the good life. The quest begun by Odysseus and continued over three millennia has come to an end with the observation that there is nothing to seek. This alleged fact was announced by Nietzsche just over a century ago when he said, "God is dead." Good and evil now for the first time appear as values, of which there have been a thousand and one, none rationally or objectively preferable to any other. The salutary illusion about the existence of good and evil has been definitively dispelled. For Nietzsche this was an unparalleled catastrophe; it meant the decomposition of culture and the loss of human aspiration. The Socratic "examined" life was no longer possible or desirable. It was itself unexamined, and if there was any possibility of a human life in the future it must begin from the naive capacity to live an unexamined life. The philosophic way of life had become simply poisonous. In short, Nietzsche with the utmost gravity told modern man that he was free-falling in the abyss of nihilism. Perhaps after having lived through this terrible experience, drunk it to the dregs, people might hope for a fresh era of value creation, the emergency of new gods.

Perhaps no one has given finer expression to the reckless affirmation of self-determination apart from any tradition, community value or transcendent ground of existence than Frank Sinatra singing, "I did it *my way*!"

Call the office? No need; no one is there. I did it my way!

But, what of God? If God is God, then human life is lived before the face of God.

Our text speaks of "The presence of God and of Christ Jesus who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made a good confession." There we have a model set forth: Jesus before Pilate.

Sinatra sings, "I Did It My Way!"

Jesus trembles and cries out, "Nevertheless, not my will but Thy will be done."

Can there be any starker contrast? Two different worlds. Two different conceptions of life and Reality.

My Way! Thy Way!

The whole life of Jesus was characterized by an overwhelming sense of living before the face of God. With Jesus, it was not a matter of finding out what works and doing it in order to become successful as the world judges success. Rather, it

was to determine the will of God and do it in spite of human approval or disapproval.

Before Pilate he was strong, steady, unmovable. Tell me, if you had to choose, would you stand with Jesus knowing it would lead to crucifixion, or with Pilate thereby saving your power and position?

What choice would you make?

Of course, you would stand with Jesus - masterfully clear-eyed, strong, not with the pathetic Pilate, anxious, fearful, equivocating, vacillating. Who was really on trial? Who was really in command of the moment? Is it not abundantly clear that Jesus' "Thy will be done," freed him from every other bondage? True to God, therefore truly himself.

They crucified him.

But, Jesus reigns, and one day every knee shall bow to him, every tongue confess him Lord, to the glory of God!

To the glory of God!

The phrase sets the writer on fire. He breaks out into praise with a great doxology, as he calls to mind God Who will bring all things to their consummation in His own time, at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

God Who in eternal felicity alone holds sway. He is King of kings and Lord of lords; he alone possesses immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light. No one has ever seen or ever can see him. To God be honour and might for ever!

Doxology. That is the tone quality of a life lived consciously before the face of God. To live in the spirit of doxology is to live spontaneously, creatively in a constant sense of awe and wonder, awe and wonder before the mystery of God, the meaningfulness of existence, the sheer majesty of an eternal purpose already at work, in us, through us, moving from Creation to new creation.

Doxology: The breaking forth of worship from one who is already participating in life that is eternal - that is life lived within our time and space, but breaking through those limits, breathing already the air of another reality, a transcendent dimension.

... take hold of eternal life. For this you were called. So enjoins the text. In John's Gospel, Jesus says,

I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly.

Again, he declares,

This is life eternal that they might know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.

To live before the face of God is to live in the consciousness of a Reality beyond the limits of time and space, beyond the appearances empirically perceived, beyond the limited realm of nature that can be measured and of history that can be documented. To live before the face of God is to have a transcendent reference point, an absolute from which to measure, truth by which to discriminate the confusing clamor of claims to validity that play upon one.

Doxology!

Not passive resignation to Fate.

Doxology!

Not unprincipled yielding to what works, is effective, gets one by or brings one instant reward.

Doxology!

Not self-serving narcissism that aims at the instant gratification of desire, the pleasure principle - doing what feels good.

Doxology!

Not a spineless, careful, fearful failure to dare, to risk, to live, to love -satisfied with an obscene mediocrity.

Doxology - The overflowing life that senses the very Creative Spirit of God rushing through it, reaching for the stars, dreaming the impossible dream, believing that there is so much more, unwilling to rest with what has been, dissatisfied with what is, always stretching, reaching, pushing the limits, knowing that the possibilities of Reality are as limitless as the God Who is the ground and goal of all that is.

And so I call you to take hold of life eternal and I ground that challenge in who you are - a person, created in the image of God, the God Who is the source, the ground, the norm of all that is good and true and beautiful and whose purpose for you is the fullness of life in the present and beyond what eye has seen or ear heard or has ever entered the human heart's conceiving.

That is to live fully, richly, creatively - that is to live before the face of God.