

The Face of God

The Celebration of the Life of Duncan E. Littlefair

Ecclesiastes 3; I John 4; John 1

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Prepared text of the sermon

If you knew Duncan well, you know he did not want this - this celebration of his life. I can hear him now, "What's all the fuss!" But, if he was right and his final breath closed his personal existence, then we have nothing to fear in running counter to his wishes. And if he was wrong and his spirit is dancing before these beautiful stained glass windows he so dearly loved, then he will have been sufficiently tempered such that, even so, we need not fear his wrath. For all his brilliance, wisdom and insight, he never figured out why he couldn't just slip away without notice being taken.

And so, we have gathered to celebrate his life, not for his sake, but for our own, for we need some closure, some beginning toward healing for the cavern in our souls his passing has left.

To know him intimately was to love him deeply, to miss him terribly, and to be overwhelmed with gratitude for the gift we have shared, living in his presence.

It was his request that I lead a simple memorial for his family and a few friends. But, we all knew there had to be a gathering of the larger community and so we are here today. I am so highly honored to have been asked to reflect on his life in this great church - to lead the community celebration of his life; and I am grateful to the Littlefair family, the Fountain Street Board of Governors and the Pastoral Staff who so graciously invited me to be here today. I'm grateful, as well, to those at this end who enabled me from long distance to create with them this memorial service remembering our beloved Duncan Littlefair.

Let me be very clear; I intend to paint no objective portrait of Duncan, nor to offer a cool analysis of this man. This will be no balanced view noting strengths and weaknesses, light and shadow. I know Duncan was not perfect - but almost - and I respected him so profoundly and loved him so completely that I hope to lift up his life such that we can say "Yes, that was Duncan," and through laughter and tears find some closure, enabling us to move on with gratitude for all he meant to us.

Let me also acknowledge that many of you knew him longer than I and you knew him in a variety of roles and diverse situations. I would only claim that in the last decade plus of his life, I came to know him intimately through hours of in-depth conversations. I knew him intimately and, I think, understood him as fully as it is possible for one to know another.

We each came from such different places, from opposite ends of the religious spectrum. I am amazed to have traveled the whole spectrum, finally to stand where he stood and he was amazed that, coming from where I had come, I should have become the one whom he hoped would keep the heart of his vision alive. I have known the smile of his favor, his warm affection and generous affirmation and consider myself blessed, indeed.

Let me tell you what I learned from him, hoping that my experience will be a catalyst for your own reflection as we celebrate his life today.

He taught me to live life fully, passionately with awareness, appreciation, wonder, reverence and gratitude.

There is a table down at Duba's and many of you are aware that at that corner table in Duba's Bar, Duncan was the center of the roundtable where on Tuesdays we probed the ultimate questions as well as discussed the issues that mark our present human experience. For those few of us who found a place at the table, Tuesdays dawned with a sense of anticipation which grew with each passing hour until, our places taken, Duncan lifted his glass - an Absolut vodka martini up - and gave the familiar toast -

To the wonder, miracle, glory and joy of life!

The respective glasses clinked and the serious conversation began – serious conversation, but now the radical diversity of the table became community and it was good - very good.

That toast was an expression of the way Duncan lived every day. Sometimes as we gathered we were aware of some eruption of darkness, some evil perpetrated by human beings, and then he would acknowledge,

Even in the darkness - nevertheless...

When first I came to know him, I realized I had never known anyone who loved life so deeply and lived life so fully. He was so sensitive, so compassionate. He felt the world's pain, but never did that pain cloud the awe and wonder with which he awoke with every new dawn.

A favorite poem by Grace Crowell expresses beautifully the way he experienced every day.

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.

I called from Florida the day before he died. His daughter Candy told me when the ambulance arrived at his home where he requested to be taken to die and they were taking him in, he had the most beautiful, serene smile. He was home. How he loved that refuge, that oasis. *But, he was really always home.* Always aware, he lived with constant amazement at grace and beauty –

a rose bud on a table set,
the joy of watching the colorful choir of birds on the feeders outside his
kitchen window,
a leaf in spring tender and green,
in autumn turned brilliant red or orange or yellow,
a sunset, a starry night,
the lawn mantled in a blanket of newly fallen snow,
a cool rainy day when by his crackling fire he could read
and savor the cloudy grayness of the sky.

He knew no bad days, no desolate seasons. He reveled in life.

One could not be with him without being drawn by the contagion of his joy and appreciation, without finding one's own awareness raised, one's own spirit sensitized to the miracle of life, the extraordinary wonder of the ordinary that we too often fail to appreciate. How often he quoted Jesus,

"If you have eyes to see and ears to hear."

He embraced life passionately - all of life in its light and shadow. He was so ruthlessly honest about our human situation - he could have penned the lines of the ancient Hebrew poet –

For everything there is a season...
A time we are born and a time we die;
a time we kill and a time we heal;
a time we wage war and a time we make peace.

This is our human situation and in the honest acknowledgment of the human condition, Duncan stood in awe, saw beauty, created meaning, lived graciously and pursued love.

Never had I met one who lived so passionately, so fully, so richly with such wonder, reverence and gratitude. *And I wondered why. I began to probe his philosophy. I began to search out his religious understanding.*

I asked him about his early years, his education and about the Chicago School in which he did his doctoral work. I still remember the smile on his face as he said no one ever asked him about his dissertation. He secured a photocopy of that dissertation from the University of Chicago and gave it to me. I studied it and it provided some excellent Tuesday discussions. I came to understand his naturalistic humanism.

The Chicago School pioneered what has been called Modernism - a term that, coming as I did from conservative, orthodox Dutch Calvinist roots, I had been taught to fear as spawned in Hell. Actually, the Modernist movement in theology was simply the recognition on the part of many religious scholars that religious faith must be exercised in light of the exploding knowledge of all disciplines of human learning. It was the recognition that our religious dogmas and confessional statements derive from a pre-scientific age and therefore need to be re-imagined and translated into thought forms consistent with Reality as we are coming to know it through empirical investigation.

Duncan was never in awe of the academic world. He never displayed his own brilliant grasp of philosophical and theological ideas. But, when I questioned him, it was exciting to see how his own philosophical/theological orientation translated into his passionate religious commitment and his powerful pulpit proclamation.

For Duncan, Reality is one and in that one Reality there is in process an amazing creative venture underway. We do not look for some Supernatural Being outside the world of space and time, governing, controlling, occasionally intervening. Rather, the Creative Process in all its randomness and all its fecundity is Mystery we speak of under the symbol God.

Not some God "out there," not this world as a vale of tears to be traversed on the way to the Real Event in another time and another place. No. This is the Life, here and now.

Duncan spoke of the Spirit. The miracle of the whole cosmic drama was that matter gave rise to Spirit, to human consciousness, to awareness. The amazing wonder is the emergence of the likes of us who have become the consciousness, the awareness, the voice of the Cosmic Process.

This is how he expressed it on Easter, 1967, in his message *The Risen Christ*:

I have come to think of all individuals as temporal, temporary, conscious intrusions or extrusions, or illustrations or realizations or expressions of the total which is God - that we are indeed God in consciousness.

For we are our creators - Lords of Creation, Lords of the Earth – because we share in the knowledge and the wisdom and the capacity of God to create.

We are Life. We are God. We are humans but we are expressions of God, expressions of the creative force in the world.

When we die as a person, as a physical body, Love does not die. Love is that which created you and gives you whatever meaning and significance and worth you have.

I read from the Gospel of John and the First Letter of John. In both passages, there appears this statement:

No one has ever seen God.

In the Gospel that statement comes after the Evangelist had recounted the drama of the Infinite, the Eternal Word becoming flesh, or becoming Human - God became Human. That is what Duncan was saying in the paragraph quoted above. *The Human as the embodiment of God.*

To be sure, the writer of the Gospel did not intend to universalize that claim, for there is an exclusivism in John's Gospel that claims that the occurrence of the Word being made flesh was once for all in Jesus alone.

Yet, out of that same Johannine circle comes the First Letter of John with the same statement –

No one has ever seen God.

But, prior to that statement, we have those familiar words,

"God is Love,"

and, immediately following, the statement,

"No one has ever seen God."

The writer goes on to claim,

If we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.

And a bit later he writes,

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

In the intimate connection of human bonding in love is the experience, the presence of God.

The word symbol "God" carries a lot of baggage. For years, Duncan did not use the term because it could not be heard without all of those connotations of a Supernatural Being of traditional religion. But, he was never without the awareness of the Creative Mystery at the Heart of Reality that found expression in the human. In a 1976 sermon, he explained:

... life is a kind of relatedness in which the parts support the whole and each other.... "Good" is whatever contributes to the growth of such relatedness... *God is that relatedness ...*

... it is the nature of the universe; it is our life; it is what brought us to this place and it is what sustains us in this time ...

This God I am talking about is grounded in nature; he is not separate from us ... The name (God) may be a matter of choice and convention. If you are prejudiced against it, don't use it But don't neglect the reality.

(Taken from *"A Reasonable and Pragmatic God,"* 1976)

Gradually I came to understand his religious vision that gave him such zest for life. I understood that that toast - *to the wonder, miracle, glory and joy of life* - was the center of his being. His religion was totally natural, wholly human. It was the passionate center of his being. He lived with an unceasing God-consciousness. His awareness, sensitivity, reverence and gratitude were the result of that God-consciousness.

From time to time, he would give me a tape of one of his sermons of earlier years. As I listened to one some time ago, he was upset with some of his parishioners who were critical of an anthem which he loved and which the choir had sung the previous week. He was clearly agitated at those who had no feel for the emotional dimension of religion, who lacked poetry in their soul and who were so insecure in their absence of faith in God, that they could not allow the music to wash over them and be moved by the Spirit.

Duncan concluded the sermon and then said, "And now I've asked the choir to sing it again!" And they did.
And what was the anthem?

My God and I, we walk the fields together,
We walk and talk as good friends should and do.
We clasp our hands, our voices ring with laughter,
My God and I walk through the meadow's hue.

He tells me of the years that went before me,
when heavenly plans were made for me to be,
when all was but a dream of dim conception
to come to life, earth's verdant glory see.

My God and I will go for aye together,
We'll talk and talk and jest as good friends do.
This earth will pass and with it common trifles,
But God and I will go unendingly.

If you really knew him and understood him, even now you can image him in that chair in the Chancel, eyes closed, head turned upward, hands folded, spirit soaring in sheer ecstasy.

Let me tell you an amazing secret - for all those years that he filled this pulpit - I say with absolute sincerity and certainty, there was not a more honest, more passionate lover of God in Grand Rapids, or Western Michigan, or, for that matter, any place on the face of the earth.

No one has ever seen God
but the Word has become flesh,
God has become human.
In that beautiful face of Duncan,
I have seen the Face of God.