

“A Single Garment of Destiny”

Sunday, January 14, 2007

The Rev. Dr. W. Frederick Wooden



Fountain Street Church
24 Fountain St., NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Printed by
THE EXTENSION SERVICE
of
FOUNTAIN STREET CHURCH

Single Copies..... \$1.00

Copyright © 2007 by Fountain Street Church

To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“A Single Garment of Destiny”

CONFESSION

*Gather up
In the arms of your pity
The sick, the depraved,
The desperate, the tired,
All the scum
Of our weary city
Gather up
In the arms of your pity.
Gather up
In the arms of your love
Those who expect no love from above.*

- Langston Hughes

My dear friend, ever present in mind, if ever absent in the flesh:

Sometimes a sensation of the past rolls over me that like a wave carries me along. It is more than nostalgia, in which we sit in the present and sigh about the past. No, such moments bring with them the sense of being there. My whole mind returns to being 6 or 26, to a moment in summer or a sorrow in the fall, and the sort of thoughts I had then, with all their feelings and even subtle physical sensations, come back in full.

It never lasts very long, so as it passes that is the moment of nostalgia, the gentle sorrow that I cannot escape time and body and must be dragged along by reality and its muddy Mississippian crawl to the sea. What remains is a surpassing longing to hold on to something. “What do our hearts treasure,” E.B. White asked, knowing that whatever it is was in our hands once but we let it slip away.

Hard on the heels of that first memory I mentioned before is my second, meaning the one I know is true and can place in the course of time like a stake in the ground. It is moving day, and I am sitting on the floor of our new townhouse home where we will live for about three years, 1955-1958. When we leave I will be five and will enter kindergarten. I went to two years of preschool there, and I distinctly remember my first sister being born. That was 1957. Thus it had to be the summer of 1955 because I have no memory of the place before, the place that car went back to with baby brother and mom and dad in the front seat, and I remember quite clearly being small as we moved in.

I sit in on the floor of the new living room as furniture comes in, glad to see familiar things like our couch and the bookshelf that goes behind the couch. I get up to sit on the couch and pull myself up as a man would onto a ledge. Men move purposefully about, kindly men who smile at me as they bring chairs and boxes in. The couch has a rough nubby fabric, and the bookshelf is long and low, painted a greenish gray and

too. I felt weak and helpless and alone and held myself in contempt for it all.

"Who will grant me to rest content in you," says Augustine. "Why do you mean so much to me? Help me find words to explain." In looking back, remembering and even feeling again these early moments I feel again the helplessness and the inability to name that helplessness. Only an inchoate pain comes which the mind understands but the pain does not leave.

I glimpse the sprouting of weeds that will grow abundantly in my soul's garden. Innocent of what I did then but nonetheless doing it, these nettles still sting even as I try to pluck them up. Their tiny needles prelude other thorns to come. I am reluctant to continue, knowing what lies ahead. His words come to mind. "Grant my prayer, O Lord, and do not allow my soul to wilt under the discipline which you prescribe."

* * * * *

PROFESSION

I have spent days, weeks, on the F train. The trip from Seventh Avenue (in Brooklyn) to midtown Manhattan is long enough that every ride can produce its own mini-society of riders, its own forty-minute Ship of Fools. Once a woman an arm's length from me on a crowded train pulled a knife on a man who threatened her. I remember the knife – its flat, curved wood-grain handle inlaid with brass fittings at each end, its long tapered blade. Once a man sang the words of the Lord's Prayer to mournful syncopated tune, and he fitted the mood of the morning so exactly that when he asked for money at the end the riders reached for their wallets and purses and he'd pulled a gun.

– From an essay by Ian Frazier, "Take the F"

My young friend,

It is the weekend of the Martin Luther King observance. To me, Martin Luther King was the most eminent American voice of the 20th century, much as Lincoln was in the 19th century, and Jefferson in 18th. Like them, he was not perfect, but a specimen of Shakespeare's men who have "greatness thrust upon them." For me he speaks not just to racism or poverty or war, but to the spiritual core of a people, as a true prophet does.

This word prophet is difficult, as it is something we think heroic. When I say prophet, I mean someone who does not foretell the future magically, but sees the path events are taking, and speaks up as one who shouts to prevent someone from stepping in front of a speeding bus. Prophets are "forth-tellers," as the scholar James Luther Adams coined the term. They tell a truth anyone could see, but don't. This is why we do not like them when they live and revere them when they are dead.

What truth did King forth-tell? Consider this sentence. "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." A familiar Christian

image, the seamless garment worn by Jesus for which Roman guards cast lots, King uses it to illustrate the indivisibility of the human community - saying that we are one people, not only because we affect each other now, but because, he believed, we are headed in the same destination.

In my last letter, I said that experience and reason tell us there is one reality, a unity we call the uni-verse. And this universe is dynamic in that there is room for new events and new things to emerge in that universe. You and I are proof. I further said that though reality changes, it remains one reality, just as you or I grow and change and yet remain one person. That changing implies a direction to things, something we experience as the passage time.

Let's compress this notion into a phrase - One Truth. My last letter expresses the principle or, to be more modest, a surmise - that every fact, all the bits and pieces of the truth as it were, scientific and moral and historic and spiritual, ultimately cohere, just as all the electrons and stars and rivers and creatures must ultimately cohere. In spite of all that seems to differ and conflict, it nonetheless hangs together.

This letter tries to explain how that cohering happens. And yes, we are getting closer to the question of God, but we are not there quite yet. To assure we do not plant our feet on sandy soil, though, we really ought to dig down until we know we have knowledge, not wishful thinking, to build on.

The ancient Greek philosopher Herakleitos helps us here. He said that you can never step into the same river twice. This metaphor, like all symbols, has more to say. If a river is never exactly the same, what with the water always flowing, it is still *A River*. There is a unity of form and function that gives it coherence. What is a river? It cannot be the water alone, which moves, nor the banks which contain them. A river is the whole thing, but especially the moving of the water. Motion defines it as much as substance. It may seem odd to say that the moving gives form and coherence, but consider a bicycle. It only stays upright when it moves. So we can say that reality may do likewise. It is sensible and reasonable to say reality is coherent in part because it is moving.

But rivers go somewhere. That's another part of what makes them rivers. They have a destination. Does reality have a destination, a goal, like a river moves to the sea? I know you want to say heaven, but what do we mean by that but something far more basic. Completeness.

My late father, citing someone else, told me that as we age we do not change but become more like ourselves. He was half right. We do change, but the direction of change is toward completeness. We transform a general potentiality into specific reality, turn our thoughts into deeds. Every human being is doing this, and that is what I believe make us part of a single garment of destiny.

If, as I have said, the universe is one reality, not only are we moving toward completeness, this universe is doing the same thing. Its goal is completeness. Whatever that ultimately means, one part of completeness to getting more related, more connected, more interwoven - weaving a single garment from innumerable threads.

But there is a problem now. This reality must ultimately include both good and evil or it will not be one reality. Sense and reason tell us that there is good and evil in the

world, and yet this seems repugnant as it would mean accepting injustice and suffering. But if the universe is heading toward completeness, that means everything in it is incomplete, partial, and therefore susceptible to error. As Paul realized long ago, "When I was a child I thought as a child." Only at the end will we see clearly and know truly. Until then we are unable to make perfect decisions because we are imperfect.

He is right. Where we go wrong is in assuming imperfection is a flaw. In a static universe, one that does not change, it would be. But in a dynamic one, that does change, imperfection is inherent in being incomplete. It is not a sin but a fact. I will say more on this in another letter, but it seemed wise to mention it now.

There is thus a single garment of destiny, though it is yet incomplete. There is a single river, though its banks may shift. Now, what makes a river run? Gravity. Because of gravity, and the character of water to "seek its own level" as they say, water flows. Gravity is a fact of nature and reality. There seems to be a tendency for things to want to stick together.

Now if freedom and free will is a centrifugal force, something that expands reality and threatens to blow it apart, what is the gravity that balances freedom and makes it hold together?

Ever heard of a silly song called "Feelings?" Feelings mean emotions, but they are also literally feelings, sensations in the body. Those things we call emotions are where body and mind meet. Anger makes us feel hot, fear makes us feel cold. Emotion is the thing that connects mind and body, thought and sensations, inner and outer. When we are tugged by the garment, feel the river, quite literally feel it, we are touched in both the literal and figurative sense. As we exert our free will on these feelings it becomes deliberate, not just automatic. When we seek to touch, it is because we desire, want, long for it. When we want to connect with our utmost selves it is love. The human expression of gravity is love.

Cut to the bone, we feel the universe. And when we feel it, the response is connection. When we feel the connection, we find ourselves valuing it. What is love but the caring, valuing, of something? What do we value of those things but the truth in it that speaks to the truth in us.

This is the key. Love is our response to truth. Love is what truth brings forth from us. Truth and Love are the conscious forces that sustain us in consciousness. They are the warp and the woof, the water and the banks, turning drops of water into a river and threads into a garment.

Now if there is One Truth, there is thus One Love. Notwithstanding our many particular and imperfect loves, just as there are many particular and imperfect truths, there is one reality and thus one truth and one love. We participate in it, but do not own it any more than we own the truth. It is larger than any of us. Love is not only what humans do, it is what the universe does.

King was right, there is a single garment of destiny: one reality, one truth, one love. It cannot be proved as science proves things, but this idea does not ask us to reject science or other knowledge either. It is a solid place to begin our quest for a lasting and honest faith. Now, as Rabbi Hillel counseled, let's go and study.