

*Zero, Zip, Nada*

I Corinthians 13:1-13

The Rev. Dr. Kenneth W. Gottman

November 10, 2019

I don't care, it doesn't matter; nothing matters, right? That refrain is a leftover from my "melancholy period," which began during my sophomore year in college and lasted through my first year in seminary. You know what a sophomore is: either a second-year student at a U.S. high school or college or someone who sports the sophistication of very little knowledge, none of it new, and is intent on impressing the world with it. With due apologies to sophomores—students or otherwise—I say that, by definition, a sophomore is still wet behind the ears and as green as grass.

The melancholy period starts when one discovers the pain of the world (*Weltschmerz*, the Germans call it): that death is a reality, that the real world will not fall down and worship just because you step onto the stage, that global forces can crush individual initiative, that

humans are regularly ornery, cruel and ugly, that unrequited love is the rule rather than the exception, that betrayal by one's closest friends is not uncommon. So one disengages, disavows interest in life, affects a bored expression, and detaches oneself from emotional pain by declaring one way or another: I don't care, it doesn't matter; nothing matters, right?

The liberal arts sophomore gets into a class in English literature, art appreciation, or philosophy and is formally introduced to the tragic vision of the world, as seen through the eyes of the literary and artistic intelligentsia. The sophomore feels small, insignificant and powerless and begins to question his or her place in the macroscopic scheme of things. Doubt seems to be cast upon the entire human enterprise. What is the meaning of it all? Maybe life is meaningless, without aim or purpose.

One reads Camus and Sartre and Samuel Beckett and Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and begins to ask: what's it all about, anyway? Sunday School religion and theology "lite"

served up in one's home church seem pretty superficial and saccharine. Especially is this so for the sophomore who is daily adding to her vocabulary words and phrases like *nihilism*, *will to power*, *existential Angst*, and *Weltschmerz*.

In a section of high school sophomore English, he is reading the concluding quatrain of T. S. Eliot' *The Hollow Men*:

*This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

At the same moment, a college sophomore hears the refrain of a song: *It's the end of the world as we know it*, as she studies Archibald MacLeish's sardonic sonnet, titled, *The End of the World*. The setting is a circus. The crowd and the performers are gathered under the bigtop, when:

*Quite unexpectantly, as Vasserot  
The armless ambidextrian was lighting  
A match between his great and second toe  
And Ralph the lion was engaged in biting  
The neck of Madame Sossman while the drum*

*Pointed and Teeny was about to cough  
In waltz-time swinging Jocko by the thumb  
Quite suddenly the top blew off  
And there, there overhead, there, there  
hung over  
Those thousands of white faces, those  
dazed eyes,  
There in the starless dark the poise,  
the hover,  
There with vast wings across the  
cancelled skies,  
There in the sudden blackness, the black  
pall  
Of nothing, nothing, nothing—nothing at  
all.*

Nothingness. Maybe that's what life is about—nothing. That's what Diana Trent believed. She was the shew in the old PBS Britcom, "Waiting for God." The series was set at Bayview, an upscale retirement home in Bournemouth. Diana Trent claimed to be a nihilist, saying that the old folks were not *Waiting for God*, but were *Waiting for Godot*, waiting like the clowns in Samuel Becket's play for the God who never comes. Day after day

for Diana, life was a meaningless slapstick comedy that would go on until she was planted in the ground and became food for worms.

Tom Ballard was Diana Trent's friend. The two oldsters couldn't be more different. He was a man of traditional faith, who ardently believed that life has intrinsic meaning. Against all Tom's protestations to the contrary, Diana would echo my melancholy early refrain: *I don't care, it doesn't matter; nothing matters, right?*

Toward the end of my melancholy period, I fell in love with Love, which manifested itself to me in a movie, *The Sound of Music*. I saw it seven times at the theatre. How many times I've watched in TV re-runs, I've never bothered to count. Christopher Plummer, who starred as Captain von Trapp in the film, liked it less than I. He was known to refer to it privately as "The Sound of Mucous." Julie Andrews played Maria, famously. Maria sang to the Captain the evening he asked her to marry him:  
*Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever  
could;  
So somewhere in my youth or childhood,*

*I must have done something good.*

Something did come from nothing once, when the Lord God created the earth, the planets and the stars. That was creation *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. But since then nothing has been nothing; every thing is something. Humans form, fashion and fabricate; we shape, structure and build. Humans have to have something to work with; God began with nothing—zero, zip, nada, *Nichts*—*NOTHING*.

I was accused of trying to make something out of nothing, once. I remember it well. On a 9<sup>th</sup> grade math quiz, I wrote that  $2 \times 0 = 2$ . Margaret Walker, my amused teacher, marked that wrong and remarked afterwards that nothing is still nothing, no matter how many times you multiply it. I was embarrassed.

Now I would like to have another crack at that conversation with Mrs. Walker, because she was partly right and partly wrong. Zero isn't nothing; zero is something, even mathematically. Every zero you add to the number left of a decimal multiplies that number

by ten; so even if I grant that two times zero is zero, I will not admit that zero is nothing; it is really something.

My wise ancient friend and repeated desert companion, the Rev. Dr. Harry Butman, wrote: *Indeed, a zero is something. It was invented by the Arabs, who knew that the emptiness of the desert was something (and something important).*

A zero in any column indicates an emptiness, an absence. Thus, the number 200 indicates an absence of numbers in the ones column and the tens column. The zero is a place marker for the numbers that may eventually occupy that column or once did. You cannot eliminate a zero without altering the number.

An absence isn't nothing; it is really something. Is there anybody of any age who does not know this? The infant already knows the terror (we call it "separation anxiety", but it is terror) of the absent parent. No one who has heard the little one's anguished wail can claim that is nothing. Every parent knows the absence of a

child isn't nothing, Whether the child has gone off to school for the first time or left home for the last time. The absence of a traveling spouse may bring relief or stress, but it isn't nothing. The death of loved ones leaves a big, indelible zero that marks a permanent place for them in our hearts. I say that zero is not nothing; it is really something,

The same can be said for the absence of God. Much is made of God's presence, but what of God's absence? To be in the presence of God is to be blessed and joyous. *Come into his presence with singing!* chants the psalmist (Psalm 100:2). And in another psalm: *Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from me* (Psalm 51:11). To be shut off from God or abandoned by God is a condition to be dreaded.

And when we are absent, one from another, that is not nothing. The congregation, by nature, congregates. When the congregation separates, as each week we know we must, we know that all kinds of mischief may transpire

during our absence from each other. So we say *Mizpah*—that ancient blessing/warning shared by Jacob and Laban—*The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent, one from another* (Genesis 31:49).

There is only one way I know for us to be nothing, for our lives to add up to nothing, for us to amount to nothing. Here it is. We are nothing if we do not love. God, who is All in all, IS love. We are never closer to God, to the All, than when we love. We are never father from God than when we do not. This is the gospel in a nutshell, and it was never more clearly expressed than by Paul, the poet, when he wrote what we have come to call the Love Chapter of First Corinthians. We err in believing that this is primarily about marriage. It is about the Christian life. Listen:

*If I speak I in the tongues of men and of and of angels . . . and if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am NOTHING. And if I give*

*away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain NOTHING.*

The way to live an unprofitable, nothing life, is not to love. The poet goes on to say what divine love is and does.

The implication is clear. How can we not love, when we have been so loved? How can our lives be nothing, when we are adored? The fact that we may not always have been adorable seems to matter not at all to the great Adorer!

I hope you are one of the happy millions who saw and loved the movie, *Moonstruck*. If so, you will remember it starred Cher as Loretta Castorini in the title role. Two of her co-stars were Olivia Dukakis and Vincent Gardenia, who played Loretta's parents as Rose and Cosmo Castorini. Cosmo, true to his name, is a man of the world. Cosmo Castorini is a world-weary Brooklyn plumbing contractor, who has a little sweetie on the side. His good wife, Rose, suspects it, but it is Loretta, the daughter, who stumbles across the clandestine couple at the

opera. Father and daughter are horrified by this chance meeting, because Loretta is also on a secret date with the brother of her fiancé.

The romantic deceptions come unraveled the next morning. Nothing of the previous evening is mentioned at the breakfast table, but Rose intuitively knows all. She addresses her husband, Cosmo.

Rose: Have I been a good wife?

Cosmo: (pause) . . . Yeah.

Rose: I want you to stop seeing her.

Cosmo: (after a pregnant pause, slowly rises, strikes the table top, grips the table edge, nods) Okay.

Rose: And go to confession.

Cosmo: (eyes downcast) A man understands one day that his life is built on nothing, and that is a bad, crazy day.

Rose: Your life is not built on nothing,  
*Te amo!*

Cosmo: (looking up) And I love you, too!

I speak now to anyone who believes that his or her life is a cipher, that it amounts to nothing.

That is a lie. Nothing that God has created amounts to nothing. You are not only something, you are somebody, and that is really something! I speak to anyone today who has ears to hear, who believes we come from nothing and proceed toward nothing. Since creation, everything has come from something, and we all proceed toward something. Even a vacuum isn't nothing. A void isn't nothing. A black hole isn't nothing. All these are somethings, parts of God's creation, which is doubtless put together just as God intended, whether or not it is clear to us.

Beyond this, the ringing affirmation of the Christian faith is that you are God's beloved child. Your life is not nothing! The God who hung the stars hears your prayers. Your Creator is also your keeper. *The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time forth and forever more* (Psalm 121:8).

So much is this so, that Paul, the poet, dares to utter one more comment on the subject of Nothing. Nothing can separate us from Christ's love or God's love. No power in the universe

can make absent the present love of God in Christ. Hear this with new ears!

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, no life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35, 36, 39).*

Zero, zip, *nada*, *Nichts*—NOTHING!