

God's Providence and Our Gratitude

Haggai 2: 4-5,9. Matthew 5: 43-45. Romans 8:28.

Let's talk today about gratitude in the face of all life can bring, in the best and worst of days and best and worst of times. In one of my favorite of Wendell Berry's novels, *Hannah Coulter*, Hannah, now old, looks over her long life filled with both profound joy and sorrow. She says, near the end of the book and her life:

"...you mustn't wish for another life. You mustn't want to be somebody else. What you must do is this [now quoting Paul]: "Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks." I am not all the way capable of so much, but those are the right instructions."

I

It is easier said than done, especially the "In everything give thanks" part. Life brings its challenges. My sermon title speaks of God's Providence. I don't think we use the word much. It used to be thought of as God's superintendence of the world in an almost mechanistic way. So everything that happened was the working and plan of God. As for the bad times, one hymn spoke of "Frowning Providence!" A pretty dreary theology. When bad things happen to us, we are

tempted to blame ourselves. God is judging us. We can feel so even if our theology teaches us better.

Jesus abolished such notions when he said, “For God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous”. (Matthew 5: 45) Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr calls this “the impartial goodness of God beyond good and evil”. God’s goodness is deeper than our categories of morality.

So, my best understanding of God’s Providence is this: God’s care for us as persons and at the same time the whole world. And, and, is God’s working in all things to bring good. One of the most beloved verses in the Bible is this from Jeremiah: “For I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not your harm, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11).

But God’s plan can be thwarted and people suffer great harm. Where is God’s Providence in this?

At the end of Genesis, we see Joseph having risen from prison to be the prince of Egypt. His brothers who had sold him into slavery in Egypt now stand before him quivering in fear that he might wreak revenge on them. But Joseph said to them:

“Do not be afraid. You planned evil against me but God planned-it-over for good.”

The Apostle Paul was getting at the same thing when he said, “We know that in everything[everything!] God works for good with those who love him.” (Romans 8:28) And if we take Jesus seriously, as in his words from Matthew, God works in everything for good with *everyone*, whether they know God or love God or not. In this world both beautiful and terrible things happen. God is at work with us, with all of us, in both.

II

The story comes from Corri Ten Boom who survived the Nazi concentration camps and has given inspiration to many. One day she and her sister were locked away in the terrible conditions of the concentration camp. Her sister reminded her of the verse to “give thanks in everything.” “There are things we can be thankful for”, she said. Corrie said, “I will give thanks—but not for the fleas!” Her sister said, “Yes, for the fleas too!”

The sisters would hold secret Bible study and prayer sessions in the stifling barracks. They used torn out pages of the Bible they had smuggled into prison . For some strange reason the guards never came in and broke up the illegal gatherings. Years later Corrie met a former prison guard and asked him why they

never came in and stopped the meetings. He said, “We wouldn’t come in because of the fleas!” Yes, give thanks for the fleas too!

One of the greatest American novelists of the last century was Flannery O’Conner. She was a brilliant young writer who had escaped the confines of her home town, Milledgeville, Georgia to pursue her writing career in the exalted literary circles of NY City. Then in 1951 , when she was 26, she discovered she had lupus, a debilitating illness which meant she had to return to her hometown to live with her mother.

At first, she greeted the news of her disease as a kind of death sentence. She wrote in a letter, “This is a Return I have faced, and when I faced it I was roped and tied and resigned the way it was necessary to be resigned to death, and largely because I thought it would end of any creation, any writing, any WORK from me.”

But in fact the reverse happened. Her limitation became the prism through which her greatest works came. Her sense of humor carried her. When she learned she would be on crutches the rest of her life, she wrote to a friend: “ I will henceforth be a creature with flying buttresses”.

She and God were planning-over her life.

You may have found some setbacks in life which however difficult have turned out to be turning points which have opened up some new avenues of fruitful life. In my own life, one of the most difficult and bitter setbacks I have suffered I now see as a “severe mercy”, to use C.S. Lewis’ words, and life has been made new.

III

Such workings of the Providence of God are seen on the massive scale of world history as well. One of them became the theme of a sermon I preached in earlier churches, and in different form, to you. I called it “The Tale of Two Cathedrals.” One was Durham Cathedral and the other Coventry Cathedral. This is the story.

During World War Two, the German blitzkrieg planned air attacks on both the cities of Durham and Coventry. When the planes approached Durham, a mysterious mist, said to be sent by God, settled over Durham and concealed it from the bomber pilots. “God has saved the cathedral,” the people exclaimed in praise and thanksgiving. It was as if God had protected it with his very Hand.

Now let’s turn to Coventry. Coventry’s Cathedral did not escape the scourge of war. Over the years Coventry had become an industrial town and during World

War Two had become a chief center for the production of instruments of war. No wonder, then, it was targeted for the German war planes.

On November 14, 1940, Coventry Cathedral died in the flames which destroyed the city around it. No mists covered the city that day. It was the first attempt to destroy a city in one single operation from the air. This devastating technique would be used many times after, by all sides, but this was the first, and a new word came into the language, to “coventrate”, which means to destroy utterly.

The city had a choice to make about how to respond to the devastation, the road of vengeance or the road of forgiveness and renewal. It’s a choice we all of us have to make when life has done its worst to us. At that moment of choice, to use the words of CS Lewis, “the angels of God hold their breath to see which way we will choose to go.”

The morning after the raid, the provost of the cathedral Richard Howard walked through the rubble with a small group. Among them was Jock Forbes, a stonemason and caretaker of the cathedral grounds. Kicking around in the rubble he found two charred beams from the 14th century roof and fastened them into a cross and planted the cross in the rubble, creating a Calvary. Another found three large roof nails in the rubble and fastened them into a cross. The road was taken.

As the new cathedral was planned, the words from Haggai became a prophecy for them: “The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former glory.” Haggai’s words themselves came from the ashes of the Temple in Jerusalem, thought inviolable, destroyed by the Babylonian army.

Those words illumine the latter glory of the Coventry Cathedral. Today, you enter the new cathedral by first walking through the ruins of the old. You come to a rough stone altar with the charred roof beams formed into the cross, and with the inscription “Father, Forgive.” On the altar is the cross formed from the iron nails found in the litter.

Then, you turn to your left and you enter the new cathedral. Its entire front facade is clear glass so that one can see the new cathedral from the old and the old cathedral from the new. As you enter the cathedral, you see the most astonishing collection of contemporary Christian art in the world, given by people from around the world.

As the new cathedral was being built, people came from around the world to help build it, including a German crew who stayed 6 months. As you approach the altar you see, instead of a stained-glass window, the largest tapestry in the world, with the Risen Christ wearing a workman’s apron, his nail scarred hands raised in blessing. As you leave, you see the inscription beneath the stained-glass window,

To The Glory Of God

This Cathedral Burnt

November 14, 1940

Is Now Rebuilt 1962

The cathedral stands as emblem of forgiveness and reconciliation. A worldwide community has arisen called the Community of the Cross of Nails which works for reconciliation.

These two cathedrals stand for me as a parable of our lives. Is Coventry more your story, or is Durham? When I preached this sermon in Fort Worth, by divine happenstance, we dedicated two twin boys, fraternal twins, one was born with normal chromosomes, the other with the extra chromosome which made him a Down Syndrome child. As I carried them both in my arms down the aisle, we blessed them both and God gave thanks for them both. Durham, Coventry.

If Coventry is your story, and you have sifted through the wreckage of your life, I pray from the ashes will come a resurrection. It may not happen overnight. If Durham is your story? Think back to the morning after the Durham Cathedral was saved by the mists. Who should have stifled the cry of thanksgiving to God that day? Even as other cities were being bombed.

If Durham is your story, if life has been kind and you have lived the abundance of life God wants for us all, do not be ashamed to raise your thanks to God. Simply, give thanks, give thanks, give thanks.