

LEARNED ANYTHING YET?

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, September 28, 2014,
In Celebration of 30 Years Since My Ordination.**

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thirty Years – a Front-Row Seat to Life

Thirty years since my ordination as a pastor, and I have two observations to make: First, as to the title of the sermon, have I “Learned Anything Yet? Here’s hoping. I do feel, however, that I’m flying by the seat of my pants most of the time. Second, virtually everything I learned in seminary is of little value to me. And so you learn as you go, I suppose.

Let me start with the statement that I have been very nostalgic this past summer. It began one week in June, when I had two funerals, both of which were for people that I had known for more than 25 years. Doing the funeral and being professional, it’s hard not to remember that it’s been a long time to have known somebody and to have been friends for so many years. Those funerals were during the week, and that weekend I went to the first church that I was called to in Troy, Pennsylvania, a little town of 1,600 people, in order to do a wedding for a young woman who was now in her 20’s. She is professional, college-educated, and I baptized her as a little baby, so I’m thinking about that while performing the wedding and turning my mind to the passage of time.

As I look back over the years, there are many things that come to mind, but an important one I want to mention now is that it is an unbelievable honor to be present with people during the transition times of our lives.

Baptisms, weddings, funerals – those are the big ones, but there are also confirmations, engagement parties, retirement parties, and the like. In addition, there are more-private conversations like one in which I was talking with a person as she decided to get a divorce. Or sitting in a hospital room when a patient learns about the presence of cancer. I’ve listened to and counseled families as they deliberate withdrawing life support from a dying parent, an agonizing decision. And there have been a few times when I’ve been holding the hand of a friend when he died.

To be part of the human family during those times is in many ways a front-row seat to life, for good or ill.

Doing this for 30 years has also given me a sense of the way in which God works in our lives. Only now have I begun to sense what Jesus meant when he made the observation that the

kingdom of God is like yeast added to a lump of dough. The yeast leavens the dough; the kingdom of God vivifies, or leavens, humanity. It grows, but slowly and incrementally, and if you're distracted, you won't notice the growth. But it is happening; suddenly you look back and see that life was all along saturated with divinity.

So it's been an honor to be a minister, and it has been a *real* honor to be *your* minister. I could not have imagined a better group of people with whom to walk this journey. And so as we enter the autumn of 2014, I thank you for being my church and my friends as we walk this road together.

“Cascading Trophes” Flag the Ecology of Yellowstone

Now the sermon. The first part comes from once again playing around for entirely too much time on the Internet.

I came across a short video with the title “Cascading Trophes.” Catchy title. I'm sure you too would watch that video if you saw the title. I had no idea what a trophé is, so I looked it up, and it has to do with where you get your nutrition. Two words that use the trophé concept occur when a seed sprouts. The root is geotropic, which means that it somehow knows it must grow down into the earth because that's where the root will find nutrition. The stem and the leaves are heliotropic, which means that they have the instinct to grow upward toward the light.

Now I'd like to read the three-minute text of the video. It will explain the concept of cascading trophes. This is not for the story alone but for what it means, which is something pretty deep.

“One of the most exciting scientific findings of the past half-century has been the discovery of widespread trophic cascades. A trophic cascade is an ecological process that starts at the top of the food chain and tumbles all the way down to the bottom. The classic example is what happened in Yellowstone National Park in the United States when wolves were reintroduced in 1995.

“We all know that wolves kill various species of animals, but perhaps we're slightly less aware that they give life to many others. Before the wolves turned up – and they had been absent for 70 years – the numbers of deer, because there had been nothing to hunt them, had built up in Yellowstone Park, and despite efforts by humans to control them, they had managed to reduce much of the vegetation there to almost nothing. They had just grazed it away.

The Remarkable Effects of Reintroducing Wolves

“But as soon as the wolves arrived, even though they were few in number, they started to have the most remarkable effect. First, of course, they killed some of the deer. That wasn't the major thing, though. Much more significantly, they radically changed the behavior of the deer. The deer started avoiding certain parts of the park and places where

they could be trapped most easily, particularly the valleys and the gorges, and immediately those places started to regenerate.

“In some areas, the height of the trees quintupled in just six years. Bare valley sides quickly became forests of aspen and willow and cottonwood. And as soon as that happened, the birds started moving in. The numbers of songbirds and migratory birds started to increase greatly. The number of beavers started to rise because beavers like to eat trees, and beavers, like wolves, are ecosystem engineers. They create niches for other species. The dams they built, as well as the rivers, provided habitats for otters, muskrats, ducks, fish, reptiles, and amphibians.

“The wolves killed coyotes, and as a result of that, the numbers of rabbits and mice began to rise, which meant more hawks and weasels and foxes and badgers. Ravens and bald eagles came down to feed on the carrion that the wolves had left. Bears fed on it too, and their population began to go up as well, partly because now there were more berries growing on the regenerating shrubs. The bears reinforced the impact of the wolves by killing some of the fawns of the deer.

“Here’s where it gets really interesting. The wolves changed the behavior of the rivers. They began to meander less. There was less erosion. The channels narrowed. More pools and ripples formed, all of which were great for wildlife habitat. The rivers changed in response to the wolves. The reason was that the regenerating forests stabilized the banks so that they collapsed less often, so the rivers became more fixed in their courses. Similarly, by driving the deer out of some places, such as the vegetation recovering on the valley side, there was less soil erosion because the vegetation stabilized that as well.

“So the wolves, while few in number, transformed not just the ecosystem of Yellowstone National Park, this huge area of land, but also its physical geography.”

On the video – look it up if you want to – you can hear that text in a compelling British accent, which everybody knows is easy to listen to. But you will see a beautifully done video about the concept of “Cascading Trophes.” When I saw it, I was deeply moved. It’s a cool story, but it went beyond that. The impact on me was to make me think about it for days on end.

Finally, it dawned on me why the effect was so strong. I’m somewhat reticent to say so, but for me it was a deep thought. Now I want you to think in terms of scale. Here’s something that happened over the course of, let’s say, a century. For 70 years, the wolves had been gone, and now for 30 more years they have been back in a space of a couple thousand square miles, more or less to use round numbers. That’s the space and the time frame in which this happened.

**Every Thought and Action Ripples Beyond the Self
to Affect both Microscopic and Telescopic Scales**

This effect of doing good, of preserving something the way it should be, returning it to its natural state, has the same power at smaller scales, smaller time frames, as well as at larger scales. The idea that occurred to me is that it's happening at all these different orders of magnitude at the same time. For example, on a microscopic scale, a word you say is *never* without impact. Everything that you say, for good or ill, every bit of gossip, every kind thing that you say ripples out through the entirety of nature and beyond.

Let's get more microscopic. Every thought that you have, I mean seriously, aren't those moments extremely private, unknown in any way to others? No, they're not! Every thought that you have, as it ripples out, affects the kind of person you are. The things you do and the things you say become a little more obvious, a little bigger, and then those things ripple out as well. Every bug you squash, every unkind word, every kind word, every good thought that you say ripples out at a smaller scale, the scale of one human being to another. Then this happens at a medium scale, and then who knows what is happening at a telescopic scale? Or what is happening to our earth as a result of the collective thoughts of humanity?

I'm sitting here trying to think about this, and it dawns on me that it is just simply true, which is why I'm telling it as part of a sermon. It is just simply true that every thought we have has this kind of power, this kind of effect. And so therefore, when something negative comes your way, you should dissipate it and return it with kindness.

Jesus said, "Love your enemy." If somebody steals your cloak, offer the other one as well. Take the negative, whatever form it may assume, even if it has a thousand forms, and dispel the negative. Return love, kindness, compassion, and make that ripple out into the world. For me, that's a deep thought.

The second part of the sermon has to do with what was arguably the worst day of my life. It was in the late '80's on a Saturday. On Wednesday of that week, two people in the church had died. One was an elderly man in a nursing home, and so that death wasn't tragic. He had lived a full life and had come to his end. But then there was a 60-year-old man who was at an eye appointment, sitting in the waiting room to have his eyes checked. His wife went to the bathroom, came back, and he was gone. He was still sitting there; he didn't even fall over, and he was gone.

Then on Saturday morning the third death of that week in this church, was little Katie Titus, a teenage girl. Her mom was the new principal of Binghamton High School. Katie was in a car of four people, going too fast and unable to make a turn. The car hit a tree. Three of the passengers suffered hardly a scratch, but Katie died on impact. I was with that family for the whole day.

**What It's Like to Step up to the Pulpit
Not Knowing What to Say; Try Plato**

Another part of the story was that my relationship with that church had become very toxic. It was time for me to go, and I was trying to do so. I had interviewed for a position at the national Presbyterian headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky, and had gotten the job. I was about a week away from announcing to the church that I was going to be moving to Louisville in order to take this new position.

Saturday night at 8:30, my would-be boss called me to tell me he had been fired, and therefore my new job no longer existed. So I hung up the phone, thinking about the three funerals I had to do, one of which was a teenager. It was Saturday night, and I had no idea what to say on Sunday morning. I've had a few bad days in my life; this was on the short list. And so I didn't know what to speak about in my sermon.

Finally Sunday morning rolls around, and I step up to the pulpit, and I still haven't decided what to say. What came out amazed me. Having gone through the fire of the last few days, I ended up preaching on Plato of all things. I sort of went back to my roots talking about the interplay of truth, beauty, and goodness.

The Three Transcendentals: . . .

I'd never fully realized the importance to me of Truth with a capital "T," beauty, and goodness. These were what Plato and Socrates and Aristotle called the transcendentals, named thus because these were the things that took hold of you and moved you beyond the mediocrity of daily life, moved you past where you were, made you a better, more vital person.

An observation that I've always found to be true and elegant is that you never encounter truth, beauty, and goodness isolated from each other. If you find something that is true and good, it will be beautiful in your eyes. If you find something good and beautiful, it's not going to be false. It will be true. If you find something true and beautiful, chances are it's good.

Now here's a not-so-deep thought: It's rather obvious that all three of these things are ascertained by the heart, not by the mind. Let me persuade you of this axiom if I can.

. . . Truth . . .

You can talk about something that's true, like a mathematical proof, and you can use your mind to say yes, that is a legitimate proof. C follows B follows A, and therefore it is true. But that's only the tip of the iceberg if you consider how we use truth in our daily lives.

Truth with a capital "T" is more like asking, Is this politician going to do what he or she says will be done? Or is this business deal going to work out the way I'm led to believe it will? Or you're dating someone, and you ask yourself, Is this person the right one for me? True or false; yes or no? The way in which you answer those deeper questions has almost nothing to do with your mind and everything to do with your heart.

. . . Beauty . . .

I probably don't need to persuade you about beauty. Analysis of a beautiful face will show, for example, that it is more symmetrical than an ugly face. However, one ought not to be constrained by the ideal of symmetry alone because beauty is often found in the duality of symmetry and asymmetry, as in modern art and in nature itself. There may be a little left-brain activity in the perception of beauty, but very little. It has to do mostly with the heart.

. . . And Goodness

And then goodness. What is good? Good is often what feels right to you at the moment of observation. Again, it has to do mostly with the heart.

Four centuries before Christ, the ancient Greeks gave these transcendentals the name "hyperbaino," which means "to transcend." (The "o" turns "hyperbain" into an infinitive.) The "bain" root means basically "to move." (It can mean to come or to go, but more generally it means "to move.") Hyper means "above." ("Hypo," as in "hypodermic" means "below," as in "below the skin.")

The Greeks offered the combination of these virtues as a way of moving humanity to a higher plane, beyond the petty, beyond the stupid, beyond the mediocre. This motivation was, for them and many others, to impel humanity toward the interplay of the ideals of truth, beauty, and goodness.

That was their definition of god. Moving humanity toward godliness, ascertained by the heart and fed by the mind and body, which then ripples out to influence our world toward goodness.

Amen.