

SURPASSING WORTH

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, October 8, 2017

Lectionary Readings: Psalm 19 and Philippians 4: 4-9.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“**T**he Glad Game” Is to Banish the Mopes from a Positive Attitude

There was an unspeakably horrific massacre in Las Vegas on October 1. I’m not going to dwell on it, but I do want to acknowledge the carnage at the Mandalay Bay hotel. It has affected my thinking, of course, for this coming week, as it has done for all of you. A good friend of mine is the pastor of one of the Presbyterian churches in Las Vegas, and so I’m thinking about him this morning in particular.

I’ve also been thinking about a 1960 movie. See if this brings back memories for some of you. The title character is Pollyanna Whittier, a young orphan who goes to live in the fictional town of Beldingsville, Vermont, with her wealthy but stern and cold spinster Aunt Polly, who does not want to take in Pollyanna but feels it is her duty to her late sister. Pollyanna’s philosophy centers on what she calls “The Glad Game,” an optimistic and positive attitude she learned from her father.

The game consists of finding something to be glad about in every situation, no matter how bleak it may be. It originated in an incident one Christmas morning when Pollyanna, who was hoping for a doll in the missionary barrel, found only a pair of crutches in it. Making up the game on the spot, Pollyanna’s father taught her to look on the good side of things

— in this case, to be glad because she didn’t need to use crutches.

With this philosophy, and her own sunny personality and sincere, sympathetic soul, Pollyanna brought so much gladness to her aunt’s dispirited New England town that she transformed it into a pleasant place to live. The Glad Game shielded her from her aunt’s stern attitude: When Aunt Polly put her in a stuffy attic room without carpets or pictures, she exulted in the beautiful view from the high window. When she tried to “punish” her niece for being late to dinner by sentencing her to a meal of bread and milk in the kitchen with the servant, Nancy, Pollyanna thanked her aunt rapturously because she likes bread and milk, and she really is fond of Nancy.

Soon Pollyanna teaches some of Beldingsville’s most troubled inhabitants to “play the game” as well, from a querulous invalid named Mrs. Snow to a miserly bachelor, Mr. Pendleton, who lives all alone in a cluttered mansion. Aunt Polly, too — finding herself helpless before Pollyanna’s buoyant refusal to be downcast — gradually begins to thaw, although she resists The Glad Game longer than anyone else.

In our culture, being labeled Pollyanna or Pollyanna-ish is actually an insult. It means that you’re unrealistically positive, and that’s

what I'm wrestling with today. I have an extremely high view of humanity, as you all know: Made in the image of God; children of God; the kingdom of heaven within us — all these kinds of good things. Am I being Pollyanna-ish? That's for you to decide.

“It Is no Measure of Health to Be Well-Adjusted to a Profoundly Sick Society”

On the flip side of it, this bloodbath happened on Sunday night, so it was in the paper on Tuesday. On Monday morning, when Conan O'Brien arrived at work, the show's head writer handed him a file containing the remarks he made following the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012 and the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in 2016. The writer of the file had suggested that O'Brien review his prior comments before responding to the shooting in Las Vegas that left more than 50 people dead and more than 500 injured. Then a quote came from O'Brien:

“That struck me. How could there be a file of mass shooting remarks for a late-night host? When did that become normal? When did this become a ritual? And what does it say about us that it has?”

Well, that's the nonpollyanna side of me. Here's another short quote before I get into the rest of my sermon. This is from Krishnamurti, a spiritual teacher for the ages, in which he said very simply:

“It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society.”

People Exhibiting Anger, Violence, Fear Show That the Root Is Spiritual

What do I talk about today? It is a core belief of mine that, when people exhibit anger, hatred, fear, violence, any of those kinds of emotions, generally speaking, more often than not, their root is spiritual in nature. Yes, there are chemical imbalances. Yes, there are genetic markers for aberrant behavior. But generally speaking, spiritual malaise, spiritual illness, spiritual trauma can be found at the heart, at the root, at the bottom of such behavior, no matter whether the trauma is minor — somebody being angry and lashing out at other people — or whether it's major.

What I'd like to remind you of is the nature of divinity because it is also my opinion that the more we recognize and incorporate the quality of God into our souls, the more we realize intellectually and heart-wise the nature of divinity, the healthier we'll be. It's sort of simple. Apprehending, heart and mind, the nature of divinity is truly healthy for us.

Here's the Best of Theological Suggestions for Recognizing and Incorporating the Soul

Here are some of the best of what theologians have come up with over the course of the centuries. Let me give you a few examples. It's all a reminder. You've heard it before, but it's good for us. Let me build a little on these suggestions:

- I. Number one. Back in the '50's, a generation ago, there was a renowned theologian by the name of Paul Tillich, who coined the phrase that divinity is the ground of our being, and that phrase became famous because of him. God being the ground of our being, I'd like you to think about it in two ways: One way to think about the ground of our being is a

plant. Every one of you has fooled around in the dirt, has done your share of gardening of one type or another, whether it's an oak tree or a blade of grass. You have a visceral feeling for the value of earth, ground, dirt to a plant. It draws its life from the ground, and so it's a metaphor that we as spiritual beings are rooted into the ground of our being, and so the metaphor is just like the plant. Our spiritual nature is rooted into divinity.

There's a second way of thinking about the ground of our being, and it goes back to the beginning of the Bible, the very first chapter. You'll remember that the name given for the first human being was Adam, and then along came Eve. In Hebrew, it's *the* human being, *the* man or the person, and in Hebrew it's "ha adam," and the word for ground is "adamah." So it's a play on words. Right from the beginning, the Bible says that the name for Adam came from "ha adam." The human being comes from the ground, it comes from the dirt. It's that same understanding that we are rooted into the ground of our being.

II. Number two. The second theological suggestion is every bit as powerful. It's probably *the* primal metaphor for divinity throughout the New Testament. It's also in the Old Testament but is not emphasized as much in the Old Testament as in the New Testament. And that is divinity as

spirit / air / breath / wind / tropical breezes / "ruach" in Hebrew / pneuma" in Greek. This notion is that divinity is like the air, but the key point is that the air is all around us and within us, and it is linked to life. Stop breathing, and you die. Everybody knows that. It's within us and all about us. And it's primal in its metaphoric message throughout the New Testament and the Old Testament.

But it doesn't stop there. It also says, particularly in the New Testament, that God is the Bread of Life, God is the Water of Life, and I'd like to point out something that's pretty important, if you ask me, and that is that *every single thing necessary for human life is likened to divinity in the New Testament* — breath, air, food, water, shelter, love, relationship. We are a communal species. Put people in solitary confinement, and they wither, wither, wither until they die. If you take a baby and you never touch it, you never hold it, you never caress it, the baby will die pretty quickly. We are a communal species, we need relationship, love; we need shelter; we need bread and water; and we need air.

Now you tell me. Is that a coincidence? That every single necessity of human life is likened to divinity in our scriptures?

III. The third theological suggestion. As I have told some of you privately, I've had to do a number of

atheistic weddings of late, where one or the other of the couple is a hard-core atheist, so do not mention God. Meanwhile, they're asking a Christian minister to do the service, and so what I've preached on for these atheistic weddings is Plato, and to note the interplay of truth, beauty, and goodness. It's a way of sliding it right in there. They don't suspect a thing, and it's a lot of fun. But for Plato, the interplay of truth, beauty and goodness was his definition of divinity.

Think about it for a moment. Think deeply for a moment, and you never find those characteristics isolated one from the others. If you find something that's true and good, it's going to be beautiful. If you find something good and beautiful, it's going to be true. If you find something true and beautiful, it's good. And this interplay of those three very difficult-to-define entities was Plato's notion of what divinity is, pervading humanity.

- IV. The fourth theological suggestion for recognizing and incorporating the soul harks back to my favorite analogy. I don't want to disappoint you this morning. From Einstein, here's a quote. You've heard it before, but this is the full quote, whereas I usually give you just a portion of it. This statement of physics is now a century old, published in 1915, when Einstein said in his seminal paper on general relativity:

“Particles are merely local condensations of the field — concentrations of energy which come and go, thereby losing their individual character and dissolving into the underlying field. We may therefore regard matter as being constituted by the regions of space in which the field is extremely intense. There is no place in this new kind of physics both for the field and matter, for the field is the only reality.”

Now *here* we have a metaphor that is supreme for the nature of our reality, for the nature of divinity and physicality in our world. And what's difficult about this is that it's hard to tell where the metaphor ends and literal truth begins. The field is the only reality, and this field somehow or other is created and conscious and loving. It's like the air that we breathe and the rootedness of our groundedness into the earth.

- V. Finally, one more theological suggestion. This, I would submit to you, is one of the equations in the Bible that says quite simply, God is Love. But there's a problem in that this unmistakably simple statement is diluted by what people hear when it is said. What's diluting about this simple sentence is that people hear it as God is *lov-ing*. Or a loving act is attributed to God. But what these

three words actually say is different. They say no more, no less than God *is* love. *Is* love — an ontological philosophical statement.

The very simplicity of this statement is that, if there's any experience of love in your lives — and there is, lots of it, there's a multiplicity of love in each of our lives — it is divine. It's yet one more way in which the wholeness of divinity is like the air that we breathe. Our groundedness is within us and all about us in our relationships, in the loves of our lives.

My suggestion to you is that, the more we incorporate these kinds of scriptural teachings into our lives, the healthier we will be, individually and as a society.

I'll conclude with one more story, reminder style. It's a story you've heard before, but it's a good one, the story of Saint Veronica. This is not found in the Bible. It's a matter of legend. Carrying his cross, Jesus stopped and stumbled, and a woman comes and wipes his face. Now this is one of the stations of the cross in our legend, but there's a deeper meaning to it.

The first meaning is that the image of Christ's face was on the cross, and so you see artwork that has the outline of his face on this cloth that was wiped by a woman, a stranger while he carried his cross. But that's not really the best meaning of it at all. It is that we have no idea who this person was, but she has been named Veronica, which is a Latin name that means "true image." "Ver" and then "veracity," which means "trueness," the icon. And so it's in the act of compassion that we are the image of Christ.

Amen.