

Sermon: Year A, Proper 18

Texts: Exodus 3:1-15

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

The novelist Julian Barnes recently joined a number of his literary colleagues in writing a book about dying – dying not in the Hallmark card fashion, compassed round by a great array of softening consolations, but rather dying in the stark light of admitting that there is no God and, therefore, no something of any kind that comes after death. Mr. Barnes openly acknowledges that he is getting older. He is at that stage in life when death seems to sneak into the picture with uncomfortable frequency, so what else could he do but address it head on as writers do, with words and quotations gathered from other brave souls who dared to contemplate death directly and, thereby, face up to life in all its contingency.

Julian Barnes is witty and urbane. His mind is sharp and his pen is unsparing. Eloquence has its own attractions, regardless of what, in fact, is said, and in this way Barnes' prose is compelling – even when he ultimately decides that life is no more than “an over-rated way of passing time.” The magic of literary art can sometimes make even such a degradation as this look impressive.

But what caught my attention more than this was a lengthy preceding observation: “Bumper stickers and fridge magnets,” he wrote, “remind us that Life Is Not a Rehearsal.” Nothing follows our demise. “[Therefore] we encourage one another towards the secular modern heaven of self-fulfillment: the development of the personality, the relationships which help define us, the status-giving job, the material goods, the ownership of property, the foreign holidays, the acquisition of savings, the accumulation of sexual exploits, the visits to the gym, the consumption of culture.” And then comes this summary conclusion. “It all adds up to happiness,” he says. It's quite a list – very au courant, a mirror that shows many of us our own reflection.

But his conclusion isn't finished with just this phrase. For Barnes includes a final gnawing caveat, tacked on to the end, like a questioning echo that reverberates, without fading. What he wrote, in full, was this: “It all adds up to happiness, doesn't it” and then, across the stretch of a long dash mark, this question is increased to the suggestion of doubt by its immediate repetition, “It all adds up to happiness, doesn't it -- doesn't it?”

His thoughts are not that original. One hundred seventy years ago, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said something eerily similar. Kierkegaard, too, was a writer, a man of letters, a bon vivant, and in 1836 he left this note in his diary: “I have just now come from a gathering where I was the life of the party; witticisms flowed out of my mouth; everybody laughed, admired me – but I left, yes, [and] the dash ought to be as long as the radii of the earths orbit -----
----- [I left] and wanted to shoot myself.”

No mere words, however brilliant, alleviate the power of the dashes that both men drew – the dashes that divide desire from truth. And life itself is suspended from those dashes. It seems to hang in the balance, as if always caught between our bravado and our fears, our fragile confidence and an ever-shadowing despair, the masks we gleefully wear and the emptiness we

can sometimes feel, acutely, at the very same time. In spite of all the delights that Barnes listed, the pleasures, the drives, the layers of possible accomplishments – all the business of living large – it is still that single dash that remains most prominent, most haunting, a gap, a silence that cannot name but shows us our real condition, revealed in this lingering suspension: “doesn’t it – doesn’t it?”

I am a Christian, because faith intersects with life exactly at the point of this fundamental ambiguity and question. But I find, more and more, that what I understand Christian faith to be is mangled by popular misconceptions that are hard to eliminate. Allow me a few clarifications. I am not a Christian because it provides me an answer to the doubt that Julian Barnes raises. I have no seamless vision of life that makes everything swell or, as is so publicly fashionable today, offers me the prideful satisfaction of my own individual justice, when everyone else gets what he or she deserves and I can sit, with superior airs, in the catbird seat. Nor am I a Christian because I believe God will make me more successful or, for that matter, happier. That dash never disappears. I know the uneasiness of that mysterious space.

The reason I am a Christian is because I am persuaded that God has made that dash his own passion. God’s word speaks where our words fail. I am a Christian because that singular dash, when viewed from God’s perspective, from God’s self-testimony in Jesus, becomes the means by which hope, grace, and love all reach their fullest expression – for us, first; within us, thereafter. The Creation is affirmed by God’s own Incarnation. God’s Incarnation is affirmed by Jesus’ Resurrection. And Jesus’ Resurrection, given as a promise to all, fulfills the Creation. In the recitation of this enacted truth, bread and wine become the real presence of God, so that God may dwell in us and we in him. And this dogged, eternal presence, crossing over to us from God, shows us not that life is an “over-rated way of passing time,” but that time is God’s gift by which the immeasurable richness of life can be revealed. I am a Christian because God’s providence, which is the whole working of the world, surpasses all the doubt I can muster or suffer or, as we so often do, casually entertain as a curious, abstract question reserved for Sunday mornings.

As a last bit of advice, Julian Barnes recommended that we should view death "from the point of view of those who have never heard of [us] -- which is", he noted, "... almost everybody. Unknown person dies: not many mourn. That," he says, "is our certain obituary in the eyes of the rest of the world." Which may be true, but excludes what is most important – for every Sunday we stand to be reminded that God knows and God remembers and God has reached down to redeem the all of all of us. “Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid.” If we were to follow the supposed wisdom of Barnes’ wholesale resignation, all we would be left with is a vicious circle that keeps us spinning from death’s indifference back to a frenzy of activities by which we vainly try to be exceptional. Which doesn’t work.

But I am a Christian because God’s infinite attentiveness to all creation affords us the grace to step off this treadmill so that we may value even every small moment under the conviction that this and this and this and this – these pearls of time – are all vivid intimations of the very Kingdom of Heaven that God is bringing about. Isaiah proclaimed that the vengeance of God is this: that God will grant to those who mourn a garland instead of ashes, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit, even in the face of death. We have the audacity to read this word at the

time of burial. How does this compare? “Unknown person dies: not many mourn.” “The Lord has appointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to give the oil of gladness instead of mourning.”

This transformation is echoed beautifully by Paul in the passage read this morning, in a statement equally radical and placed within our own present tense. “Owe no one anything,” he wrote, “except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” *Love* fulfills – not obedience, not strength, not diligence, not esteem, not dominance, but love received, in order to be given. *Love fulfills* – it edifies, it builds up, it nurtures and heals, it forgives and embraces, it overcomes and comes over, crossing the distances we naturally place between ourselves, every dash of worried question.

I listen to many of the strident, anxious, selfish voices of our time. They often sound like Julian Barnes without the eloquence. How much does the world need to hear Isaiah and Paul instead, from us, when by our words and actions we offer a more eloquent, skillful and practiced hope.

I am a Christian, I relish worship, I yearn for Sunday because it is the love of God that makes life full, isn't it ----- isn't it.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen

* Quotations of Julian Barnes book, Nothing to be Frightened of, were taken from the Washington Post's review of the book by Michael Dirda, August 31, 2008.