

“But Don’t the Suit Fit Nice”

Sunday, October 23, 2005

The Rev. W. Frederick Wooden



Fountain Street Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan

“But Don’t the Suit Fit Nice”

READINGS

Nature never repeats herself, and the possibility of one human soul will never be found in another.

– **Elizabeth Cady Stanton**

Whatever crushes individuality is despotism, by whatever name it may be called and whether it professes to be enforcing the will of God or the injunctions of men.

– **John Stuart Mill**

Philippians 2: 12 *Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

Exodus 33: 12 *Moses said to the Lord, "See, You say to me, 'Lead this people forward,' but You have not made known to me whom You will send with me... if I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know Your ways, that I may know You and continue in Your favor.*

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RESPONSIVE READING

ONE: Small as is our world compared with the infinitude of creation.

ALL: Brief as is our life compared with the cycles of time,

ONE: We are so tethered to all by beautiful dependencies that not only the sparrow’s fall is felt to the uttermost bound

ALL: But the vibrations set in motion by our words reach through all space and the tremor is felt through all time.

Maria Mitchell, American astronomer

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SERMON

Once I imagined myself to be a composer, creating great melodies and symphonies. Then I was going to be a conductor of those melodies. When life took a turn, I imagined myself a scholar of religion, penetrating the fog of theology with great books. After that, I saw myself as a great preacher whose oratory moved people to live nobler lives. Those are just highlights. I also fancied myself a poet, a pundit, a prophet. But when I look back, I got the most reward and renown for being funny. So when I got here and learned that my auspicious predecessor, who had already eclipsed me as preacher and scholar, was famously inept at telling jokes, I had an epiphany - Be the funniest preacher Fountain Street Church ever had, maybe even Grand Rapids. Maybe even...

So a man walks into a tailor shop one day, looking for a suit. The salesperson pounces. "Here, this one is perfect," he says, thrusting a hangar into his hands.

The man looks dubious, but agrees to try it on. When he walks out he looks preposterous and is furious at the salesman. "Look at this jacket; it's too big and won't stay on my shoulders."

"Well sir," he says, "if you just put your chin over here on the lapel it will fit just fine. Look at the drape. Marvelous. Marvelous."

"But the pants! They are falling off me."

"Generously cut, I admit, but if you reach your hand over here and slip your finger in a belt loop and hold it, you can see that it hangs beautifully. It looks marvelous, truly marvelous" And the customer had to admit the cloth was very fine.

Well, to make a long story short, the man actually bought the suit, so persuasive was the salesperson, and even wore it out of the store. And as he was walking along the street, two acquaintances saw him from the other side. "Goodness, Harry looks terrible," said one.

"Yeah," said the other, "but don't the suit fit nice."

While my own ambitions have diminished over the years, my ambitions for liberal religion have grown. So when I had the chance to come here, I leapt at it, for there is no better place to work for the future of liberal religion than here. And if we have a few laughs as well?

But this is far more than a pulpit for my antics. When John Winthrop preached to the future settlers of Boston while on board the rickety ship the Arbella, he emphasized that they were to be like the famous 'city on a hill,' that would be judged by how well they lived not by how well they preached. So it must be here. We are the city on the hill for liberal religion, and like Winthrop's Boston, how we live will be our beacon more than what I say as a preacher.

Thus my ambitions for Liberal Religion are exactly my ambitions for Fountain Street Church – to create here a new "*Modell of Christian Charitie*" as Winthrop's sermon was titled, rooted in an intelligible theology that leads to lives where being human and being religious are synonymous. So this morning I begin to create for you my vision of liberal religion, which is my vision for Fountain Street Church, which is my vision of the world as it could be and should be.

And it all starts with that joke I told. The more I think about it, there is a lot of religion that essentially says: "No matter what size life you have, there is only one size religion for sale: When you find the jacket doesn't really fit, you have to slouch. When the pants fall down, you have to hold them up. In short, if the suit don't fit, it's your problem. The result, in my estimation, is a lot of people out there hobbling about while admiring how nice their spiritual clothes look.

For example, Rick Warren and Joel Osteen are getting rich and famous touching on people's desire to have a meaningful life: *The Purpose Driven Life*,¹ *Your Best Life Now*. But when I read them, the end message is the same: Evangelical Christianity. One spiritual suit fits all. No matter how different we are, we all apparently need exactly the same thing.



People are individuals. Perhaps no species other than dogs is so variable in shape and size and appearance. That we expect to be different is easily inferred by how much we stare when we see twins or triplets. Being alike is the exception. Being unique is the rule. It is so clear biologically, that I am startled it has never struck us as a basic fact of being human. Religion has obsessed about human nature for millennia, and whether we are cursed or blessed, and so on. Why has it not occurred to us that being individuals is part of being human?

Now, if you believe in God and that this God had something to do with creating things, then it is hard not to wonder if our individuality isn't intentional. If you fur-

ther believe that humans bear a resemblance to God, then our individuality may even be part of our divine nature. At the very least, you understand the Danish theologian Kierkegaard when he said, "... in the eyes of God, the infinite spirit, all the millions that have lived and now live do not make a crowd, He only sees each individual." For those who don't believe in a creator God and prefer a scientific view, the diversity of the human race must be one favored by natural selection. It is advantageous and useful or we would not have it. In other words, being individual is the way things are supposed to be. But conventional religion keeps selling one size for everyone, insisting we have to adapt to it, not the other way around. Shouldn't it be the other way around?

Yes. Religion ought to be bespoke, tailored, customized. Liberal religion is about religion that fits you, not you it. That's because it sees individuality, the fact that we each have distinct lives and minds, as a blessing not a curse. And its intense belief in spiritual freedom – personal freedom of belief including non-belief – emerges from this prior belief in the sanctity of the individual.

I just used a phrase - sanctity of the individual. That's an important notion that deserves some analysis. Sanctity means sacred, which means something of ultimate value, and thus to be defended as essential. Since we so scrupulously avoid anything that smacks of dogma, how can we say "sanctity of the individual" without violating that freedom we all cherish?

Any one of us would defend our personal lives if threatened, as our personal individual lives are sacred to each of us. Whether we actually fight, or flee, we would take drastic action to preserve our existence. Liberal religion takes that fact, that we instinctively protect our personal lives, to be proof of the inherent value of the individual. And consider the word itself, individual, which means something smaller than which there cannot be. What is it that cannot be smaller than one person? Human life. It comes in units exactly the size of one person, no more and no less. An arm cannot think; a city cannot love. The only form of humanity is the individual person.



So the sanctity of the individual is not a notion handed to us from on high, but an objective fact that liberal religion holds to be self-evident. It has also long been a dogma, if there is such a thing here, at Fountain Street Church. For me to proclaim the individual as the foundation of liberal religion at Fountain Street Church would seem to be saying nothing new.

But I am saying something new. I am saying our individuality also has purpose. Again, if you believe in God, individuality has something purposeful in it, intended as it were.

Or if you are not a theist, there is something useful in it or it would not have survived the rigors of natural selection. As one who tends toward William James's notion of pragmatism, which says any idea worth holding has an actual outcome, I see no conflict. Intended or evolved, individuality has some transcendental value, something that paradoxically goes beyond our individual lives and experiences. But what is it?

What is it that cannot be smaller than one person? Human life.

We each, uniquely, have something to give. We each, uniquely, need and are needed by everyone else. Thus we each, uniquely, have lives that matter not only to our individual selves but to everyone else. This

¹ It should also be noted that there is criticism from evangelicals who find Warren's book problematic for being suspiciously liberal. For a summary go to: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Purpose_Driven_Life.

I call the Ministry of All Souls.

That is the spiritual heart of my faith, but I maintain it is also the heart of liberal religion and Fountain Street Church. We think we are about freedom, but the freedom of belief we so love is not an end in itself, but is to nourish our individuality into ripeness, to ensure we do not become spiritual drones, one size fits all souls. Our famous skepticism is not an end in itself, but a tool to prevent the hobbling and crippling of individuality against the crushing weights of conformity and coercion. We know the truth that Paul wrote to Philippi: "work out your own salvation... for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Herman Hesse said, "In each individual the spirit is made flesh, in each one the whole of creation suffers, in each one a Savior is crucified." And I would add, in each one the world is resurrected and redeemed.

We are here to find the courage to live lives like this, lives that matter. And everything we do should help us find and give that gift we have to share, and open us to the same in others. This is the beacon we are meant to shine forth. It has often been covered with bushel baskets like doubt and skepticism and even spiritual snobbery. But if we have the courage to reveal our light, to declare our transcendent faith that every person has value because every person has a ministry that is needed to save the world, something wonderful can happen.

I dream of a world filled with saviors, where every person is giving something unique to save the world. The religion I crave preaches this dream in word and deed. The church I serve, this church, can be the place it begins, because its gift, its ministry, is to be beacon city for the Ministry of All Souls.

