

ARE THERE LIMITS TO SMILEY'S *GOOD WILL*?

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
July 17, 2005**

Humility can be a bitter pill to swallow, especially at Stanford, which enjoys the reputation of being one of the world's leading universities. Its Founding Grant contemplated that it be a university of "the highest grade," and that it "qualify its students for personal success." It was founded with a strong sense of social responsibility as well – "exercising an influence on behalf of humanity and civilization." Stanford's grand vision of itself was full of good will – "teaching the blessings of liberty regulated by law, and inculcating love and reverence for the great principles of government as derived from the inalienable rights of man to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."ⁱ

In today's gospel lesson,ⁱⁱ Jesus asserts that good seed has been sown in the world, but along with it weeds have been sewn too. So why not just remove the weeds and allow the good seed to grow alone? The problem, as Jesus explains it, is that in trying to remove the weeds, one will surely uproot good wheat along with bad weeds. Better to let them grow together

until harvest time. At that point they can be fully distinguished from each other and the weeds can be bundled apart from the wheat. As Jesus explains his parable, it's only the angels of God at the end of history who will truly be able to separate children of the kingdom of God from children of the devil. The implication is that human beings need to have the humility in ordinary daily life not to think that they can accurately name and remove evil in the world without at the same time removing good. Or vice versa, the good cannot be fully and unambiguously promoted by human beings, for evil grows up alongside it and is deeply intertwined with it.ⁱⁱⁱ Those who study and teach (and preach) at Stanford need, with humility, to take heed that its good-will-filled vision of itself has always been intertwined with not-so-flattering realities of moral compromise and spiritual blindness.

The psalmist in this morning's Hebrew Bible reading^{iv} asks God to search him and know his heart, to test him and know his thoughts. He asks God to see if there is any wicked way in him.^v Scholars have frequently suggested that the writer of the psalm has been accused of idolatry – of acting as if he is God – and that in the psalm he's asking God to affirm his innocence.^{vi} Of course idolatry is the polar opposite of humility. And to think that God is not aware of all forms that our immodesty takes is itself the

height of arrogance: “O Lord...you discern my thoughts from far away...Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord.”^{vii}

What does this all mean for good will – for genuinely trying to “exercise an influence on behalf of humanity and civilization,” as people associated with Stanford are supposed to do? There’s a wonderful novella by contemporary author Jane Smiley that helps flesh out these Bible lessons, I believe. It’s called, not surprisingly, *Good Will*, and it was published in 1989.^{viii} Allow me to work through some of it with you, and I think you’ll see how helpful it is in understanding how our hearts may be searched, what the limits of good will may be, and how humility may be cultivated.

As the story opens, we learn that Bob Miller is a Vietnam War veteran who has returned to the land with his wife Liz, an Ivy League graduate, and their seven year old son, Tommy. Nineteen years ago – presumably just at the end of the 1960’s -- Bob bought a 55 acre farm in Pennsylvania and decided to drop out of the regular economy and become entirely self-sufficient. He decided to live lightly on the earth and fully respect his relationship to the environment. The family income before Tommy was born was around \$150 per year, and now it’s up to \$350: “You simply can’t raise a kid on a hundred and fifty dollars a year,” as Bob explains to someone interviewing him for a book: “A kid likes to have nice school

supplies, for example.”^{ix} There are property taxes to be paid as well. Yet, the Millers grow their own food. They have built their own house, barns, sheds and furniture. There’s no electricity or oil or gas, but they heat with their own firewood. The Millers weave and knit their own clothes from the wool of their lambs and sheep, barter with their neighbors, and have scrounged in the local area for castoff tools, bicycles, fishing tackle, a stove and a canoe. Their vision for their family is simply to live a self-contained life in good-willed harmony with nature and the community around them. Their purposes, as Bob puts it, “aren’t extreme or political.” Their aim, just like everyone else, is “to prosper.”^x Much as the Stanford grant put it, the idea is to find “personal success” while pursuing “the inalienable rights of man to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”^{xi}

Listen to Bob’s understanding of their life as he was walking home one night with Liz and Tommy:

This is what we expect: to eat and be satisfied, to find comfort in each other’s company, to relinquish the day and receive the night, to make an orderly retreat from each boundary that contains us – the valley, the yard, the house, the room, the covers, wakefulness – in perfect serenity. Well, of course I am thankful, and of course a prayer lifts off me, but there is nothing human about it, no generalizations, nor even words, only the rightness of everything that is present expressing itself through my appreciation.

As you can see, Bob has a strong spiritual sense, although he wouldn't call it traditionally religious. For example, as he looks over the landscape from the house he says "I respond, unfailingly, with love ('regard' and 'inspiration,' looking and inhaling)."^{xii} For some reason, however, he's made uncomfortable by his wife's attending a local Christian church on Sunday with Tommy and by her kneeling by the bedside at night to pray. He calls his own religious views deistic.^{xiii}

Tommy has been attending the local elementary school, and this is where the Millers' idyllic life of good will starts to be challenged. First Tommy brings home a note from his second grade teacher that he has torn apart two dolls belonging to a girl in his class. When asked about it by his parents, he responds that "She's a nigger." His father explodes, and immediately spansks him, telling him in no uncertain terms never to use that word again. Later, in trying to find out where Tommy learned the racial epithet in the first place, Bob is informed by his son: "That's what some teachers were calling her. I heard them...Some fifth-graders said it too." Bob and Tommy make a rare trip to a local Walmart and buy replacement dolls, which Tommy then gives to his classmate, Annabel.^{xiv}

A month later, Tommy cuts up Annabel's new lavender winter coat with a pair of scissors at school in front of other children. Bob summarizes

what he does after Tommy admits to the deed: “I spell out moral values, expectations and consequences. I punish and promise more punishment. I make sure he understands. I assert authority. I bring things to that impossible point, an end.”^{xv}

Bob also has a rare moment of questioning his lifestyle:

I wonder what it would be like to raise a child with money. All his life we have been devising things for his benefit; he has been our experimental subject, and I admit he has been a good one, receptive, appreciative, flexible about ideas that looked good on paper that didn’t work, like the knitted wool diaper covers that were supposed to wick moisture away from the baby so that it could evaporate. He is a good boy, and I love him.^{xvi}

One of the things that Tommy comes miss most is television. It’s explained to him that not only do the Millers not have electricity, but also there would be minimal TV reception in the mountains. Tommy’s response is that Annabel has a satellite dish and they get a hundred and thirty-seven channels. His father thinks he has the last word: “That’s a hundred and thirty-seven chances to get stupid. We’ll go to the library on Saturday.” At this Tommy jumps up, knocks over his chair, and shouts, “I hate reading. That’s what’s stupid, those books.” He storms upstairs before Bob can impose immediate punishment, and Liz prevents her husband from following their son to do so.^{xvii} The following day Tommy sets fire to

Annabel's family's satellite dish. The fire spreads to their house and it's burned to the ground.

Now the tenor of the book changes dramatically. The reader is pushed a year ahead to find the Miller's living in a two-bedroom apartment in State College, Pennsylvania, with a television set. Tommy is attending a different school than Annabel and seeing a counselor three days a week. Bob and Liz see the same counselor once a week as part of the terms of their custody arrangement with the state welfare department for keeping Tommy. Liz works in the bookstore at Penn State, Bob works as a carpenter at the university, and Tommy has a paper route.^{xviii}

So, what happened to this idyllic world of good will? As the fire investigator explained to Bob, "With juvenile arson you've got to look at the envy factor." The school counselor added, "Now, who was more different from the others than Tom? A little black child, that's who. I'm not surprised."

The book that Bob had been interviewed for was published after they'd left the farm. Liz wept as she read these words in the introduction: "Bob Miller shows what must be a variety of genius in the single-minded way he has transformed his valley, and his life, to an expression of ideals that are often extolled, but almost never realized." Yet, Bob himself had

recognized just after the fire that he'd "reached the utter empty-handed end of knowledge about how to raise this child." And the self-realization he had that followed may be the key to it all: "All my habits of thought presented themselves simply as varieties of pride. Even the love I had been so sure of – for Tommy and Liz, for the valley, for this work, this soil, this air – was primarily self-inflating."^{xix}

So it's humility that's missing – in relation to child-rearing, to his wife, to the creation of his perfect lifestyle, to the forces of nature – human and environmental. Ultimately, Bob lacks humility even in relation to God; he's guilty of the idolatry of which the psalmist was charged. Liz stopped going to church just before the fire because, as she said, "There wasn't room in my life for two of you...you and God."^{xx} He had kept expressing his astonishment that as a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania she could be attending a Pentecostal church and getting something out of it. He felt church attendance was always disruptive of their own time together on Sunday – "obstructing the smooth flow of time" that he liked. Ironically, though, he'd noted that "Privately, I think she feels humbled, which is a feeling she is in favor of as a way of life."^{xxi} By the time they're living in State College after the fire, Liz is going to church again. Liz knows how to

cultivate humility, even while she's committed to the same vision of the good life as Bob.

As a parent, Bob was blind to what the world looked like from his son's point of view. Bob understood Tommy as an experimental subject who could be molded to Bob's adult commitment to voluntary poverty. The limit of that good will vision must be careful attention to how his son is growing up and to what he's experiencing in relation to his peers and his community in the local public school.

So take-away lesson #1 is cultivating humility, preferably (as the Psalmist taught) in relation to that higher power, God, who reminds us of the limited nature of our personal knowledge and capability for action. Take-away lesson #2 is understanding that good will is a noble quality of being, but that it has limits; when pursued single-mindedly it can blind us to other realities, such as the prevalence of common human vices like envy and greed and pride.

Take-away lesson #3 returns us to the gospel lesson of wheat growing alongside weeds, with little possibility of effective separation until harvest time. Bob at the very end can see that his counselor wants to make another whole thing of him, the way Bob tried to make a whole thing of his family, his farm, his time. Instead, Bob thinks that it makes more sense now for the

longing he has to make things up to Annabel's parents simply to lie next to the racial hatred that has been expressed through his family. Here's more, in his words:

“Let Tom's innocence lie next to his envious fury; let Liz's grief for the farm lie next to her blossoming in town; let my urge to govern and supply every element of my son's being lie next to our tenuous custody; let the poverty the welfare department sees lie next to the wealth I know was mine. If these things are allowed, if no wholes are made, then it seems to me that I can live in town well enough, and still, from time to time, close my eyes and feel a warm, wet breeze move up the valley.”^{xxii}

Humility is a pill we must swallow, especially at Stanford, even as we strive to change to succeed and change the world for the better. Good will is of course good, not bad; but it must not blind us to hard realities of human nature that surround us, starting with the ancient seven deadly sins of envy, greed, pride, anger, lust, gluttony and sloth.^{xxiii} And in fact, evil is deeply intertwined with good in this life; both kinds of seed have been sewn in the same field and weeds are growing up alongside the wheat. We must strive to be the wheat ourselves, and not the weeds, but simple solutions to evil will throw fresh babies out with dirty bathwater or even worse. I mix my metaphors. Enough now. Simply put, God is more than good will. God is love. So I commend to you for contemplation and action the three great

Christian virtues as enshrined on the front of this church: faith, hope and love (or charity). But the greatest of these is love.^{xxiv}

NOTES

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- ⁱ *The Founding Grant*, 1885 (Published by the University in 1987).
- ⁱⁱ Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43.
- ⁱⁱⁱ For an explication of this parable as a reminder that “We live in an imperfect world, and no human effort can eradicate that fact,” see *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, p. 311.
- ^{iv} Psalm 139: 1-12, 23-24.
- ^v Psalm 139: 23-24.
- ^{vi} *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IV, p. 1235.
- ^{vii} Psalm 139: 2, 4.
- ^{viii} Jane Smiley, “Good Will” in *Ordinary Love & Good Will: Two Novellas* (New York: Ivy Books, 1989).
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- ^x *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ^{xi} *The Founding Grant*, 1885 (Published by the University in 1987).
- ^{xii} Smiley, “Good Will,” p. 118.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, pp. 123-125.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, pp. 130-132, 134, 140-141.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211, 214.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- ^{xxiii} *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., Tenth Edition, 1997), p. 295.
- ^{xxiv} See I Corinthians 13:13.