

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT GATSBY?

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
Stanford Memorial Church
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The gospel lesson this morningⁱ tells the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. The theme from that story which I want to explore with you this morning is idolatry -- that is, treating as of ultimate worth something that is not divine, is not God. Of course the classic story of idolatry is the children of Israel at Sinai creating a golden calf to worship while Moses is up on the mountain speaking to God, receiving the Ten Commandments.ⁱⁱ In the gospel story from Mark, King Herod is willing to behead a prophet of God, John the Baptist, out of his love for his daughter Herodias. She dances at his birthday party, and he is so enthralled by her that he's willing to give her any wish. He makes that a solemn oath before all his courtiers and officers and the leaders of Galilee. After consultation with her mother, who bears a grudge against John the Baptist, Herodias asks for the prophet's head. King Herod, albeit grieving, immediately sends a soldier to behead John. Worldly love comes before divine duty for Herod -- the duty not only to protect God's prophet, but also not to take human life. "Thou shalt not kill."¹ King Herod becomes an idolater.

Psalm 24, our first reading today, states the opposite case very clearly: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it."ⁱⁱⁱ The psalm also explains that those who "shall ascend the hill of the Lord...and stand in his holy place" are "those who have clean hands and pure hearts."^{iv} Now, how can we clothe this ancient story King Herod in modern garb to bring the theme of idolatry alive for us today?

Exit King Herod; enter the Great Gatsby. F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic book by that name has often been described as the American novel. Published in 1925, it leads many library and academic lists today as the best English-language novel of the twentieth century.^v It's beautifully written and surprisingly short -- less than 200 pages. Countless literary critics have seen this book as the preeminent commentary on the American Dream and on living for ideals. But just what exactly is so great about its title character?

The basic story, for those of you who haven't read it -- at least lately -- is that of a Midwestern farm boy made good. He drops out of college two weeks into his freshman year --

¹Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17.

not something I'd advocate for Stanford students, of course, regardless of your talent and ambition. He hooks up with a wealthy yachtsman for five years and is cheated out of an inheritance when the man dies. Then he joins the army, where he meets and falls in love with a well-bred southern belle named Daisy near his training camp in Louisville, Kentucky. Gatsby fights in the First World War and is decorated for battlefield bravery. Then he goes to Oxford University briefly, during which time he learns that Daisy has married another man. As a consequence, he spends several years accumulating enough wealth to buy a huge Long Island mansion across the bay from Daisy's house, so that he can devote himself to trying to win her back. The book takes place in and around Gatsby's mansion, and back and forth from New York City, in the summer of 1922.

The narrator of the novel is Nick Carraway, another Midwesterner and veteran, and a 1915 Yale graduate, who by chance has rented the house next to Gatsby's as he tries his hand at the New York bond business. On the first page of the book Nick says that he's inclined to reserve all judgments of people, but on the second page he notes that Gatsby represented everything for which he has an unaffected scorn. Later Nick says that he disapproved of Gatsby from beginning to end.^{vi} In fact, we learn during the book that Gatsby has lied more than once, that he has apparently accumulated his wealth not only immorally but illegally, and that he's willing to sacrifice anything for his infatuation with a married woman. So again, what's so great about Gatsby?

Well, Nick also tells us that Gatsby had "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again."(2) Nick explains that "The truth was that Jay Gatsby...sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God...and he must be about His Father's business"(99). He was an idealist who lived with [quote] "a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing."(100)

Gatsby's idealism is closely related to the American Dream: If only one works hard, just the way Ben Franklin told us to -- and Gatsby had developed his own list of resolutions as a boy -- one will indeed become healthy, wealthy and wise. His father said after Gatsby was found murdered in his own swimming pool: "He had a big future before him, you know... If he'd of lived, he'd of been a great man. A man like James J. Hill. He'd of helped build up the country."(169)

Yet, Gatsby's idealism, once he met Daisy, became attached solely to her. After he made love to her while he was in the army, "he found that he had committed himself to the following of a grail."(149) As Nick later learned, Gatsby "knew that Daisy was extraordinary, but he didn't realize just how extraordinary a 'nice' girl could be." Although penniless, he had let her believe that he was from much the same social stratum as herself, and she came to represent everything that he wanted his life to be. As Fitzgerald writes, "Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the

youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor." (150)

Yet this by no means was pure materialism. Listen to this description of Gatsby's feelings: "One autumn night...they had been walking down the street when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. They stopped here and turned toward each other... His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete."(112)

What romanticism! What infatuation. What attachment to something and someone far from the mind of God, far from his being a son of God going about his father's business. What idolatry.

We learn that Gatsby eventually comes to accumulate great wealth, not merely to be wealthy, but to win Daisy -- for whom wealth is a sina qua non, given her background and her perceived need for future security. He ends up living solely and completely for the love of Daisy. His American Dream becomes symbolized by a green light which Gatsby stares at across the bay from his house -- a green light which marked the end of Daisy's dock.

Most of the other characters in the book turn out to be rather despicable people, or perhaps just normally imperfect, practical people living day to day without any dreams of ideals to speak of. Daisy's husband, Tom, is a racist. He also cheats on his wife and is a brutal man who breaks his mistress's nose for repeating Daisy's name in front of him. In turn, his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, is married to an honest, loving man, whom she despises for not being wealthy. Daisy's friend, Jordan Baker, is a golf champion who cheats on the course, a [quote] "clean, hard, limited person, who dealt in universal skepticism."(81)

What's so great about Gatsby? Well, his idealism, his dreams, his green light in the distance -- they set him apart and make him greater than the rest. We can learn from him how life can be transformed, by pitching one's life above the day-to-day practicality, above the desire for security, above the drive for power. I don't think that many of us can live at Gatsby's level of idealism very much of the time. But of course Fitzgerald's book challenges us to an idealism beyond Gatsby's, by pointing up so poignantly the limitations of his ideals.

For Gatsby uses utterly corrupted means -- Mafia-like business deals and connections -- to pursue his end of love. His business transgressions are serious and inexcusable, regardless of his humble origins, his capacity for achievement, and his lofty dreams.

Even without that, Daisy is an inadequate object of his love. The narrator, Nick, describes Daisy and her husband Tom as "careless people... they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made...."(181)

Even without that, Gatsby's love is not truly for another human being, but only for the image of her inside his own head. Nick suggests [quote] "that he wanted to recover some idea of himself, perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy."(111) When Gatsby finally reconnects with Daisy after five years, and she falls in love with him again -- with the man who can now provide the material comforts she desires -- Nick notes that Daisy comes up short of Gatsby's dreams [quote] "because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything."(97) That's idolatry by definition.

Compounding his iniquity, Gatsby was also trying to re-live the past -- a task always doomed to failure -- not to mention the immorality of his breaking up a marriage. Gatsby wants Daisy to tell Tom, "I never loved you," and then to go back with him to Louisville to be married from her house, just as if it were five years earlier. "And she doesn't understand," Gatsby says. "She used to be able to understand. We'd sit for hours---" Nick advises, "I wouldn't ask too much of her. You can't repeat the past." "Can't repeat the past?" Gatsby asks incredulously. "Why of course you can!... He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand."(111)

Finally, near the end of the book, when it appears that Gatsby has lost Daisy forever, Nick surmises that "he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream."(162) As a student of mine when I was teaching this book once put it: "He had to die at that point. He literally had nothing left to live for." Religiously this is what idolatry is all about: treating as ultimate that which is only finite and passing.

One leaves this book feeling that Gatsby is indeed great -- certainly in comparison to those who surround him in Fitzgerald's novel. Yet he is also tragically flawed by impoverished dreams and by limited ideals. On the last page of the book Nick says, "I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him..."(182)

Daisy was the Great Gatsby's idolatry. Herodias was King Herod's idolatry. Both of them ended up deeply corrupted in pursuit of their idols. Is this an indictment of human love, whether for a potential partner or for one's daughter? I hope not. Psalm 24 asks us simply to have clean hands and pure hearts, remembering that ultimately the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. Let us love other people, but always by remembering that they are not the ultimate object of our

love, as God is. Let our love for one human being not lead to personal corruption, to abuse of another human being, or to myopia about the meaning of life itself. On the other hand, human love takes on a very different look when it mirrors our love for the divine, for the very ground of our being. In the end, this becomes a very simple matter, not a complex one. Finding ourselves aligned with the life force in the universe, rather than with lesser force, is the only way to true love and delight. AMEN.

NOTES

i. Mark 6: 14-29.

ii. See Exodus Chapter 32.

iii. Psalm 23: 1

iv. Psalm 24: 3-4.

v. C-Span, "American Writers II: The 20th Century: The Great Gatsby,"
www.americanwriters.org/works/gatsby.asp

vi. F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (New York: Collier, 1980), p.154. (Henceforth all page references will be in the text of the sermon).