

WAS THE DEATH OF A SALESMAN INEVITABLE?

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
Stanford Memorial Church
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Psalm 145, attributed to King David, exclaims: "The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season."ⁱ Trust in God is the theme I'd like to discuss with you today. I mean trust in the sense of not trying to control, or even thinking about controlling, everything in our lives: trust as letting go, at least some of the time...letting be, accepting, appreciating, seeing life as a divine gift. In an Eastern religious sense this might mean accepting your dharma, or life's duty, and fulfilling it as best you can. It might mean aligning yourself with the Tao or life force, rather than fighting it or trying to control it.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells the crowds: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear...Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."ⁱⁱ In today's gospel lesson from John,ⁱⁱⁱ Philip concludes there's no way to feed the crowd of five thousand that's been following Jesus: "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."^{iv} Yet, somehow five barley loaves and two fish stretch far enough to feed everyone as much as they want, with twelve baskets of fragments left over.

Trust in God, and you will be fed in due season. Not that you should sit on your hands, of course. The crowd of five thousand didn't do that. They kept following Jesus, because they saw what he was doing as a healer and they also wanted to hear what he was saying about it. The disciples didn't sit on their hands, but instead worked hard to feed the five thousand and to clean up afterwards. But not a one of them controlled the outcome. They simply put one foot in front of the other in trying to do what they thought was right, and God took care of the rest. Or as Jesus put it in the Sermon on the Mount, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [like food and drink and clothes] will be given to you as well."^v

There's a modern play by Arthur Miller entitled Death of a Salesman in which, as many of you know, things don't seem to work out as well. In the end the salesman, Willie Loman, loses his job, thinks he can't feed and clothe his family, and commits suicide. Was his untimely death inevitable, or might things have turned out differently if he'd had a another kind of attitude and

approach to life? What if he'd let go, relied on others around him rather than trying to control everything himself, and accepted his own basic nature rather than trying to become someone he wasn't? I think this particular play is a very useful way to think about today's Bible lessons in modern context, and to plumb more deeply the implications of ultimate trust.

Willie Loman is a travelling salesman who lives in Brooklyn, New York, after the Second World War. His company has assigned him to a route that takes him up through the New England states. He's married to a woman named Linda, and he has two sons, Biff and Happy. His best friend -- really his only friend -- is Charley, who runs his own business. As Willy's sons grow up, he teaches them that the way to get ahead is to make a good appearance in the business world:^{vi} "It's not what you say, it's how you say it --because personality always wins the day."(65) He counsels "It's not what you do...It's who you know and the smile on your face! It's contacts...contacts."(86)

It becomes clear rather early on that Willy isn't really suited to being a traveling salesman, and doesn't like it very much. His personal passion is in working with his hands: in his garden and as a handyman. Willy's thirty-four year old son, Biff, has just returned home from years of working as a ranchhand -- a cowboy -- out West in order to take Willy's advice to try to break into the business world in New York City. Willy encourages him mightily, but Biff's passion is for physical work outside, not pushing a pencil in an office: "It's a measly manner of existence. To get on that subway on hot mornings in summer. To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors, with your shirt off."(22) His thirty-two year brother, Happy, is meanwhile working unhappily in New York City: "All I can do now is wait for the merchandise manager to die. And suppose I get to be merchandise manager...He just built a terrific estate on Long Island. And he lived there about two months and sold it, and now he's building another one. He can't enjoy it once it's finished. And I know that's just what I would do. I don't know what the hell I'm working for."(23)

Charley, it turns out, loves his work in the business world. He's competent, honest, straight-shooting, and kind to his employees. He puts on no appearances; it's not a matter of personality for him. When Willie is fired at the age of sixty-three, Charley offers him a job in his firm. Yet, Willie's too proud to take a job from his best friend.

Willy also has a tumultuous relationship with his son, Biff, perhaps because Biff's very much like him, yet is trying to make a life choice to find enjoyable, fulfilling work -- a choice that Willie never made. Biff is trying to be who he really is, rather than force himself into a mold which doesn't fit. This parent-child conflict may sound familiar to many Stanford students who are trying to discover their true identity, their true vocation and calling, in the face of strong parental expectations. The conflict may also sound familiar to many parents who want the best for their children, especially their happiness and fulfillment, but who are also desperately

concerned that their children are striking off in directions that won't realize their potential and that won't put enough bread on the table in the long run for their families.

There's a very emotional scene between Willy and Biff near the end of the book when Biff is calling his father a phony and Willy is branding his son a spiteful ingrate. Biff screams to his brother, "The man don't know who we are!"(131) He then turns to his father and yells, "Now hear this, Willy, this is me." He proceeds to tell his father that he blew Biff full of hot air as he grew up, that he's not cut out to be in business in New York City, and that he should be getting back out outdoors and doing physical work: "Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool out of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am?"(132).

"Trust in God" may be too theological a dictum for this play, at least as Arthur Miller explicitly wrote it. Yet, Biff speaks in epiphanous terms about the recent moment in which he became clear that he didn't want to follow Willy into business life: "I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw -- the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world."(132) It's as if Biff truly discovers his vocation -- his divine calling, if you will -- as Willy never has.

What's Willy's problem? Why doesn't he discover his own vocation? Why, as Biff asks him in that climactic scene, doesn't he "take that phony dream and burn it before something happens"(133) -- implying, of course, before he commits suicide? Again, perhaps it's unfair to theologize this as simply not trusting in God, so let me spell out Willy's issues, as I see them. Together, though, I believe they constitute a lot of what it means not to trust in God.

First of all, Willy Loman was very self-absorbed and prideful. He brags to his sons when they are young, "Boys, they know me up and down in New England. The finest people. And when I bring you boys up, there'll be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing, boys: I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own."(31) It turns out that when Willie dies, no one comes to his funeral except his immediate family and Charley.

Secondly, self-absorbed as he was, Willy Loman wasn't able to look very deeply within himself in order to plumb his own soul. At the graveside, Biff says to Charley, "The man didn't know who he was." Biff explains, "You know something, Charley, there's more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made." Charley responds, "Yeah. He was a happy man with a batch of cement."(138) Not long before his suicide, Willy had gone off to a seed store to be able to plant carrots and peas in his urban backyard. As Willy explained, with symbolic implications of which he was not aware: "I've got to get some seeds right away. Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground."(122)

Thirdly, Willy Loman wasn't able to look far enough beyond himself to appreciate and affirm

the love that surrounded him. His wife Linda was always by his side, supporting him. The stage instructions at the beginning of the play explain that Linda "more than loves him, she admires him."(12) After the explosion between father and son, Biff breaks down sobbing, holding onto Willy. After he leaves the room, Willy says to Linda and Happy, in an astonished tone: "Isn't that--isn't that remarkable? Biff--he likes me!" Linda responds, "He loves you, Willy!" and Happy, deeply moved, adds: "Always did, Pop."(133) Charley stays close to Willy as a friend and giving him money, even when Willy insults him by refusing his offer of employment: "I don't want your goddam job!"(97)

Fourthly, Willy relied solely on material solutions to his problems, not spiritual solutions. Throughout the play he remembers his brother Ben who made a lot of money, primarily in diamond mines as an adventurer in Africa, although it becomes clear that Ben was not an ethical person. Ben remains Willy Loman's model of success. It's a get-rich-quick model too, as Ben explains: "When I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich."(48) I doubt it was by God. In the end, Willy decides, perhaps in a kind of misguided selflessness, that the solution to his family's financial problems is a get-rich-quick scheme: he'll commit suicide by driving his car off the road so that his family can live off his life insurance proceeds. Obviously, this isn't a rational solution, since suicide could well be a basis for invalidating the insurance policy. Beyond that, as Linda points out after his death, the last payment on their twenty-five year mortgage had been made the very day he committed suicide, and the family only needed a little salary to support them at that point -- easily supplied by the job Charley was offering.

Psalm 145 proclaims: "All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you. They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power... The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." Clearly, Willy Loman wasn't calling upon God, even in his travail. He was prideful, shallow, materialistic and unaccepting of love. He also seemed to think he could singlehandedly control his destiny and that of his family. So, in that sense his death was inevitable. A very different attitude and approach would have been one of letting go of ego, realizing that there's a divine spark that lies within all of us (no matter how buried it may seem to be), viewing life itself as a divine gift (regardless of the challenges and setbacks that are inevitably part of it), and accepting the love and friendship that was freely offered to him (even if he wasn't particularly deserving of it).

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink," says Jesus. "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." The five thousand will be fed. God is the Mysterious Presence, the source of all, from the world without to the soul within. If we call upon God in truth, surely the living waters will flow within us and upon us. Let us trust in God, let us try to align ourselves with the life force, now and always. AMEN.

NOTES

i. Psalm 145: 14-15.

ii. Matthew 6: 25-29.

iii. John 6: 1-15.

iv. John 6:7.

v. Matthew 6:33.

vi. Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman (New York: Penguin Books, 1949), p. 33. All page references hereafter will be in parentheses in the text of the sermon.