

TRIVIALIZING FAITH

June 13, 2010

Texts – Proverbs 3: 1 - 8
II Corinthians 4: 13 - 18

Several years ago, a seventeen year old high school senior made national news when she did something remarkable. She achieved a perfect score (800) on both sections of the Scholastic Aptitude Test. She also scored a perfect 8,000 on the tough University of California acceptance index. Never before had any one student accomplished such a feat. Her high school classmates nicknamed her “Wonder Woman” because of her brilliance. She was admitted to Harvard in the Fall.

A news story about this outstanding young woman appeared a short while later. Toward the very end of it was a paragraph which caught my eye. The reporter asked this bright youngster, “What is the meaning of life?” She replied, “I have no idea.”

Now on the surface, this may not strike you as unusual at all; I confess it did not seem so to me at the time. But then I began to wonder if there might be something more to it. I wonder if this young woman is not symbolic of a fundamental problem with our society. It is possible to grow up today, attend the finest schools, receive the best possible education, pass all our tests of intelligence and knowledge with flying colors ... and yet have no idea at all about the meaning and purpose of life. **“We are a people,”** one commentator says, **“who have learned to go with greater and greater speed and efficiency, but where we are going we do not know.”**

Do you suppose that is true? And if it is true, how did it come to be this way?

We would all agree, wouldn't we?, that education is the key to achieving what we sometimes call “the good life.” High school and college are almost universally accepted as being essential if what you want to achieve is the kind of career that will enable you to have a fine home in a good neighborhood, that will let you raise a family in comfort and style. We try to

give our young people all kinds of signals from the earliest of ages about how important academic and athletic achievement can be for their future. I know I did that with my kids. Did you? Are you doing it with yours?

There's nothing wrong with this per se. What is unfortunate about it, however, is the attitude that often comes along for the ride. It is this – **Whatever I don't have to learn or do in school is of lesser importance. It doesn't "really" matter.** And what our young people do not have to learn or pay attention to in school is faith. It's off limits ... a forbidden topic, except in so far as it might come up in a comparative study of religions in a social studies class.

We believe in the separation of church and state. I believe in that whole heartedly. We do not want instruction in faith – any faith – to be a part of a public school curriculum. There are all kinds of good historical reasons for that – certainly there are in the histories of our European ancestors. There are also all kinds of good contemporary reasons for that – one has only to look at the flames of religious intolerance which burn so brightly throughout much of the Islamic world today.

So no, we do not want to enthrone any faith or sanction any religion, however indirectly, in our public institutions. But the result of this enlightened policy may well be that **we have produced a growing number of absolutely faith-less people.** We have seventeen year old geniuses who have accomplished so much learning and yet who have so little idea about the meaning and purpose of life. More troubling still – they could care less.

I do not believe this is a problem we ought to expect our school boards or teachers to remedy. It is not something the legislature in Montpelier can fix. It is rather something for which you and I – as members of this faith community and as members of the public at large – must take responsibility.

Everything about our lifestyle today suggests to young people that serious and systematic

grounding in a solid and sophisticated faith is not nearly as important as getting that math assignment finished or being a part of the soccer team or competing in the hockey tournament. In most cases, this is not a deliberate or conscious policy. But the choices we almost casually and unconsciously make, the activities we clearly invest in and worry about, the way we schedule our days – all these give the impression that the nurture and maintenance of a mature faith is not all that critical a concern.

It is not, I am convinced, that as individuals or as a society that we are in any self-conscious way anti-religious. It is, rather, that **we tend to trivialize faith ... it is something enjoyable to do when convenient, if we can work it in.**

The result is not that we end up religionless, nor that ours is a religion-less society. It is rather that what we come out with is bad religion – faith arrested at the sixth grade level, beliefs that represent an incoherent hodgepodge of whatever pop psychology and pseudo-spirituality happens to be on the best seller list today.

Does it matter? The spirit of a self-satisfied secular society says “No, it’s not really that important.” I don’t believe that. It seems to me ... based on my experience of living ... that **religion is not an option in human life.** It’s not an “add on” to the manufacturer’s standard package. Religious faith – from a purely secular point of view – is a matter of how you look at life. It has to do with how you interpret reality ... how you understand what comes at you as you move out into each new day.

This is critical to how a person functions and thrives as a human being. Whether you engage the challenges and troubles of Monday morning with strength and courage and intelligence depends a great deal on how you understand and interpret those tasks. And that is the business of religion. It is not optional. We do not, any of us, “live without religion” nor is there any such thing as “living without God.” I would argue that **every human being has a**

religion and a god which he or she worships. The ultimate questions are: What religion do you follow? Which God do you serve?

The better part of the last century was witness to a colossal contest between two competing world views. One described itself as “democratic capitalism,” the other as “communist socialism.” For nearly seventy years the two went head to head – it seemed to almost all of us who lived through it a matter of life and death. We rejoiced in 1989 when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down; our president called it the dawning of a new world order. To many of our teenagers today, it all seems old hat.

Lin Yutang is an Asian-American who, for many years, was a proud proponent of the Chinese version of communism. In 1937, he wrote a runaway best-seller entitled The Importance of Living; one chapter of which was entitled “Why I am a Pagan.” Christian theology, he said then, repelled him because of what he called its “presumptuous arrogance” that it could know God.

Sixty years later, Lin Yutang changed his mind and his heart. “I have joined the Christian Church,” he wrote, “because I wish to re-enter that knowledge of God and love of God which Jesus revealed with such clarity and simplicity. The question of paramount importance,” he went on, “is – Can we survive without religion? For over thirty years, my only religion was humanism ... the concept of the self-perfectibility of men and women through education – the belief that humanity is sufficient unto itself. I now believe,” he said, “that humankind cannot survive without religion. We need contact with a Power outside ourselves that is greater than ourselves. I believe that Christianity, because of what Christ revealed, offers ... incomparably the best way to God. I have also been compelled to conclude that as irreligion and materialism advance, the spirit of human beings decays and weakens, for I have witnessed the doings of a nation living without God.”

He concludes: “Looking back on my life, I know that for over thirty years I lived in this world like an orphan. I am an orphan no longer. Where I had been drifting, I have (now finally) arrived ... at home.”

I find it a remarkable testimony, and a frightening prophecy ... for what Lin Yutang describes from his own journey is disturbingly familiar to me as I ponder the easy humanism and rich materialism of our own time and place. How many today see themselves as orphans, drifting through their days in the dark of meaninglessness, depending on their own wits and luck to survive until they slip into the void? **How important are the math scores and Little League games, the business deals and our standing in the community, when measured against the life and the love of the compassionate carpenter of Nazareth?**

“We do not lose heart,” Paul writes, and in so doing speaks the truth so many who have followed in his footsteps have found. “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For (these) slight, momentary afflictions are preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, for we do not look at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

That is not a trivial matter. It is deserving of our very best. At the very least, it is deserving of our time and our attention.