

“Letting Him Get Under Your Skin”
 Pastor Sam Richards
 January 7, 2024
 Text 1 Cor. 1:22-31

Here’s a poem from my college days that reminds me of Gerald Manley Hopkins—but it isn’t his work—or of Robert Frost at his finest reaches of imagination—but it’s not his work either:

The World Is Too Much With Us

BY WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
 This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
 The winds that will be howling at all hours,
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
 It moves us not. Great God! I’d rather be
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Hear the sad, forlorn tone and catch the aptness of the opening “world-weary” couplet, among other things these features contributed to my memorization of Yeats’ poem. I made a point of visiting Yeats’ grave in Ireland—to pay my respects and it was a haunting moment near Mt. Ben Bulbin. “Cast a cold eye on life, on death. Horseman, pass by”—is Yeats’ epitaph. But at the present moment, the poem reminds me of New Testament Age Corinth—the bustling city where Paul planted a church from which we have two, or three pastoral letters (depending on how you number them). And the poem raises a question that forms the time for today’s message:

What do urban renewal and new birth have in common? Well, they are both about spiritual transformation essentially. Urban renewal without transformation is simply relocating people; it entails the demolition of buildings and infrastructure—upgrading the housing, perhaps, and moving the pre-existing issues (people problems) into new settings unaddressed. I remember the newspaper expose` which detailed the catastrophe of housing third world immigrants in an urban, twentieth century apartment complex on the east coast *with no instruction in the use and function of appliances and plumbing even—especially bathtub shower stalls!* Of course they didn’t know any better than to house chickens in the oven—what an ideal poultry coop! Unless the people are changed (renewed, born-again, converted), nothing has essentially changed. Change the heart, change the world. Faux apologies without remorse, or acknowledgement of wrongdoing are worse than worthless; they are insulting.

Simple displacement is not renovation because circumstances do not define nor should they determine who we are, how we are wired, what we are about, or are after in this life. Corinth was, mildly speaking, a fairly debauched but typical *reconstructed* Greco-Roman city, strung out between two sea ports—a commercial hub through which commerce flowed; bringing affluence, wealth and stuff, from east to west, and vice versa. It was unique in that most sea ports had commerce as an in and out proposition—ships came in laden, unloaded, reloaded and shipped back out, heading for the next port of call. Corinth was two ports connected by a land bridge, a portage. It was more of a weigh station, or a transportation hub—goods had to be moved by wagon from east to west/west to east. It was a current trucker’s dream location . . . no empty wagons *either way!*

With sailors, drivers, transients and travelers galore, prostitution was a thriving industry with the accoutrements of abortifacients, abortions and infant death by exposure. So maybe “lewd” would be a better word than “debauched” to describe Corinth. And the point of bringing that up is that drunkenness, fornication, incest and adultery are very much in play in Corinth and the *members of the church* from that city would be drawn from the sin locale they formerly inhabited. “There but for the love of God go I!” And, as it turns out, *disentangling* from such open immorality is easier preached than enacted like pornography and addiction. The prosperity of Corinth probably aided and abetted sinful lifestyles. That’s forlorn and sad enough.

I wonder what our thoughts would be on how to renew such a city? Would we take Jesus’ approach? ***Why expect heathens to act any differently from heathens who living in an ignorant, polytheistic and idolatrous setting?*** For our day, the same principle applies to unbelievers, I think. ***Are they sheep without a shepherd?*** Who elicit our pity/compassion? Or do their immoral lifestyles repulse us so that we turn away in revulsion?

Do we think that a good moral education would patch things up? Perhaps if they knew the ten commandments, they would behave more purely, live more righteously—they really should try harder. Or is something deeper necessitated because bondage is hardly just a matter of poor taste, and bad choices!

The Pharisees seems to have believed in the moral reformation/self-help approach. That if people knew the law, they would obey the law more fully—especially given the hedges that “the moral majority” of that day, the Pharisees, had constructed around ***walking in the way of the Lord, walking in God’s ways.*** The evidence is in; those who are “lost” do not act in their best interests very often. Enlightened self-interest is not match for fear, self-hatred, discontent and the pursuit of pleasure.

Does the way of ***wholly serious morality*** work? Let’s label that course of action piety—a step up from “the New Year’s Resolutions solution.” Did piety succeed in the moral perfection of the Pharisees, who advocated it, even? Did those who knew what was right, do what was right? The answer is no. Morality as a means of social control was an abysmal failure. And Jesus, who had a propensity for turning things on their head, wasn’t helping in the crusade for moral perfection, or conformity. In fact Jesus seemed to expose their *hypocrisy* (requiring others to live out what they chose to disregard) and make their religiosity look as ridiculous as it appears to have been. ***They did not walk like they talked.*** And that is why Jesus instructed folks to ***do as***

they say, not as they do. They did not lack in earnestness; they were *wholly serious* and that seriousness led them to be condemnatory, judgmental and proud—rather than kind, compassionate and merciful. I think it was their pride that galled our Lord the most. **Pride of the flesh**, yes, **worldly pride** were frequently in his sights. The Pharisees hated that they could not bear to be laughed at *and they seemed utterly incapable of laughing at themselves.*

It seems to me that Jesus leveled a large measure of humor toward such adversaries.

After all who had ever heard of **camels . . . passing through the eye of a needle**—or envisioned the hilarity of folks **choking on a gnat** who had just finished **swallowing a camel!** There was such an evident deficit of perspective! How about a man with a **log in his eye** hoping to help extract **the speck in his neighbor's eye**?! Ludicrous? And funny? These examples, what if they were supposed to bring you to the end of your wits, to stretch your commonsense and lead you to exclaim, “What, that’s impossible!” *And, yes, that would be the point.* But when you are bent on being “wholly serious morally speaking,” you entirely miss the humor which Jesus offered to move your presumptions, or point of view even to a new place. Jesus was willing to present positively stewards who were successful cheats and idlers as laborers worthy of a full day’s hire because the person doing the hiring was free to be gracious, generous and free to violate our strictures on “fair wages for hire” to make a point about divine generosity. Of course, the hirer is free to do as he wishes with his money and those who get what they bargained for have no basis for complaint. But they do complain because their sense of justice can’t incorporate their boss’ freedom. Well, is it supposed to? What if eternal divine love chooses to distribute itself by another standard? Is God limited to our terms of contract? No, not even if he chooses to limit himself to his covenant promises. No, be content because you got exactly what you agreed to!

Now, prior to venturing too far into the matter of obedience, we need to establish that **obedience God desires is a matter of the heart**—it is a sincere, heartfelt response of our loving heart towards the Father. Dread of wrath and fear of punishment, or even banishment to hell are appropriate religious affections for unrepentant sinners but it is the heart of man of the forgiven that God pursues. Sincerity, yes, integrity, of course; but heartfelt love and affection for God are the prime “mediums of exchange” between the Creator and his creatures. That we were created capable of loving God, of spiritual life—those are the high marks of being human. The dutiful performance of the rules, of living by the letter of the law are inferior goods; God wants your best, your heart. *There are very “religious folks” who live as if they were quite oblivious of the fact that we are persons, created by a personal God who desires a personal relationship with us forever—as sons, and heirs, and as his beloved children.* As strict moralists, as those who focus on the externals such as behavior and merit, the Pharisees erred in their estimate of Jesus, both of his person, and his teachings. I would suggest that they were obsessive compulsive types who had zero tolerance, who were incapable of extending grace and compassion, to those whose personality types weren’t just like theirs!

The Pharisees viewed much of Jesus’ teachings as *pernicious nonsense.* What does the fetid of a spendthrift and debauched son upon his return home have to do with religion? Well, not much suggests we’ve fail to see that the key point is the father’s

redemptive love. We tend to side with the resentful elder brother who critiques his younger brother forgetting that we would have nothing if it were not for the generosity of the father! We have been the recipients of astounding love and we are too “offended” at immorality to be grateful—is it our sense of justice that bars us from entering into the joy of reconciliation, restoration and redemption at home with God?

Finding fault with God seems to be our preference to praising him! That’s enough to make us either sad, or forlorn, don’t you think? But the elder brother is just as out of love with his father as the younger son was when he demanded what he had coming to him, and burned his bridges, to go off and gratify himself in a far land—however it was far enough to prevent reports from seeping home and hurting, grieving and infuriating. **Whither shall I flee from your presence? There** is no place . . . we can run, but we can’t hide. *And that is what it has to do with religion! The object of our worship is worthy of our worship regardless of our moral turpitude.* Or regardless of our moral rectitude, or lack thereof. God is the unshakeable source of love for all who are called to be redeemed.

The Pharisees found Jesus’ teachings to be corrosive, socially and religiously dangerous and I suppose they are to those who are imprisoned in their own self-righteousness and pride—in their estimate of themselves as the elite. Paul properly diagnoses the Corinthian dilemma, the people whether Jewish, or Gentile/Greek were supersaturated in ethnic pride. The Jews required a sign. The innumerable miracles did not finally cut it for the Jews—except perhaps to those who were the blessed recipients of those healings. Their healing had life-long repercussions no doubt; you don’t go from blind to seeing and not have your entire life reordered! Everyday would be a gift again.

The Pharisees thought that his teachings actually undermined morality. How do you quarrel with: **Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath? And, I tell you it is not that this man, or his parents sinned, but that the glory of God might be worked in him this day.** Yes, grace trumped good morals. He had to be stopped. The contagion of eternal love could not be allowed to persist; it would knock their whole religious system down. Yes, of course, that was the point. Jesus was calling them up, calling them to transcend their limited knowledge, prejudices, superstition and points of view—in a word, he was calling them out of themselves and into the kingdom where he rules as Lord of all. And the fact is that eternal love had either the last laugh, or the last word—depending on your preference—in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Or, in the resurrection life of the risen Lord, divine love triumphed over sin and evil, death and the grace, religion and morality.

After Jesus had been crucified, dead and buried, the elite returned to their normal, complacent state of grave and dignified, moralistic self-congratulation—yes, Pilate, Caiaphas, the Sadducees and the Jewish leadership—they were all satisfied that they had done their duty, justified the authority which had been vouchsafed to them. All of them washing their hands of him, not just superstitious Pilate. They had “eliminated” that malefactor, that insurrectionist, that “dangerous fool” who was misleading and deceiving everyone. Now they could get back to “getting and spending,” to engaging with what they viewed as the stuff of real life—things like maintaining the status quo, the uneasy civic tranquility with them still in charge, still sponging off the public by way of leveraging their privileged position (much as some in Washington *get rich* by limiting

this, regulating that—according to the movement of stocks, bonds and investments (to which they have the inside track, or *scoop*).

But, behind their backs, imagine this; Jesus had popped back up again! Without their inkling, and despite their lies and efforts to suppress the truth, Jesus was back—more alive than ever, appearing everywhere (seemingly all at once!) as “the Lord of the Dance!” He was/is not done, sealed up, or locked away at all . . . he isn’t apparently even dead anymore. His followers were growing as Jesus drew, called, enchanted thousands upon thousands, increasing his thralldom, his kingdom, his rule. He had indeed become unstoppable. He was born again and again in every believer’s heart.

Eventually those who were looking the other way, they would turn around and see what was actually going on. Their authority had been bypassed, transcended and all their amassing of wealth, stuff, influence power and fame amounted to nothing much at all.

Now isn’t that hilarious? And if that isn’t hilarious, then what is? The whole of creation was erupting in joyous laughter. Only their pride impeded their joining in!

So that fate of Corinth, we affirm, is in the hands of the living Lord. New birth, the complete renovation, or *make-over* of those citizens who converted to Christ—that was the force behind true and lasting urban renewal. When believers had their perspective on life altered, and when their wants and desires were altered, ***a new city was being birthed***. A complete renovation of values and priorities follows new birth. It is as if Jesus is inviting new believers, “Let me in and I will become what you are all about! My righteousness will become your righteousness, my obedience will become your obedience; my service, your service and ***my love of the Father will become your love of the Father***. I am willing to become the new “you,” the new inner person, if you say “yes” to me, I will be recreated in you, ***indwelling you***—starting with the heart and extending to your everything.”

What is required for this to reoccur? Belief. Choose Jesus as your celebrity! Believe the gospel and Jesus Christ, the word of God, will indwell you, come to life in you. For Jesus has the power (and authority) to enlighten all who formerly lived in darkness. Jesus, the fountain of living water, has the power to infuse life into even those who were spiritually dead ***in their trespasses and sin***. He can quicken the inert! Receive the light, *for seeing the light always precedes walking in the light*. We need to observe, by celebration how the Passover covenant has been transformed into the New Covenant sealed with the Lord’s Supper and by the oneness thereby implied, just as their sins became his sin; even now his sinlessness has become our salvation, our righteousness and our truth.

Amen