

Overcoming Sin

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

One of the marks of the great artist is that he speaks truths that universally appeal to all men and women, and Shakespeare did that probably as well as any other great writer. And in his play Hamlet, he has Hamlet pass through all the hesitating and doubtful experiences that we ourselves have passed through. And he has Hamlet at times speaks "soliloquies", we call them in Shakespearian criticism. That is, speeches where the man is talking to himself, and one of those soliloquies runs like this, "Oh, that this too too solid flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew. Or that the everlasting had not fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God! God! How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, Seem to me all the uses of this world!"

And I don't know about you personally but I would guess that many of us in this room have felt that kind of thing at times, especially those last lines, "How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, seem to me all the uses of this world!" I would think most of us here have experienced the kind of depression and introspection that that expresses. And loved ones, the reason for it is that we insist on running closed universes, we do. You and I, that's what we're doing all the time.

We run a closed little universe that we call our life, really. That's it. Doesn't matter whether we're tight little Belfast men as I was, with a grim little grip on our lives -- or whether we're Minnesotans or Americans trying to make sure that life doesn't go off the rails. The reason for most of our depression and the reason for most of the emptiness that we feel about life is that we have set up a closed little universe that we control absolutely. We will not let anybody affect it or endanger it in any way.

Of course that wasn't the plan at all, we weren't made to operate like that. Apart from anything else, it means that you have three and a half billion closed little universes who never get to know each other and never interact with each other. But the tragedy is that when you run your life like that, nothing works right. Nothing works as it was meant to, that's why you get depressed, that's why you get frustrated, that's why you feel empty -- because you weren't made to operate like that but you've got a tight little operation going and you won't change for anybody and the tragedy is -- and I would say this to my younger brothers and sisters -- the tragedy is that as the years pass, you become more and more unchangeable, really.

And I think most of the older loved ones here would agree that apart from some power coming into that universe from outside, the people that we know down through the years have become the same, only moreso, than they were when they were 17. The tragedy is that you get smaller and smaller and more and more intense and more and more yourself and more and more unbearable. And loved ones the reason is we run a closed little universe.

You may sit there and say, "Oh brother, I have had depression that has come just because I have given all my money away", well, that's very unlikely. Most of our depression comes because we're downright self-centered and we're wrapped up in ourselves and are preoccupied with making sure the thing goes right for us. That's why Ponce de Leon has such a fascination for us, do you see that?

Ponce de Leon and the pumpkin in Cinderella and the white swan that the ugly duckling turned into -- all the same. Ponce de Leon was one of those great explorers that was always searching for the elixir of life, the fountain of eternal youth, that rejuvenating power that would keep life

eternally fresh and new and exciting. That's why the pumpkin has the fascination for us in the story of Cinderella. We always like to think that maybe the coach-and-four can turn in, or the pumpkin can turn into a coach-and-four, and we always like to think that maybe an ugly duckling can become a beautiful white swan.

Now, why do you think we feel those things? Do you think that's just an aberration that we men have invented in our little myths and stories? No, it is pointing to the fact that we can be changed. We can be changed, it is possible to be changed. It is possible for your life and your attitude and your whole approach to life and yourself and the future to be changed, if you let a power come in from outside, if you'll open your universe. Loved ones, that's what this communion table stands for.

This dear person died and then got up from being dead and His body was never found and the truth is that He is the Son of our Creator and once He rose from the dead He was let loose as a spirit into our universe and it is possible for His Spirit to come into us and change us completely and transform us and make us feel the same way as He does. I mean you must have been like me, gone out on a spring morning at times and felt, I wish I was as clean as that spring air. I wish I was as bright as those happy little birds.

I should tell you a little joke.

A guy was in the French café eating lunch and Jacques is our bird. Do you know Jacques? He is a happy little soul, a little canary that we bought when we first opened the restaurants down there and he sings madly away all day. So, this guy was waiting to have his order taken and I think it was John Spalding who was a Harvard graduate who was waiting upon him and John was asking him in his best intellectual tones, "What would you like?" and the guy, Jacques, of course was blasting away whistling like mad and the guy said, "I'll have a shot of what that bird's got", -- but haven't you felt that at times? You've looked at these other little creations of God and you've thought, "Oh I wish, I wish I could be as joyful or as happy or as free as the rest of God's creation."

Loved ones, all those things, little Jacques, the little birds, all the beauty in the universe was created by this dear person Jesus, and His Spirit is more joyful than all of those, brighter than all of those, freer than all of those and that Spirit can come into you this very day and that's why most of us not only look forward to each morning of our lives, but look forward especially to communion because for us, it's an opportunity to receive more of that free liberating life of Jesus in a new way into our own lives, and you can, this morning. That's why we eat the bread and drink the wine, do you see that? Because we believe that that's an outward expression of what is actually happening spiritually as Jesus' Spirit comes into us.

Now, let me tell you this. He can only come in if you'll open up the closed universe, you have to open it up. There are three steps that you need to take. God has been indicating to you in your conscience some things that He thinks are questionable in your life, you know that. Agree with Him, that's the first step. Agree with Him. You see what that does: it opens the universe, it opens your closed protected little universe, it says to God, "Lord, I don't really want to do this but I know You've been troubling me about these things in my conscience so I am going to agree with God." Move off dead center.

You know it doesn't much matter what it is, for some of us it's some silly thing like smoking, for others of us it's real promiscuity, either physical and actual -- or internal and in our minds. For

others of us, it's a kind of sarcastic critical attitude to certain people, for others of us it's just a real greediness about food or about money. For others of us it's just this desire to be one up on everybody else and never to be put down but God has been troubling your conscience about some of these things and He is asking you to agree with Him that these things are wrong. That's what it is to confess, it's to agree with God.

Loved ones, if you want this life that makes a spring morning spring, if you want this life within you that raised Jesus from the dead, take the first step and agree with God about the things that He is troubling your conscience about. You know, go on, be a devil, agree with Him, get off dead center, stop this business of saying, "Well, well, no, I mean I don't think it's really wrong." If you're questioning it, it's probably wrong. If you're doubtful about whether you should do it or not, it's probably God trying to get through rather deaf ears.

Agree with God, please, do, agree with him, get off dead center, open the closed universe, please, otherwise there's nothing will come in and you will shrivel up inside, you'll get worse and worse as the years go by, you will. So, the first step this morning, if God has troubled you about some things in your life, confess it. There will be a quiet time when we're distributing the bread and the wine, so during that time, agree with God, stop arguing from Him, stop rationalizing about them saying, "Oh well Lord, I am a little emotional or a little artistic in my temperament and I need that mode of expression even though I know it's sinful." Stop that silliness, agree with God.

Second step, stop doing it. Stop doing it. Just stop. Now, if you say to me, "Brother, I have stopped smoking so often I can't count the times", or if you say to me, "Brother, I have stopped swearing so often I can't remember", or you say, "I have made countless new year resolutions not to criticize other people and I am still doing it", stop doing it. If you say to me, "But I have stopped a hundred times", I say there's only one right thing to do. Repent means you stop doing it and eventually one of those stoppings will stick, really.

Eventually one of those times you stop will stick and it will work. Do you see there are two kinds of stoppers? One is a resentful stopper. They say "Oh, I've tried a thousand times, it doesn't work, oh I don't know what's wrong, it's God's not coming through or something's not working, oh I've tried stopping" -- that's a resentful stopper. Doesn't really want to stop at all. He is kind of glad that he can't stop and feels that he has the extravagance to criticize God or be resentful. He doesn't really care.

Then there's a joyful stopper. There's a stopper who is so sick of the things, so fed up with it, so anxious to get hold of God, that he'll hear this this morning or she'll hear this and they'll stop yet again and eventually after they've thrown away the cigarettes for the 27th time, or after they've apologized to the person for the 47th time, eventually those joyful stoppers will stop for good. But you stop sinning, you stop it.

The third step is, don't just give God a little bit of your life. If you want the Spirit pervading your whole life, it's life for life. Jesus gave his whole life for you, so give your whole life to Him this morning, hand it over to Him. Say, "Lord God, it's You that made me, and it's You that has bought me with Your son's death. I owe myself twice to You. I give You my own life here. All I have done is make a kind of boring mess of it, Lord I give it to You and You run it from this day forward and do what You want. And loved ones, whether you end up in Switzerland or Africa or in New York slums or here in Minneapolis, you'll find a new fresh spirit of Jesus that will come into you and will lift you from the bottom up so that you won't live under pressure and you won't live in that

self-centeredness that destroys life.

Now, it works, it works if you're real this morning. If you're real with God this morning, God will give you not only this bread and wine but will give you the lively Spirit of His own Son into your heart deep down and then it's so incredible to spend your life in constant levitation because that's what it's like. It's living constantly above yourself and looking down at your own life and you're again at last able to live the way Jesus did Himself.

So, loved ones will you think about those things during the quietness that we'll have. And you see the things to do and you can see what they are. They're actually saying to God, "I'll go your way" and actually doing it instead of playing mental games with Him and refusing to change, that's it. When God sees you're serious about changing, He begins to be able to give the life of His Spirit to you. So I pray that somebody here this morning will do it for the first time. And those of you who have done it before -- I mean that's what I am going to do this morning -- I am going to receive something new of Jesus for myself today and I know he'll be faithful to us.

Now will you stand loved ones, and I'll give the invitation.

You that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins and are in love and charity with your neighbors and intend to lead a new life following the commandments of God and walking from henceforth in His Holy ways, draw near with faith and take this holy sacrament to your comfort and make your humble confession unto Almighty God.

Let's be seated as we pray.