

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO KIERKEGAARD

JAMES 1: 17-27

UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHICAGO

AUGUST 30, 2009

Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

Do you remember—are you old enough to remember—are you interested enough in great American music to remember George and Ira Gershwin’s wonderful number, “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off”? One of my favorite is about a young woman auditioning for a Gershwin musical who gets up on the audition stage and announces that she would like to sing a song from a Gershwin musical and goes promptly into “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off.”

In singing “You say either, I say either, you say neither, I say neither...you say tomato, I say tomato,” she pronounces all the words exactly the same. Presently, the casting director calls out, “That will do. Thank you Miss Le-VEEN. We’ll be in touch with you, Miss LeVEEN.” Gathering up her music, the young woman looks out into the seats of the theater. “Oh, by the way,” she says, “the name is pronounced LeVINE.”

With the death of the inimitable Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, we have lost one of the great orators of our time who spoke with that Boston accent, “I have an idear. Why don’t we get a vodker?” Every year when we go to a remote part of North Carolina for our family vacation, it takes me a few days to adjust to the accent of the rural, somewhat isolated folks down there. Mary Cantwell, in a memoir, refers to a Connecticut accent entailing a strangling of vowels that she calls “Locust Valley Lockjaw, and she speaks of those women who work in Manhattan on fashion magazines as “well-syllabled.”

Although the old Chicago working-class accent—dese, dem, and dose (as typified by our Mayor who used to live in Bridgeport and is now in his sixties working hard at speaking English)—is less in evidence these days, nobody can say it ever hurt anyone’s political career in this town. I regret the way the influence of television has begun to wipe our regional accents. When I go back to Arkansas or Louisiana or Mississippi, my friends and relatives deplore the way I have become afflicted with “Yankee speech impediments” during my forty years of missionary work in the north.

Have you noticed—I am sure you have—that clergy often have an accent, a way of speaking when they are confined to sacred precincts like pulpits, chancels and Communion tables that is known in the trade as a “ministerial tone”? Clergy are often guilty of pronouncing the name of God with three syllables: “Gooo-ahh-wahhd!” The way Oklahomans make the word “Yale” into three syllables.

If anyone in the history of Christianity ever deplored such histrionics, it was my best friend, the nineteenth-century poet/philosopher/seeker/preacher/raconteur, Soren Kierkegaard. The title of today’s sermon is based on the fact that this passage from the Letter of James was Kierkegaard’s favorite pericope of Scripture. The “accent” with which Kierkegaard spoke was born out of a deep love of the Church coupled with a sense of dismay at the way so who called themselves Christian failed to

follow Christ. That is why this passage, today's Epistle Lesson, was Kierkegaard's favorite passage from the Bible.

As a devotee of the theology of Martin Luther, I have generally avoided the Letter of James. Luther called it an "epistle of straw," because it emphasizes law and action, what he called "works righteousness" rather than salvation by faith. Yet even Luther understood the necessity of expressing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to our neighbors in love. James writes, "But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing" (v. 25).

Soren Kierkegaard was one of the most remarkable people God ever created—a polemicist, philosopher, diarist, lover of common people, a bon vivant around 19<sup>th</sup> century Copenhagen who paradoxically had only one true friend in his forty-three years of life, and undoubtedly one of the most insightful Christian writers of all time.

Kierkegaard was forever maimed by the life and death of his father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard. Soren Abaye was the youngest of Michael Pedersen's seven children, and the one who learned his father's terrible secret. When Michael was a young man, he had suffered (not enjoyed) an encounter with a prostitute, and he lived from that time on in fear that he would not only contract syphilis but, because the symptoms of the disease lay dormant in the contracted person's body for months, even years, he would not know whether or not he had the disease. Moreover, it could be imparted to his children.

So, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, trying to atone for his sins, trying to understand God's possible punishment for them, stood one day on the heaths of the Jutland, that almost-barren grassland north and west of Copenhagen and cursed God.

Every person in this sanctuary knows deep down in her or his heart the anguish of that young man. We complain, we murmur against God. We are unsure of the difference between punishment and mercy, between providence and grace, between law and Gospel.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once observed that in his experience those who reflect upon their lives and conclude that they have received far less than they deserve tend to be among those from whom no great living comes. Others evaluate their lives, think they have broken about even, and conclude that they got about what they earned. Rarely do you see any exceptional living from them either. However, those who readily reckon they have received far more than they deserve are among those who do indulge in great living.

Justice means I get what I deserve. Mercy means I don't get what I deserve. Grace means I don't deserve what I get.

A word must be said about the death this week of one of the giants of American politics. Senator Edward Moore "Ted" Kennedy suffered his share of anguish and defeats in his seventy-seven years: the death of his oldest brother, Joe, in World War II, the assassinations of his brothers, Jack and Bobby, the

dementia that plagued his mother, Rose, in her last years, the airplane crash that broke his back and caused him intense pain for the rest of his life, his drinking and womanizing that plagued him until he married his beloved Vicky.

His personal life was difficult, to say the least, and his political life was no picnic either. After being defeated in his bid for the Democratic party's nomination for the presidency in 1980, Senator Kennedy became a true statesman. In his nearly forty –seven years in the U.S. Senate, he introduced over 2,500 bills and saw more than 500 of them passed. He championed civil rights, health care, anti-poverty legislation, and he said that his proudest vote was against the war in Iraq in 2002.

When he was expelled from Harvard after hiring another student to take a Spanish exam for him, Ted Kennedy enlisted in the U.S. Army, and his two years in the service brought him a life-changing experience. Joe McGinnis wrote of him in his 1993 study, *The Last Brother*:

“His induction into the army as an enlisted man exposed him firsthand, in a way none of his naval officer brothers had experienced, to the fact that many people, especially blacks, came from severely disadvantaged backgrounds, and that so much of what he had taken for granted all his life was utterly foreign to them, and, moreover, forever unattainable by them.”

From that experience as well as his deep Catholic faith which at its best stands for the rights of the poor and the disinherited, Ted Kennedy became a tribune of the powerless, the persecuted and the downtrodden.

James makes clear (verse 17) that God supplies the good things in people's lives and from this basic affirmation he instructs Christians about daily life. He names the things he is most concerned about. For example, James is keenly aware of the power of human speech both to build up and destroy. In the vernacular, he says, “Be slow to bad-mouth others or go on the warpath or raise hell.”

James was a keen observer of human nature, and he paid close attention to the details of everyday living. He noticed the generous acts, the small gifts, the gestures and the words we use. He knew that such small acts are the nuts and bolts of everyday life, holding together the scaffold on which we build community and the social order. Hearing the Word of God without doing anything about it is as different from acting well after hearing as a lightning bug is from lightning.

Words are important in our life, and when we use them in anger or to blame or disparage another person, we have violated our calling as followers of Jesus Christ. We use words to express ourselves; to convince and convict ourselves and others; to describe, name, blame or label things; to win arguments; to sell an idea or object; to lecture; to expound a point; to explain things into or out of existence, persuade, condole, console, counsel; to announce, denounce, deceive; to ask someone to marry; to declare war and make peace; to sentence someone, diagnose a condition, analyze a problem, deliberate or negotiate a deal. We cannot get along without words. Words can harm, alarm, uplift, inspire, degrade or silence someone.

James tells us to use our words carefully. He does not tell us to “swallow” or “stuff” it. Rather, he encourage us to transform anger into a virtue. Be quick to listen, he says, and slow to speak and therefore slow to anger.

Backbiting and slander characterize worthless religion. The tongue is capable of great damage. For James this cannot be overemphasized. James hammers against anger and an abusive tongue.

But he goes further. In a kind of dialectic of Christian existence, James understands pure religion as being inclusive of both social ministry and personal morality. One’s relationship to God means showing mercy (2:13), striving for peace (3:18), helping the needy (2:15-16), loving the neighbor (2:18) and recognizing the social justice of a fair minimum wage (5:4). In terms of personal morality, it means keeping away from the “stain” of sin (Moffatt’s translation).

That inimitable storyteller, Mr. Garrison Keillor, fashioned a wonderful tale about a group of twenty-five Lutheran ministers who were invited to Lake Wobegon to study the demise of the church in small town America. They went to Mr. Keillor’s mythical hometown, a place where “all the men are brave, all the children are smart and all the women are good looking” because it is quintessentially Lutheran, Midwestern and small town.

After they had finished their first day’s seminars, lectures and break-out groups, they were invited to a barbecue on Lake Wobegon by the mayor of the village. They all piled on to Wally’s pontoon boat with Pastor Ingqvist hosting. The Lutheran clergymen all dressed in corduroys, earth-tone sweaters and Hush Puppies for the occasion—their idea of casual attire. But Wally’s pontoon boat is only twenty-six feet long and twelve feet wide, so the twenty-five Lutherans were crowded neck to neck for the barbecue.

Those standing too close to the grill began to get hot, so they dipped their beer mugs into Lake Wobegon to get some water to douse the fire. But as they leaned over the side of the overcrowded boat, it began to tilt dangerously. As they then rushed to the other side to keep it balanced, it capsized. You can imagine the pandemonium, as they, all twenty-five of them, fell into the lake. In their Hush Puppies and corduroys they were so weighted down that they could not swim to safety.

But it had been a dry summer in northern Minnesota and the lake was only five feet deep. Nobody drowned but many of them were standing with their heads just above water. Some were in water up to their chins and could barely keep from choking.

As Mr. Keillor told the story and the audience on National Public Radio was in stitches, he then paused and in that mellifluous voice said, I feel just like those Lutheran pastors sometimes. I know just what they were going through. I find myself up to my chin in life’s waters, almost ready to drown in my troubles.”

I, too, know that reality, that feeling. Don’t you? More than seldom. Often, in fact. And the writer of the Epistle of James knows it, too. But we are not left to drown.

Luther wrote, “A Christian is a free person, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant, subject to all.” We live in that tension between our own God-given independence and God’s call to serve

the last, the least and the lost. God loves us more than we can imagine. And God's love does not depend on our good works. God's love is given freely and graciously.