

Honors Convocation Wednesday, September 19, 2018: The Ineluctable Dr. Shirley Kilpatrick

It's Saturday morning, November 1, 1755. It's All Saints Day, a festival day when the church celebrates the great cloud of witnesses both living and dead. Like most people, you and your family go to worship. As you are gathered, a cataclysm of monumental proportions strikes: first the earthquake, then the fires, and finally the tsunami. You, your family, and virtually everyone you know is crushed, burned up, or drowned. Lisbon is destroyed and surrounding regions seriously affected. It remains one of the worst earthquakes in human history. In a century when many influential people were already questioning the truth of the bible, this event seemed hugely significant. How could a good God allow this to happen to people, many of whom were trying to worship him? The notion that there is a God who executes a loving providence seemed demonstrably absurd.

This horrific event is an example of what we call the problem of evil. Christian scholars: you and I cannot explain these problems of evil away or make them "okay." Yes, I can take you to numerous carefully crafted arguments that attempt to answer the question, "How can a good God allow evil?" But as erudite as these efforts are, you will come away from each one with a gnawing sense that the arguments, in their turn, are not wholly convincing. Though this is the case, we must not dismiss the problem of evil. We must face it and do what we can as scholars to wrestle with it, even if in the end we must sit, like Job, in silence before our God. People will not take our scholarship seriously if we do not show in deep ways that we can enter into the reality of suffering.

But the problem of evil, intractable as it is, is not the only problem you must faithfully address. American science journalist, John Horgan, writes,

My inability to solve the problem of evil keeps me from believing in Catholicism (the faith in which I was raised) or any other religion. But I call myself an agnostic rather than atheist, and here's why: the flip side of the problem of evil is the problem of beauty. If there really is no God and the world was not in some sense designed for us, then why is it so often quite so heart-breakingly lovely? (98)

American cultural critic, Susan Sontag, who like Horgan was not a Christian, talks about our experience of the lovely. After an argument in which she cites our many struggles over beauty (for example, who hasn't railed against impossible beauty standards!), she takes us into the middle of war. It is late December 1942 on the Russian front. A German soldier writes home,

“The most beautiful Christmas I had ever seen, made entirely of disinterested emotions and stripped of all tawdry trimmings. I was all alone beneath an enormous starred sky, and I can remember a tear running down my frozen cheek, a tear neither of pain nor of joy but of emotion created by intense experience. . . .” (212)

Sontag’s point here is that “our capacity to be overwhelmed by the beautiful is astonishingly sturdy and survives amidst the harshest distractions. Even war [she says], even the prospect of certain death, cannot expunge it” (212-13).

Horgan summarizes my argument up to this point. He writes,

Believers in a beneficent deity should be haunted by the problem of evil. But atheists should also be haunted by the problem of beauty—and love, friendship, truth, compassion and all the other things that make life worth living. (98)

So no matter what fields we are studying, these are the two great problems before us. Tonight I am particularly calling us to pursue the problem of beauty with genuine zeal, creativity, and hope.

In his Nobel acceptance speech, Alexander Solzhenitsyn talks about three trees: the tree of Truth, the tree of Goodness, and the tree of Beauty. In his picture, these trees grow side by side, meeting at their crowns. In the modern world, he says, we have knocked down the tree of Truth, and we have knocked down the tree of Goodness. We have not allowed these two trees to grow. But, he says, “perhaps the whimsical, unpredictable, unexpected branches of Beauty will work their way through, rise up TO THAT VERY PLACE, and thus complete the work of all three” (Section 2).

If we try to have a conversation with someone about what is true or what is good—it could be tough going, even rancorous. But if Sontag is right, nearly everyone has some experience of beauty that they would like to talk about. Sontag concludes, “Imagine saying, ‘That sunset is interesting’” (213). No, nearly all people would say it is a *beautiful* sunset. Undeniably beautiful. Even if war rages, it is still beautiful. And so in a culture that rejects truth and goodness, we still have an opening—the undeniable beauty that is all around us. And each of us, no matter what we are studying, can and should seek to know and love this beauty and seek to live a beautifying life.

American poet Denise Levertov helps us to meditate on this call. She writes,

I know this happiness
is provisional:

the looming presences—
the great suffering, great fear—

withdraw only
into peripheral vision:

but ineluctable this shimmering
of wind in the blue leaves:

this flood of stillness
widening the lake of sky:

this need to dance,
this need to kneel:

this mystery: (“Of Being”)

Levertov reminds us that even the deep happiness we might presently feel is always subject to change. That is because we are experiencing it in a setting of evil, a world of suffering and fear. We cannot dismiss that setting as if it does not exist. Such a rejection produces an empty optimism. No. We must cultivate *happiness* not empty optimism, happiness rooted in a hard reality. But evil and suffering alone are not an adequate account of reality. That view would constitute a deadly pessimism. No. Something ineluctable, that is something undeniable, is shimmering in the blue leaves. A shimmering wind we can't exactly explain and certainly cannot control is expanding reality even as I speak. In the end, we cannot resist this shimmering. Sooner or later we will need to dance and to kneel before so great a mystery.

Most of the time we miss the shimmering because it is in our peripheral vision with fear or distractions in our direct line of sight. Levertov describes this existential reality:

Lord, not you,
it is I who am absent.
At first

belief was a joy I kept in secret,
stealing alone
into sacred places:
a quick glance, and away—and back,
circling.
I have long since uttered your name
but now I elude your presence.
I stop
to think about you, and my mind
at once like a minnow darts away,
darts
into the shadows, into gleams that fret
unceasing over
the river's purling and passing.
Not for one second
will my self hold still, but wanders
anywhere,
everywhere it can turn. Not you,
it is I am absent.
You are the stream, the fish, the light,
the pulsing shadow,
you the unchanging presence, in whom all
moves and changes.
How can I focus my flickering, perceive
At the fountain's heart
the sapphire I know is there? ("Flickering Minds")

As Levertov tells us, the Lord is the source of the evanescent, shimmering beauty we see in the world; he is the stream, the fish, the light, the pulsing shadow. But he is also the unchanging Beauty, the sapphire, which is the same yesterday, today, and forever. In an Easter sermon, Augustine exclaims,

Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea,
question the beauty of the air, amply spread around everywhere, question the
beauty of the sky, question the serried ranks of the stars, question the sun
making the day glorious with its bright beams, question the moon tempering
the darkness of the following night with its shining rays, question the
animals that move in the waters, that amble about on dry land, that fly in the
air; their souls hidden, their bodies evident; the visible bodies needing to be

controlled, the invisible souls controlling them; question all these things. They all answer you, “Here we are, look; we’re beautiful.”

Their beauty is their confession. Who made these beautiful changeable things, if not one who is beautiful and unchangeable? (Sermon 241)

We have flickering minds. We struggle to see the ever changing beauty around us, let alone see the Beauty of the living God in whom there is no shifting shadow. Still, whatever our fields of study, we must seek the sapphiric beauty and help others to seek it with all the creativity, insight, and prayerful faith we have.

In an effort to gain insight and to increase our faith, we turn to the prophet Ezekiel who shares with us his vision of the heavenly living creatures and the sapphire he knows is there. He says,

. . . there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads as they stood with lowered wings. Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like **a throne of sapphire**, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell facedown. . . .

We all, young and old, have a lot of scholarly work ahead of us. In that pursuit, we must aim to do our very best, cultivating minds that can face the problem of evil and engage an ineluctable beauty—till in the end, we fall face down.

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