

Beloved Sisters & Brothers: When Jim Gettamy inquired as to my topic for this meeting, I despaired of making a selection, & piously suggested that--as our Lord says in the Holy Book--when I stood up among you, it would be given unto me

WHAT I'M MOST CONCERNED ABOUT

what to say. Only later did I remember that the promise's context was enemies: it would apply only if you were *enemies*. But since you are *friends*, the promise did not apply, & I would have to prepare this speech (copies of which are available in the unlikely event that any of you might want one before the rest get mailed as Thinksheet #3269).

So what title did I give Jim? To maximize my options on this occasion, I said let's call it "What I'm Most Concerned About." In my 66 years as an ordained so-called-mainline minister, I've never before been so open about a title. And I'm glad I was; for this speech is going to center in the most interesting and boring person I know, a centering very rare in my Thinksheets. (Yes, you, like me, are the most interesting & boring person *you* know.)

1 Franklin--wasn't it?--said that a gun pointed at you powerfully focuses your attention on yourself, what may happen to you. In my 89th year, having outlived my parents in longevity & facing declining physical powers, including sight, I can no longer--even with Loree's help--maintain the house & gardens she & I designed & built when I retired more than 1/4 c. ago: we are moving into an old folks' warehouse politely known as a retirement community (at my suggestion, in the midst of her Nebraska tribe) as soon as we can sell our Craigville place. This now today is my swan song to you, so listen up hard if you think the Lord may have any wisdom for you from old Willis, who loves you & is sad to have to leave you. Like you, I am full of years & of stories; & I must now go lay my stories on strangers who may prove less patient of them than you have been.

2 You all know how it is with moving. Selling your house is hard work & scary & boring; just moving, as all of you know, requires such self-attention as to make one feel guilty--guilty that, for the transition time, it's "what I'm most concerned about." When I gave Jim the title "What I'm Most Concerned About [Right Now]," I thought it wouldn't be about me but rather about some theology-&-culture issue, the category of most of my Thinksheets. E.g., what I call "egalitarianity," the ideological idolatry of equality as the arithmetic replacement of complementarity ("Christ-" being removed from "Christ-ianity" & replaced by "egal-" [equal-]). Or I thought about leading you in a discussion titled "Songs that Sing Themselves" (& I urge that somebody lead in this sometime): When you wake up in the morning or after a nap, do you not sometimes find yourself listening to something being sung inside you--some hymn, romantic ballad, whatever? When it happens, you can use for meditation & prayer the words you are hearing sung. The Holy Spirit, like water looking for a crack to seep through & never ceasing day or night, is trying to get through to you--through your remembrances & hopes, your fears & your faith, your griefs & your joys--&, by divine intelligent design, you are especially open to the Spirit in the twilight of falling into & out of sleep.

Yes, the songs that sing themselves inside us. Brothers & sisters, I'm ashamed to confess that what I'm most concerned about right now--in this world full of woes & wonders--is all the details of getting rid of the house we thought we owned but discovered owns us. The older I get, the more my soul trusts the Lord & the less my nerves do: my ancestors died nervous wrecks trusting the Lord. But often, these mornings, I come awake hearing "Yes, Jesus took my burden I could no longer bear. Yes, Jesus took my burden in answer to my prayer. My anxious fears subsided; my spirit was made strong! For Jesus took my burden, & left me with a song." Or I hear my 1897-divorced Anglican grandmother singing a song of love's transcendence of time: "Darling, we are growing old, silver threads among the gold.... Yet, my darling, you will be, will be, ever young and fair to me."

3 I'm uncomfortable talking so much about myself, & to relieve the discomfort I'm going to take a moment to display my humility. The reason I'll never write an autobiography is that I'm so humble that the writing of it would bore me, & I can't

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imagine anyone's not being bored reading it. But the Lord has let me meet some interesting people I've jotted notes about, & occasionally I get an idea I think worth writing down; & I use the abecedary form to retain both. (Later in the hour, I'll read you a few samples.) Actually, humility is more a goal of mine than an achievement. Herb Davis is a better model of this virtue. When recently on the "Confessing Christ" site Gabe Fackre praised Herb for his long life of courageous word-&-deed witness to the gospel, Herb countered with (in substance) this: I hope I live long enough to forget any good I've ever done & remember only the answer to the Heidelberg Catechism's first question, "What is thy only comfort in life and death?" Answer: "That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, [whose blood wins victory over the devil and] who...assures me of eternal life and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him." (1563) (Also, I'm not so humble as to refuse to provide you with such copies of these remarks as you may want, & to send them out as Elliott Thinksheets.) And oh yes, in light of Herb's directing attention from himself to Jesus, I must tell you that often these mornings I awake to this inner song: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face; and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace."

4 More than $\frac{1}{2}$ c. ago I heard the justly lauded Indian Christian D.T.Niles say something he's now well known for having said: "Evangelism is one beggar telling another where to find bread." Soul-bread. The Word who came among us is the Bread of life; & daily we can be fed by words of Scripture, hymn, creed, confession, & maxims of life special & common. If you hear or read a sentence that feeds you, write it down & put on it your frig door so you'll be fed again & again even before you open the frig. Through the years I've put thousands of sentences, one sentence each, on 3x5cards & have used them variously--some of you will remember, for many years beginning in 1963 on the facing pages to the daily meditations in the UCC Lenten manual "The Fellowship of Prayer." Here are two I've made much use of, the first my adaptation from Thomas Aquinas: "The road that stretches before our feet is a challenge to our hearts long before it tests the strength of our legs. Our destiny is to run to the edge of the world and beyond, off into the darkness; sure in spite of all our blindness, secure in spite of all our helplessness, strong in spite of all our weakness. joyfully in love in spite of all the pressures on our hearts. In that darkness beyond the world we can begin to know the world and ourselves--and to understand that we were not made to pace out our lives behind prison walls but to walk into the arms of God." And this from Reinhold Niebuhr (quoted [though incompletely] by his daughter Eliz.Sifton at the end of her book-length tribute to him, THE SERENITY PRAYER [p349, WWNorton/03]): "Nothing worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing that is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing that we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our own standpoint; therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness." And this from me, picked up (by a Hospise CN clergywoman, who had it calligraphed) from somewhere in my eight years of Kirkridge "Readings and Intentions": "GRACE, God's caring Presence, supervenes over and interpenetrates the common day. It is the food within all food, the comfort and strength within all assurance, the song that sings itself within all our moods. To know this is light, to live it is life eternal. The Love that will not let us go will not let us down."

5 Before you & I have some conversation & I then close with ABC readings of ideas & persons, I want to introduce you to Luella, her real name, a charwoman in Rochester NY, here finger painted by Dianne Dengel, whom I saw sign this 3' x 1' oil. Luella calls me from what I'm most concerned about to what I *should be* most concerned about. She eats her bread without teeth, & without shoelaces but with dignity walks through the world of her work--carrying her world-sweeping broom like a processional cross, her world-washing pail like a baptismal font, & her keys as though with her joyful smile she could unlock the doors of the kingdom to us all. I want to know what Luella thinks I should be most concerned about right now, & after our meeting I'm going to look into those big eyes of hers & ask her.

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