

Wonalancet Chapel, July 4, 1993

The Rev. S. Lester Ralph

Opening sentences:

We gather here quietly assembled,  
 Bringing our public faces,  
 Bringing our personal secrets,  
 Bringing our shared humanity.  
 We gather here gently assembled,  
 Seeking deeper understanding,  
 Seeking the nourishment of our spirits,  
 Seeking the grace of our being together.

We gather here angrily assembled,

Knowing the ills of society's oppression,  
 Knowing the personal failures of courage and action  
 Knowing we can act justly, and knowing we can change  
 our world.  
 We gather here amazingly assembled,  
 Giving thanks for one another,  
 Praising the gift of Life,  
 And remembering our responsibility to serve all  
 humanity.

Paraphrase of Corinthians 13:

If I speak with the precision of a scholar and acquire the subdued elegance of a television announcer, and have not love for all men, I am but the staccato noise of a riveting machine or the irritation of a dripping faucet. And if I have the training of a news analyst to predict what will happen tomorrow and understand the Einstein theory and can identify questions, and if I have faith, so as to change the opinions of my neighbors (which in many ways is more difficult than removing mountains), and have not a warm love for people in my heart, I am as interesting as last week's headlines. If I give all my money to the United Fund drive and if I push my body to the edge of a nervous breakdown, but have not awareness of God's creative love, I gain nothing.

Love is willing to wait a long time and always searches for evidence of goodness in people; it does not push its way through crowds or break into line at supermarkets. Love does not care about recognition on committees, it is not distressed by careless words, nor is it depressed when a fellow worker is successful; love does not rejoice when misfortune comes to a competitor but rejoices in right, no matter who gets the credit. Love is eternally present as the atom. As for predictions of presidential elections, they will melt away. As for the intricacy of language, the United Nations will surmount that. As for the latest

classroom theories, they will vanish like the early morning mists. Love shows us how little we really know. When I was growing up, I was eager to learn and soon felt that I knew all the answers, but when I became fullgrown, I blushed with the realization of how little I truly knew. For now we see as through a distorted television screen, but then person to person. What a small fragment I know about the world! But there will come a time when the love of God will show me the world reflected in the souls of the people. So, nuclear mysteries, 1993 models of everything, and love are woven into the fabric of life, but the greatest of these is the creative love of God.

Robert N. Zearfoss  
Seeking the grace of our being together.

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Prayer for the Departed (Ellen Havelock)

O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, in whose embrace all creatures live, in whatsoever world or condition they be; we beseech Thee for her whose name and dwelling place and every need Thou knowest. Lord, vouchsafe her light and rest, peace and refreshment, joy and consolation in paradise. Grant that her life may unfold itself in Thy sight. If she hath ever been hurt or maimed by any unhappy word or deed of ours, we pray Thee of Thy great pity to heal and restore her that she may serve Thee without hindrance. If there be ways in which she may come, vouchsafe her to us as a guide and guard and grant us such a sense of her nearness in such degree as Thy laws permit. If in aught we can minister to her peace, be pleased in Thy love to let this be.

Pardon, O gracious Lord and Father, whatsoever is amiss in this our prayer, and let Thy will be done, for Thou art able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon

(Today I am going to speak about the Fourth of July, but it will take a little time for me to get to that. Please bear with me until we reach the connections I hope to make at the end.)

We live in an age where everything is coming out of the closet. Actions which have destroyed or distorted countless lives are now being talked about and dealt with: child abuse, age abuse, wife abuse, sex abuse, race abuse. It is essential that these scourges be eradicated from human relations--but I am not going to dwell on that aspect this morning.

Rather, my focus is on how this, as all other worthy endeavors, can itself be distorted. I have recently been reading

a book entitled Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character, by Charles J. Sykes. Let me give you some examples from the book.

1. An FBI agent embezzles \$2000 and loses it in gambling. He is fired, but later reinstated by the court. The argument for this is that his affinity for gambling with other people's money is a handicap and protected under federal law.

2. A man admitted to exposing himself 10,000-20,000 times. Turned down for a job as an attendant at a park in Wisconsin, he sued, contending he only did this in laundromats and libraries, never in parks, and was therefore a victim of job discrimination.

3. In Chicago, a civil rights complaint was brought against McDonald's: a man with a 60-inch waist complained that the seats were not large enough for his backside.

4. In Baltimore, a 640-lb. contractor wants to be classified as a minority group builder--he can't visit construction sites; he falls through wooden stairs.

Closer to home is the case involving Pamela Smart. The teenagers accused in connection with the killing of her husband are bringing suit, arguing that if school officials had been doing their job properly, they would have realized that the young men were involved in inappropriate activity.

During the time when I was mayor of Somerville, I had what I considered to be the honor of appointing the first black man to the police force. It was a disaster: we were unable then to check people's backgrounds, and I was later forced to dismiss the man for firing at the cars of speeding teenagers and shooting out lights at will. He brought suit, alleging racial discrimination and was eventually reinstated.

What we see is misbehavior being redefined as disease. According to a recent survey, 20% of Americans reported a psychiatric disorder; 50% are obese or afflicted with an eating disorder; 20 million are alcoholics (and, adding in family members and co-dependents, this means that 80 million, or one-third of the population are affected); 25 million said they were addicted to sex; 20 million said they were compulsive gamblers; and 50 million were suffering from depression or anxiety. The impulse to flee from personal responsibility and blame others is becoming deeply imbedded in American culture.

Hemingway said that life eventually breaks us all, but that some have the strength to become strong in the broken places. My life experience teaches me that if you show me a productive, creative, growing person, I will show you someone struggling monumentally to overcome some real or felt inadequacy--something inside that feels broken.

Let me tell you two stories of victims to suggest alternative paths to excusing ourselves from moral responsibility for who we are:

Last week I visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington,



D.C.--a deeply-moving, life-changing event for anyone who is able to go there. One interview, by an aging woman who survived Auschwitz, told of being transported by train to the camp with her mother, her sister, and her sister's new baby. When they arrived, a Jewish prisoner-slave got on the train to move everyone out. When he saw the baby, he whispered very softly to the mother of the two daughters, "Pregnant women and those with young children are killed immediately." Coming off the train, the mother grabbed the daughter's baby, saying, "I'm afraid to be alone. Let me take him." The two daughters were directed to one line for the labor camp; the mother and grandson to another line moving toward the gas chambers. As they moved farther and farther apart, the mother kept calling to her other daughter, "Olga, take care of your sister. Olga, take care of your sister." Here was a victim who chose to give herself--not to blame, hide, or rationalize--a moral human being, simply trying to save what she could, at the cost of her own life. Does it not give us cause to reflect on our feeble resolve to offer ourselves in the service of the deepest values?

Another story: Henry (not Henry Steele) lived in a little colonial house in Virginia. Late one evening, friends came to visit. They sat in the candlelit parlor, quietly talking, watching the flickering shadows on the walls. During a lull in the conversation, there was suddenly a scratching noise, at first faint, then a little louder, that gave rise to lighthearted remarks about ghosts and such. After a few minutes, Henry stretched, yawned, and asked to be excused so he could retire. When the visitors had gone, Henry sighed. He was alone again with the noise--the sound of something dragging along the floor joists beneath his feet.

Henry stiffened, reached for a lantern, approached the trap door, and grabbed its iron ring. He peered into the blackness, then lowered the lantern and himself into the cold cellar. There was a rustling in the corner. A figure, cringing in terror, wailed. As Henry lifted his lantern, the light fell upon a face horribly animated, its twisted features snarling one moment, weeping the next. The blanched, wild-eyed visage was filled with torment. This was the face--of Henry's wife.

Henry could not recall the duration of her madness nor the endless procession of days and months he had descended the cellar stairs to feed and care for her. All the hours of his life had by now blended into one solitary hour of despair. These were the visions that stalked him day and night.

A few days later, March 23, 1775, Henry addressed the Assembly at St. John's Church. These were his words:

Shall we try argument? . . . Shall we resort to entreaty? . . . What terms shall we find which have not already been exhausted? . . . We have petitioned, we have remonstrated, we have supplicated, . . . we have been spurned in contempt. . . . There is no longer any room for hope. Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the

price of chains? . . . Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death.

Thus lived and thus spoke Patrick Henry.

America is a land of hope and promise, but only for those who resolve to use freedom responsibly--for those who resolve to strive and work and let freedom ring for every individual willing to give it his or her best effort.

Hear me out. There is no future in trying to cash in on our weaknesses and excuse ourselves from the responsibility of living heroically the only life each of us is ever going to have.

(parts of the service requested copied by  
some in the congregation; typed from Lester's  
notes by Ann Rogers)