

Man's Part in Evolution.

SHAPING LIFE TO FINER ISSUES

Sermon Preached by Rev. Mary A. Safford at Unity Church, Sioux City, Iowa.

I CORINTHIANS III:9.

For we are laborers together with God.

Paul was not a man of smooth words or half way measures. Impulsive, ardent and intense, he had the defects as well as the virtues of all such natures. But the world can afford to overlook many defects, if need there be, in those who bring to it a lofty purpose, the courage to dare, the will to do. And there was that which may well kindle admiration in the life of this apostle, who was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision, but set himself with resolution to do the work that lay before him, the grand work of converting Jew and Gentile to a purer faith in God and man and duty.

This work that was given to Paul nearly 2,000 years ago is the same work that is given to us to do to day. Conditions and circumstances have greatly changed, but now as then men need to be lifted out of ignorance and sin, into that higher life of the soul where beauty walks hand in hand with duty. And nothing can be more inspiring as we go forth to labor for the right than to feel, as Paul felt, that we are co-workers with God; that we may join hands with that "infinite eternal energy from which all things proceed," in the noble work of shaping life to finer issues. There is strength and cheer in the thought, that while the evolution of our race is regulated by a system of far-reaching laws of development, we have the power to aid the action of these laws by our individual efforts; that the humblest man or woman, boy or girl, who strives to know the truth and do the right, really helps God in the grand creative work which will find its consummation in a purified and perfected humanity. It means a great deal if we can really feel and say with Emerson,—

On bravely, through the sunshine and the showers,
Time hath its work to do and we have ours.

for without the strong conviction that God needs us and that our labor will surely count for good, we soon lose heart and hope. I know of nothing more disastrous in its effects upon society, nothing that does more to paralyze human effort and promote life-destroying indifference, laziness, wickedness, than the feeling so many men and women cherish, that the world moves on just the same, no matter what they do.

Science has given to the world the grand conception of the universality of law; but good gifts are often turned to an unworthy use. Many there are who shirk responsibility, who refuse to do their part in life, upon the ground that they are wholly the creation of their environment, that all results are determined by unvarying laws, hence it matters not whether they work or play, because in no way can they help or hinder the action of these laws. They affirm that what is to be will be, hence it is utterly useless to attempt to change present conditions. With the Persian poet, Omar Khayyam, they view men as the slaves of circumstance, the helpless creatures of an all powerful Being who uses them as—

Impotent pieces of the game he plays
Upon this checker-board of nights and days;
Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,
And one by one back in the closet lays.

This fatalistic doctrine does not conduce to earnest work toward making this world a better place in which to live, hence there is need that men should see it is not true. Over against the fact that God works by unvarying law, we need to place the other fact that he has given us the power to be laborers together with him. God regulates the growth of a plant by a wondrous network of laws, yet has given us the power so to adjust the action of these laws that we can either kill the plant or help it to a strong and beautiful flowering and fruitage. You know that while you cannot, in any way, create a single seed, that while you cannot set aside the action of one law of growth, you can so prepare the soil in which you plant your seed, you can so avail yourself of known laws, that your corn and oats will grow, when without work there would be nothing but weeds.

Our common daily work consists in thus applying known laws to produce desired effects.

We have learned that friction causes heat, and we strike a match and light the morning fire by the help of this known law. We have learned that it is a law of gases to diffuse themselves through space, and to prevent the smoke of our fires from filling our rooms we build chimneys and invoke the aid of other laws to bear this smoke away. In short, while we cannot create or destroy a single particle of matter, or set aside a single law, we can so combine these particles, we can so adjust one to another of these varied laws, that we freely cause harmful or helpful results.

The savage is the slave of the mighty forces all about him, but as he advances in the path of progress he masters these forces and converts them into helpers. They in their turn become his slaves, and as step by step he moves onward to higher and yet higher conditions of being, his progress is marked by an ever-increasing mastery of nature's mighty forces.

As man thus works with God in the material world, causing the corn to grow and the flowers to bloom that the earth may be glad, making the winds his messengers and the lightning his nimble Mercury, so may he work with God in the finer world of spiritual realities where thought and love, or desire and hate, are the forces that bear sway. He may plant the seeds of truth and love in the souls of little children that in after years will bloom in fairer flowers than any which his garden yields. He may give the world a noble thought that, striking root, will live and grow and be a blessing to the race when centuries have come and gone. He may do some worthy deed whose influence, widening as the years go by, will not be spent when the lapsing waves of time are blended with the ocean of eternity. He does have the power to help or hinder the growth of humanity in all things pure and beautiful.

Gladly, thankfully do we accept the teachings of evolution. We rejoice in the thought of never-ending progress, but we deplore that false interpretation of this noble theory, which makes of man a mere creature of circumstances, blown about by the winds of time, utterly powerless to determine his course in the slightest degree.

We would that all might realize that while we add nothing to do with our evolving as conscious human beings, once evolved, once given the power to think and to act, we have very much to do with the future evolution of ourselves and others. We are not responsible for those tendencies to evil which we have inherited from the past, but we are responsible if we do not exert ourselves to conquer them by wise and careful training. Circumstances do much to shape our lives, and knowing this to be true we may do much so to shape circumstances that their influence upon us will be helpful rather than harmful. While our environment is making us we may ever be making our environment.

The one great truth that we should always bear in mind as we think of the mighty forces that are ever giving birth to life is this, Inter-stance as well as circum-stance has creative power. What we are does not depend on outward forces only, but is the joint product of these external forces and the power that is within. Our characters are not the product of circumstances over which we have no control, for our thought, our feeling, our will, act with these circumstances and upon them, to make us noble or unworthy.

Not only is it true, as Luther said, that "God needs strong men to help him," it is also true that without such help God's work is left undone, because he works through human hearts and brains and hands. He shares with us creative power that we may use in helping to accomplish his wondrous purposes. No matter how hard our lives may be, no matter how small our power to help may seem, there is something we can do; and no one else can do your work or mine. Well answered the old violin maker, Antonio Stradivarius, when told that he was foolish to be so painstaking in the making of his instruments, and that another man could make violins as good as his:

May be; they are different. But were his best. He could not work for two. My work is mine. And hereby or not, if my hand slacked I should rob God—since he is fullest good, leaving a blank instead of violins. I say, not God himself can make man's best. Without best men help him.

But not without men's hands; he couldn't make Antonio Stradivari's violins without Antonio. Like Antonio, we are called

also to do our best. As the pure white lily unfolds its petals to the sunlight and rests upon the bosom of the stream in beauty, because from out the slime and ooze below it draws only life-giving elements, so may we develop strong, pure souls most beautiful to the all-seeing eye of God, if from out the soil in which our lives are rooted we extract those things which build up noble character, if we so use the materials for growth as to really work with God. And are we not ungrateful for our rich inheritance of thought and feeling, our power to dare and to do, if we are not striving to make still richer the lives that will follow ours in the pathway of the years?

We are heirs of all the ages. Into the texture of our lives is wrought the power that it has taken the long and painful struggle of many centuries to create. We build on the foundations that others have laid, oftentimes in pain and tears. And as all life that has preceded ours, from the highest to the very lowest forms of being, affects our lives to-day, so will our thought and action tell for good or evil on the lives of men and women in the years that are to come. Hence common gratitude for that which we inherit through the toil of others would inspire us to join our hands with those mighty forces of truth and love that are ever working to uplift the race.

Sublimely beautiful is the story that science tell about the making of this world, and those other worlds on high that beam so kindly on us through the silent watches of the night and radiate the splendor of the day. Out of formless matter were shaped the shining spheres that give us light. From a vast fiery nebula was condensed the glowing sun that in its ceaseless whirl threw off other worlds into surrounding space though holding them within their orbits by its mighty forces, in its turn became a great creative power that clothes our earth with life and beauty. Held and guided by unvarying laws it ever radiates the light and heat which are life-giving, life-sustaining. As if grateful for its own existence it pours a constant flood of light and warmth upon us, aiding its maker in that creative work which is finished yet renewed forever.

What the sun does, though all unconscious of its power, we may do as conscious thinking human beings, who have the power rightly to choose and wisely to use the gifts of God. In the shaping of a solar system which was but a step in that grand creative work which has ever tended to the absolute perfection of the human soul, well may we feel that if we are worth the toil and struggle of the centuries that lay behind us, it is because we have such wondrous power to enrich the future by our faithful, loving work with God for man. Let this thought inspire worthy deeds. Instead of saying that we are bound by circumstances, let us prove that we have that within ourselves that can convert all that life brings to us into material for growth.

As a church, as individual men and women, let us ask: What can we do to help? and be assured that if we really desire to help it will not be hard to find a way. If instead of acting upon let-things-go-as-they-please theory we could only realize that we are in part responsible for every wrong we might have prevented, that we much account for our failure to do the good we might do, we would interest ourselves more keenly in life's best work instead of drifting idly on its strong current, aimless, purposeless men and women.

And if you crave rest, if lives burdens press heavily upon you, if the world seems out of tune and your lot a dreary one, remember that—

Rest is not quitting
The busy career,
Rest is the fitting
Of self to one's sphere
'Tis loving and serving
The highest and best,
'Tis onward unswerving;
This is true rest.

Not the real work of life but its constant jar is that which tires men, and when we join hands with God to labor for high and holy ends, striving to adjust our lives to his unfolding plan, the discord grows less and less, the harmony more and more.

As in the physical world man has matched his intellect against nature's mighty forces to master them, so in the realm of spiritual realities the might of love and thought must be brought to bear upon the powers of evil to conquer them. Its triumph is

certain, its reward is sweet. Yet we shall not be inspired to perform it, we shall not have the courage, zeal and patience it demands, unless we realize individual power to act; our individual responsibility. But if we feel that we can choose the good and follow it, that we are not the slaves of circumstances, but co-laborers with God; if we look upon this life as the beginning of a larger life beyond the grave and realize that every noble action tells for time and for eternity, then there will come to us such courage, hope and joy that nothing will cause us to despair.

Despite all opposition and our many failures in life we shall go forward bravely, doing our part in life, though none may sing our praises, though but few may know that we have even lived. Not long ago I held in my hand a piece of coal containing the perfect imprint of a fern that lived and died thousands of years ago. No human eye beheld its beauty, no human voice told of its grace, for when this fern was living man had not yet appeared upon the earth. Yet unseen, unsung, the little fern unfolded its feathery greenness in the sunlight, and lived and was beautiful, doing the work for which it was designed, though all unconscious that, dying, it would leave a record that some time would be read. It simply did its part in life, and at last the record so long hidden was brought to light. Thus may we imprint upon the tablets of time the record of strong, beautiful lives that God's eye ever sees; that some day will be manifest.

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