

Law and Grace: Body and Soul

Rob Gieselmann, Epiphany 3B, Jan. 25, 2015

When I was five years old, my parents moved us from Tennessee to Vero Beach, Florida, just north of Palm Beach. In those days, the town slogan was, *Where the Tropics Begin...* Long, lazy summers and you could swim year-round without a wetsuit! Spanish galleons and gold treasure lay just offshore – you could even see the boiler of one sunken ship, sticking up, out of the water.

You can understand, then, why I was dismayed to read the latest issue of *National Geographic*. *National Geographic* describes the effects climate change might have on Florida by the end of 21st century. The expected 5 foot rise in sea levels will inundate the neighborhood I grew-up in – Our house will be submerged, like the Spanish galleons. The Florida Keys, the Everglades, and pretty much every single domino-like condominium dotting the shore, from Pompano Beach to Miami Beach, will be water-logged. Despite these dire predictions, both politicians and developers continue approving and building condos at the fastest rate seen in decades.

Dozens of cranes dot the Miami skyline, and nobody seems concerned. Change is in the air – and what can anybody do about it? So why bother trying? Paul just spent the better part of this chapter - in his letter to the Corinthians - lecturing them not to change.

*Maintain your life as it is. If are unmarried, don't get married.
If you are a slave, don't seek freedom.*

So when he writes the words you just heard – he sounds confused. If you are married, don't act like it. If you buy things, act like you have nothing. This is all a bit much, and even Paul seems to realize that he isn't making sense – As if by way of explanation he adds, *What I mean to say is, the time is short.*

Now - most scholars will tell you that Paul thinks Jesus is returning soon – that's why the time is short, so don't waste your time trying to change things. If you are single, stay that way; married or a slave, stay that way. But I'm not sure I agree. I rather think that Paul sees in a way the rest of us don't – perhaps that the veil between this world and the next is terribly thin – that Paul sees continuity between the two worlds – The person you become in this life is exactly the person you will be in the next life – You will pick-up right where you left off in your spiritual and even emotional development. Or destruction.

To Paul, the externals – whether you are slave or free, single or married – matter far less than the character you develop, the person you become. When a person dies, he won't shed his bad habits like a snake sheds its skin.

Jesus spoke in the same way. The kingdom of God is the here and now, not off in the future... Among you... Where?...Right in front of your eyes. It matters, then, the person you become –

In his novel, The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, Haruki Murakami tells the ethereal story of Toru Okada, searching for his missing wife. Along the way, Toru encounters an old soldier, who tells Toru his story. During the war, the soldier was captured by Mongolians, who threw him into a deep well where he should have died.

While he was in the well, the sun revealed extraordinary truths to him, so extraordinary – that the rest of his life became a disappointment – nothing could compare to that moment. The old soldier’s story should have been a warning to Toru, but it inspired him instead. He is, after all, determined to find his wife, so maybe a well will hold similar truth for him.

Toru finds his own well – And each day for a year, he descends to its dark bottom of to meditate. One day, he metaphysically trespasses the boundaries of the well and this universe - and passes into some other world, like a dream – *Or is it real?*

In that world, Toru finds his wife. Turns out, her brother, Toru’s brother-in-law, kidnapped her. He kidnapped her because she knows secrets about him that could ruin his political career. Toru battles his brother-in-law, violently – and Toru wins, crushing his brother-in-law’s skull with a baseball bat. Leaving him unconscious.

Toru returns to this world, climbs out of the well, to the news that his brother-in-law, has, in fact, suffered a brain hemorrhage. From which he will never recover. A brain hemorrhage? Or did Toru, in fact, crush his skull? Which world is real? This world, or the one next to it? How do the two influence each other?

And I can’t help but think that Paul sees the veil so thin as being virtual. Which is why he claims that who you become matters more than your state, or your accomplishments. *What I mean is, What I’m trying to say is, the time is short.* The clock is running out on Floridians. They imagine buildings are what matters. Or at least they don’t care enough to stop building – Despite the entire shoreline and half the state being at risk: The Everglades, the coral reefs and the keys.

Which leads to the question of you and me – what *are* we building here at St. Stephen’s? As we consider our work on this annual meeting day. Who are we becoming? Paul – at the end of this long discourse – reminds the Corinthian church of this: Only three things survive – Not church attendance, not the buildings, not community prominence – Three things, and three things only: Faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is

...It was for love, that Peter and Andrew, and James and John, left their earthly world and entered one transcendent. Follow me, Jesus called, and still calls. What *are we building?* The things we do matter, but they don’t matter, if you understand what I am saying. They matter if for love. They matter when we are reaching out to help others. They matter when we free people with the hope that God cares intimately for them. Who we are, who we become, is everything. Let’s never forget.