

Repent The Day Before You Die

Rob Giesemann Pent 27A, Nov. 9, 2014

I was best man at a wedding in rural Georgia, once – in a clapboard Baptist Church. It was May, and the church was un-air-conditioned. The bride had requested tall candles be placed throughout the room. Once the church was full of people, the tepid air became hot – so hot that halfway through the service, the candles started melting sideways – Flames shot up around the room, and the groomsmen and I spent a good ten minutes frantically putting out the flames.

Pastor William Willimon tells his own story about an old Georgia Baptist church. It was a funeral. But the preacher still lit into the congregation – shouting and fuming, flailing his arms: “It’s too late for Joe! He might have wanted to do better in life, but no more. He might have wanted to straighten up, but now he can’t! But it ain’t too late for you! You might drop dead tomorrow. So don’t wait a day longer! On their way home, Willimon said to his wife, “Can you imagine a preacher doing that to a grieving family? I’ve never heard anything so manipulative, cheap and inappropriate.” Willimon’s wife agreed, but added: “Of course, the worst part is, *what he said was true.*”

Rabbi Eliezer of the first century taught, “Repent on the day before your death.” One of his disciples asked him, “How will we know when that day is?” To which the Rabbi answered, “All the more to repent today.” Think about it.

**

Have you ever *really* observed – looked into - a Salvador Dali painting? Surreal images, faces painted into chalices and carved into rock formations, clocks like wilted petals draped across ledges. The paintings are dreamlike, of real things presented in surreal fashion. – hence surrealism. Nighttime dreams are like a Salvador Dali painting. People appear in all the wrong places – unexpectedly and uninvited.

They say, recurring dreams disclose fear or anxiety, and generally I have experienced that to be true. But I have this recurring dream about church – and I can’t figure out which of my anxieties it represents. Church is about to start, only I can’t find the correct alb, or robe, to wear. The organ is playing, acolytes are lined-up with the cross and candles, but I’m not with them – I’m still in the sacristy, searching desperately for my robe.

Funny thing about this dream is, I’m pretty much *never* anxious about church. I’m just not. But the dream is surreal, and my life is skewed ...Just like the parable about the five anxious bridesmaids – The five don’t have enough oil, in the same way that I can’t find my alb. Jesus’ parable feels surreal like a dream, a Salvador Dali painting – It makes no

sense at all, and yet, it discloses a deeper anxiety. It's a wedding, but where is the bride? And what wedding starts at midnight? The doors are locked, and keeping guests out. It just doesn't make sense, but I can't escape the underlying feeling that Jesus is saying something important.

*During the past few weeks, I have heard several people say, *"It is time to change my life. I know what I believe, but I don't always live my belief. It is time to live what I believe."*

Indeed, the reason I have advocated Earth and Altar this year is because I have felt the same thing – There is a better way for us to live – so why not tap into that better way, now? I don't mean just from an environmental standpoint – although that, too – but when I talk about Earth and Altar – I am speaking about the spirit...And about priorities. What is truly important in life, anyway? Is it wealth? Or career?... Children?

Let's start with children. Did you know that the parent who constantly makes his child the number 1 priority, may be sending the wrong message? The parent thinks, *I love you*, but the child narcissistically hears, *"You are the center of the universe."*

Likewise – by choosing sports over faith on Sunday mornings, parents are sending subliminal message – Personally, I would rather my kids have learned faith than soccer rules – when they are thirty-five and have to face one of life's real challenges.

When I was a teenager, my dad wouldn't let us answer the telephone during supper which would irritate me to no end – But this taught us something important; – But these days, people not only text during supper, they text – egads! - during church! Priorities – and *tis the gift to be simple*.

Sam Keen writes of career first, that work is good, but he also asks sardonically: *"In working so much have I done violence to my being? How often, in doing good work have I betrayed what is better in myself and abandoned what is best for those I love?"*

When I talk about Earth and Altar, these are the questions I ponder – *how can we live more authentic lives? With deeper meaning?*

**They say, *"You can't take it with you."* But they're wrong. You can. Take it with you. In fact, *you will take it with you*. Many spiritual greats believe that who you choose to become on this earth, by the time you die – from a spiritual and emotional standpoint – is exactly the person you will be beyond the grave. You won't shed a stunted soul like a snake's skin when you die. Which begs the question: Are you paying attention? To your

soul? ...To your faith? Are you well-exercised in the matter of character, and in prayer? Do you *know* God? Have you *experienced* the complete wonder of grace?

You can't borrow faith from others, you see – you have to develop your own. Which is the point of the parable: The five bridesmaids with extra oil *couldn't* share theirs with the others, even if they'd wanted to.

Like theologian Alec Vidler said, “If you have been careless about your own faith and obedience, well, you will not have any. And so it is, both Joshua of the Old Testament, and William Willimon's old Baptist preacher – both reminded the people: Today, not tomorrow, is the day. Or like the Rabbi said, *Repent the day before you die.*”