

"TAKING CREDIT FOR YOURSELF"

INTRODUCTION We're passing through one of the most beautiful times of the year. The buds are popping; you can almost hear the grass growing. Someone has said that the grass grows because angels incite it to. And if that's the case, then surely the angels have been out in great numbers these past three weekends.

"We glibly talk of nature's laws,
But do things have a natural cause?
Black earth becoming yellow crocus
Is undiluted hocus-pocus!"

Well, watch where you walk. There are angels "hocus-pocusing" everywhere.

ANGELS DO GOOD WORK What are angels after all but messengers who remind us of God's will and God's presence at births, resurrections, celebrations and the like. And perhaps more than ever you and I need those lifting reminders. New York Times editor, James Reston, spotted an angel's work recently and provocatively wrote of it. It is the star magnolia tree that has been standing at the northwest gate of the White House since the Depression days of the 1930's, reminding us, says Reston:

"Of the continuity of life and the importance of hope". He goes on to write, "Washington needs that symbol this year. It is stunned and even stupefied by the noise and nonsense of politicians who think...that all is lost without them. The magnolia tree knows better."

Not a bad message, is it? Angels do good work. But go further...

Suppose an angel is perched right now somewhere in the thatch of your hair or a whorl of your ear and, as always, is inciting you to grow - for such is the will of God. Well, according to the Gospel, something like that is precisely what is going on.

In the morning Scripture, you'll recall that the self-righteous people of His time were grumbling about Jesus being too chummy with all sorts of suspicious characters. In reply, Jesus uses two beautiful similes. One is of a shepherd who has a hundred sheep but leaves 99 of them to go out after one that has wandered away. The other is of the woman with 10 coins who searches, even scrubs and cleans, every corner of her house until she finds the one coin she has lost. In each case, when they found what was lost, the two people call in friends and neighbors to help them celebrate. "In the same way," Jesus concludes, "there is joy among the angels of God over one sinner who repents". In some mysterious way, angels do watch over us, cheer for us, urge us on, try to remind us of God's will and God's presence. Not a bad message, is it? Angels do good work!

GETTING US TO GROW Now I suppose for the angel inciting the grass to grow, it's enough to simply say, "grow". But angels assigned to human beings - our angels - if Jesus is right, would apparently need to be more complicated in their appeal to us. To get us to grow, angels seem to have to begin by nudging us, nagging us and whispering in our ears, "Repent, repent". The word is the stock-in-trade of wild-eyed evangelists and doom-peddling fanatics. "Repent". It's like being stuck in a tent meeting; up to your ears in altar calls. "Repent"

Tell it to the Communists, or the criminals, the Republicans, even, or the dogmatic democrats, if you insist, or the Presbyterians maybe - but us? It's one thing to imagine angels "hocus-pocusing" grass into growing, or cherry trees into blossoming, but it's quite another to imagine angels trafficking in the sawdust trails of repentance - and with us, no less. Yet, is it so different?

REPENTANCE / HUMILITY / AND CHANGE

I've been thinking about repentance lately, because the core of the message of Jesus is, "Repent and believe, for the Kingdom of God is at hand". As I thought about it, it occurred to me that what this word really means is this: take credit for yourself. Traditionally, the word has been used to mean "change your mind", or "turn your life around", or "live differently", or "go a different direction" - and it does mean that. But I want to suggest here today that it means taking credit for yourself, because to do that would involve doing the rest of those things for most of us.

The other day I was talking to a preacher friend and the subject of humility came up - an unlikely subject. I don't remember exactly how it came up or in reference to whom, or whether each of us was suggesting the other could do with a little. In any case, as we sorted it out, we came to realize that humility is not deference or reticence or self-effacement - all the usual ways we think of it. Rather humility is simply trying to be objective about yourself. Humility is trying to make an honest assessment of your strengths and your weaknesses, your virtues and your faults. It's claiming your life for what it is - no touch-ups for effect. And in that sense, I think you can conclude that humility and repentance are linked together.

To repent is to take credit for your own corruption, your own perverseness, your own limitations, your own blindness and self-seeking. To repent is to take credit for yourself and not deflect it on to someone or something else. If someone disturbs you, look first to yourself for the reason. I think that this was what Jesus was saying to those self-righteous people who were gossiping about Him and His friend.

Elie Wiesel points out that Adam and Eve were punished not so much for having sinned as for having invented excuses and alibis. I think that's an accurate insight, and the Bible from cover to cover confirms it. The issue Jesus presses isn't whether we've sinned but whether we'll repent: take credit for it and not blame someone else. Not to repent is to make excuses - like a drink coming home late from a night on the town. We may not be very original sinners, but we're pretty original excuse-makers.

Professor Harrel Beck of Boston University told a good story last Summer at a service in Ocean Park, Maine that I remembered...a story about the Arab Shiek who got lost one night out in the wind and the rain. He finally found his way back to his tent, only to discover that all he had to eat was a bag of dates. He reached into the bag, took out one of the dates, held it up by the candle, discovered it was wormy, and flipped it out of the flap of the tent. He reached down, got another date, held it up to the candle, discovered it, too, was wormy...and flipped it out of the flap of the tent. He then blew out the candle and ate the rest of the dates.

We do it all the time, don't we? Close our eyes to the compromises we make concerning our own judgements. And so our angels chuckle and moan over us.

how: someone has said that insanity is hereditary. You get it from your children. Even so, who do you say is driving you crazy? Who do you blame for **your** life? I find myself getting a little tired of myself and a little bored when I persist in blaming my problems on my parents, or the Bishop, or the Administrative Board, or whoever. I'm also becoming a little tired of women blaming men and men blaming women for whatever it is that's wrong for them and so on and on - ad nauseam. Blaming is self-indulgent; and worse, it's self-defeating. Take credit for yourself.

Why? Because "the kingdom is at hand". That's the secret of the whole thing. The amazing point about those things that Jesus used isn't that the single sheep or single coin or single person is so lost, but that each of them matter so much and are so valuable to the shepherd, to the woman, to God. That is really what the angel in your ear keeps whispering, "Repent". You matter to God. Take credit for yourself. This Kingdom is here - for you no less, no other than YOU.

AND TAKE CREDIT FOR YOURSELF

Take credit for yourself! But be sure to catch the flip side of what it means to repent, for usually we don't make the complete connection.

Humility - being objective about yourself - means honestly claiming your strengths as well as your weaknesses, your gifts as well as your gaps, your creativities as well as your destructiveness. It is owning your power, your talent. It's being up-front about what you can do, without shuffling your feet as though you were some kind of cosmic flyspeck. To repent is to take credit for yourself and your importance in God's economy where every sheep, every coin, every person is crucially important and extremely valuable.

John Leonard wrote a fine column "On Being Average". In it he recalls as a teen-ager having been chosen by a photographer to get his picture taken for a magazine because he appeared to be the average, typical teen-age American boy. Leonard says,

"Try telling a magazine photographer that you are in no way 'typical'....indeed, just try it."

Living - as opposed to simply surviving - is a matter of trying to tell whoever it is that there is no average that you are not above, that, as someone has put it, in God's "body shop" each of us was customized. It's a matter of trying to tell whoever it is that you are unique, that you are full of starlight and plankton and minerals and jumping beans, and God's own image. Indeed, tell the photographer that. Indeed, tell yourself that. Tell the world that. Of course, telling takes work; it takes action; it takes a bit of sweat and a few blisters; it takes tears and laughter. But let me ask you this: are you willing to settle for a lie about yourself? Tell the world. Work at it. Be ingenious at it, insistent at it, persistent at it. Don't take a bucket of self-pity with a tint of indifference and a brush of fear and paint yourself into a ~~corner~~ of defeat and despair.

Repent. Believe. Take credit for yourself. Use your power. You are crucial to the kingdom of God. Remember that David had only 5 little stones in a brown bag when he went out to fight the giant, Goliath. What have you got in your bag? Use what's there and don't be afraid of the giants around you!

SOMETHING AT WORK IN AND THROUGH OTHERS

And finally, give credit to something at work in and through others, a grace that is as sure as Spring. "Repent and believe"... They may be one and the same thing at last. And I wonder if believing isn't really a little like, maybe more than a little like, giving credit. Maybe all you can give credit to sometimes, is something like a cherry tree in blossom in the park. It's enough for starters. Imagine all the angels at work on such a tree! Stand under it sometime and maybe you can hear them inciting it, telling it to grow, to bloom, to blossom. Just don't be surprised if the angels sound a little like bees and birds.

Take credit for yourself. Give credit to a power at work in the world in and through others. Have you read Virginia Satyr's research on hugs? She's discovered that it takes four hugs a day just to survive; it takes eight hugs for simple maintenance; and twelve hugs a day for growth. How we know why it's important for us to be here on a Sunday morning: with a little luck you can get enough hugs to keep you going and growing through the week. And a hug is a beautiful symbol for taking and giving credit all at the same time because you can't get a hug without giving one.

SOMETIMES WE MISS IT

"Repent and believe, for the kingdom is at hand". Give credit for a power at work in the world for good, a loving and gracious power. Sometimes it's easy to miss it. Who was it who said that God's presence is so total that no one notices? Could that be possible? Many of us don't notice it. What we do seem to notice is that the times appear dark and foreboding, like Goliath striding out to fight little David. And yet... little things, small pebbles are reminders enough.

I've been chuckling ever since I heard the story of the country church upstate that got a woman minister. They really didn't want her, but were in an episcopal system like ours and had to take her. And the old chairman of the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee had always taken the new preacher out fishing... He figured there had been enough changes, he wasn't going to stop that. So they got out in the water and the wind came up and she got cold. She said, "I'm chilly and I left my jacket on shore". He said, "I'll row back and get it". She said, "Never mind" - and got off the edge of the boat and walked across the water to get it. The old fellow sat there scratching his head and said, "Isn't it enough they sent us a woman minister; did they have to send us one who can't swim?"

Which reminds me of the woman who put in her will that all the pallbearers at her funeral should be women. Her minister asked why? "Why?" And she said, "Men never bothered to take me out when I was alive!"

Angels in my ears. Well, if not angels at least we're laughing and the world seems lighter. There definitely is a power at work in the world - in and through people - even you and me. Give it credit. Lean on it. Let it work.

OUR TEACHER

As many of you know, Guisseppi Verdi hated organ grinders on the street with a passion. Whenever he found one he didn't like, he bought it and stored it in his basement. When he died, they found 300 hand organs in his basement.

One day Verdi was coming down the street. He came up behind an organ grinder

who was all dirty, wrinkled (even the monkey was scabby), but worst of all, he was playing the tune badly. Verdi tapped him on the shoulder, said, "pick it up" and went on to lunch. Three weeks later he came upon the same guy, all spiffied up, what a transformation, even the monkey had had a bath and best of all he was playing the tune right up to time. Verdi thought to congratulate the fellow, walked around in front of him, noticed there was a band in his hat on which were written the following words, "Master Musician. Student of Verdi".

You know who your teacher is. Remember His words, "I tell you, there is joy among the angels of God over one sinner who repents". Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Take credit for yourself. What kind of people are you in this Church, this fellowship of the faithful? I say with all my heart, you're the kind of people who give hugs to others and in so doing you make the angels smile and even laugh. And to that I say, Amen. And Amen!

PRAYER O God, who didst make all things, and who hast given to us the gift and wonder of life, help us to walk softly through thy world, obeying its laws, respecting its wonders, and give us also that confidence which comes from knowing that angels are at work, and that all things can be remade by Your great power and overwhelming love for each of us. In the name and spirit of Christ. Amen.