

Fragile Things
Michael Jenkins

II Corinthians 4: 6-10

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One of my favorite writers, Neil Gaiman, tells the story of waking up one morning with a sentence rattling around in his head. It must have come from a dream. But he had no idea what the sentence meant. He got out of bed and wrote it down:

"I think ... I would rather recollect a life mis-spent on fragile things than spent avoiding moral debt."

Let me read that again:

"I think ... I would rather recollect a life mis-spent on fragile things than spent avoiding moral debt."

The sentence makes sense to me, except for one word: *"mis-spent."* Usually we think of mis-spent as wasted or squandered or poorly invested. The phrase *"mis-spent youth"* indicates a certain lack of wisdom on the part of someone who, and I'm not pointing any fingers, poured too much time into planning fraternity bashes instead of studying for chemistry exams. But I don't think Neil Gaiman is speaking of mis-spent in this way. I think there's irony afoot. Maybe something like the irony of the gospel. Maybe mis-spent is in the eye of certain beholders.

A pastor I once knew well in Austin took me to lunch one day. He seemed intent on impressing me. Just before he dropped me back at the campus, he mentioned what his next engagement was that afternoon. It was impressive. Actually, I don't remember what it was, but I do remember that it was intended to impress me. And then he said something I do remember, "If you're a pastor like me that's the kind of thing you spend your time doing. I don't have time in my calendar to sit around with sick or dying people. Somebody else can take care of that."

Getting out of his car, I felt such a muddle of conflicting emotions. I'm sure I felt self-righteous. Even writing this sermon, I kept having to erase commentary on how thoroughly I judged my colleague for saying what he did. But, if I can keep my self-righteous judgment at bay, I could say (and I think this is true) that my colleague was honest enough to say what many others have thought. To spend time with sick people and especially dying people seems to them a bad investment of their time, especially if they're ambitious. In other words, doing so is to mis-spend their time.

We could contrast this attitude with what Will Willimon said in a commencement address at Princeton Seminary several years ago. Some of you will remember Will, the former Chaplain of Duke University and retired Methodist bishop, who was one of our Lupberger Lecturers some time back. Will told his audience of seminary graduates that he had come to them that day to reveal why they had been forced to learn dead languages like ancient Greek and ancient Hebrew. After hours and hours of drudgery spent deciphering declensions and

translating obscure passages, he told them, you'll never ever begrudge spending whatever time is needed to hear the same story five times from someone whose memory is gone, but to whom your presence is precious. To Will, fragile things are worth our investment.

And: "There are so many fragile things, after all," continues Neil Gaiman, "People break so easily, and so do dreams and hearts."

Indeed. "There are so many fragile things."

Saint Paul, wrote his most mystical reflections to the Corinthians, in his second letter to them. In lines, just before our sermon text today, Paul writes: "Even unto this day, when Moses is read to us, there is a kind of veil covering our hearts. But when we turn to the Lord, that veil shall be taken away. The Lord is the Spirit. And where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. And we all, with open faces beholding the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord."

It would take a thousand years of devoted Christian mysticism to say anything half as profound as those words by Saint Paul. This is the ultimate promise of our faith, not that we merely survive forever in some form after death, but that we may enter into eternal life even now. In other words, *there's life before death*.

Paul goes on to tell us more. Because we have received God's grace, and have been drawn by grace to turn toward the God, as Ann Lamott says, who promises "not to leave us where he found us," "we have renounced dishonesty, refusing to walk or to trade in deceit or to entertain lies, instead dealing in truthfulness that is apparent to the consciences of others."

Paul wants us to understand that, as he calls them, "the gods of this world" use all sorts of devices to blind us, to make us value that which is of no value, to sacrifice those we love on unholy altars, to spend our lives amassing that which distracts us from those "fragile things" for whom Christ came into this world.

"We have this treasure," Saint Paul writes, "in earthen vessels" so that we may comprehend that the excellency of power is of God, and not us." Clay pots, the kind we dig up in archaeological sites, broken, shattered, brittle: God has chosen the most fragile things to hold his glory. And these are the things the gods of this world despise.

What a waste of their time, *according to the gods of this world*, for kings and potentates to leave their homes in the cold of winter to search for a baby in a barn? But it was by mis-spending their time in this quest that we remember them as the *Wise Men*.

What a waste, *according to the gods of this world*, for my old friend Father Paul Scaglione to mis-spend the prime years of his ministry sitting with people who were dying? For hours, he listened to their stories, stories nobody else will ever hear, then prayed with them as they drew a last breath. What could they do for him? All that time invested in people who would soon die? Who would ever know?

What a waste, *according to the gods of this world*, for a promising young man or a promising young woman to become a high school teacher. Unless, of course, they were doing it to burnish their resumes so that they are more likely to advance their career goals. They aren't going to change the world teaching school. They sure aren't likely to change the state of education. At best, they will touch a few lives here and there. "What losers," the gods of this world reason.

What a waste, *according to the gods of this world*, for a daughter or a son, or a spouse, to spend precious days listening to and holding the hand of and playing games with a parent or a wife or a husband afflicted with dementia who does not know them any more. The burden is so great; the pain of not being remembered is so keen. What a waste, say the gods of this world.

And, of course, what a waste, *according to the gods of this world*, for a talented young man like Jesus, a born leader, able to communicate complex ideas in such memorable ways, to mis-spent his life teaching a little rabble of nobodies, only to end up himself a complete failure, arrested, convicted and dying virtually alone. He could have been anything he wanted. He could have done anything he wanted. But his life was mis-spent on fragile things.

I wonder what Paul was thinking of when he said: "We are troubled on every side, yet not discouraged; perplexed, but not in despair. We share in the dying of the Lord Jesus" giving ourselves to and for others. "But by doing this, we also see emerging in ourselves the life of Jesus." Surely, he is not saying that investing our lives in fragile things is a lark. This is not a path to be taken lightly.

Over the past several months, living here among all of you, I've come to believe something, something you have taught me about our faith as we've just gone about the business of living as a community. This is what I've learned from you: *There's nothing more important in this world than blessing others.*

It might be as simple as a smile or a pleasant word to a stranger in a shop, or as difficult as a moment of gentle truth-telling to an old friend. It may be as big as helping to bind up a wound that someone has been carrying since childhood, or making sure a kid whose whole life has been a record of mistakes and abuse gets another break.

You've taught me that. Which means you know a thing or two about what really matters.

I heard a story this week.* Pretty typical story really. It's about a high school teacher. It must have been right before a holiday or something and the teacher realized that her class wasn't getting anything productive done that day. They were chatty and distracted and cutting up.

So she told them to take out a piece of paper and to make a list of every person in their class. And, she told them, beside each person's name, write down what quality or characteristic you most admire in that person. The class got very quiet, as the students looked at one another, and thought, and wrote.

She took up the papers at the end of the exercise, and took them home. Carefully, she cut out each statement; on a page dedicated to each student, she pasted these statements. When she finished she had thirty separate sheets, one for each student, filled with the qualities their classmates most admired in them. At the end of the semester, she gave these pages to the students in her class.

Several years later, as she tells the story, she received a call from the mother of one of those kids. The mother said her son had been killed in action in Afghanistan. She wondered if his favorite teacher would come to the memorial service. "Of course," she said.

Just after the graveside service, the mother approached the teacher. She said, I have something to share with you.

My son only took a few things with him when he was in combat, but one thing he always had on him was this. Whereupon she unfolded a piece of paper that had clearly seen several years of wear. Its edges were worn and dirty from handling, its creases deep from being often opened and folded back up. Two of the young man's friends, also classmates, overheard the conversation. From her purse, a young woman pulled her page; from his wallet, a young man unfolded his.

A little exercise to quiet her rowdy class had become a precious event of grace blessing their lives. Someone took the time to allow these students to be revealed to themselves. Someone mis-spent a class period so that they could have a mirror held up to themselves, and could see who they were.

So, says Saint Paul, *"we all, with open faces beholding as in a mirror the glory of God, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord."*

"I think... I would rather recollect a life mis-spent on fragile things." How about you?

Amen.

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- Jack Kornfield, Heart Wisdom Podcast, Episode 70: The Essence of Buddhist Psychology, Part One.