

in particular.

GESTURES

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

May 30, 1976

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"After this Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' weight. They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there." John 19:38-42.

This scene in a cemetery brings to a close the story of what happened on that original Good Friday. Two devout men carry off the body of Jesus to the tomb that one of the men recently purchased for himself. Though Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus belonged to one faction of the local establishment, they were powerless to do anything else for Jesus that day. So they did the only thing they could. They took responsibility for his body at some risk to their position in society and possibly to their personal safety. Religious custom required that someone bury the body properly before the Sabbath. But one senses that these men were motivated by more than concern for the proprieties. Their act was a gesture of devotion.

A cemetery is a place of gestures. That is to say, it is a place for actions that have no meaning except as expressions of sentiment. I suppose that tomorrow a great many people will flock to cemeteries to perform certain gestures on what we used to call "Decoration Day." I don't know to what degree this custom still prevails. Despite my job, I really don't get into cemeteries very much. Yet I suspect that people still place flowers on the graves of relatives on Memorial Day.

I recall that we used to do this when I was a child. My parents and I would travel to my grandmother's apartment, and she would go with us to a cemetery in a neighboring city. Even though the cemetery was some distance away, we would always walk there. One of the highlights of that walk was passing near a soft beverage plant with a huge model of a gingerale bottle on the roof. It came to me as a great sadness lately to learn that the Hoffman's Company is out of business. Next to the nectar of the gods, there was no drink ever brewed to equal their gingerale. On the avenue outside the cemetery there were several flower shops. We always went into one of them to purchase a bunch of flowers which were placed at the gravesite in a queer little metal container featuring a spike that stuck into the ground.

In that cemetery there were the graves of three people who were related to me. I never knew any of them except the grandfather, and I couldn't remember him. But I felt a bond with these people. Visiting their graves with my living family gave to me a sense of family solidarity. I enjoyed the conversation about how tall the tree had grown which was planted when the plot was acquired. I enjoyed looking at the sculpted angels and other art work at more pretentious grave-sites than ours. These excursions to the cemetery once or twice a year were always a pleasant experience.

My recollection of those visits continues to be a pleasant one. I do not believe that it is morbid. The French writer, François Mauriac, wrote that "a cemetery saddens us because it is the only place where we do not meet our dead again." Where we meet them, he said, is in the everyday places where they used to live. That is so. But Mauriac overlooked the fact that sometimes we have gone to cemeteries with the living.

Many years later I took my family to see that cemetery. The three people who used to go with me there were long since buried there, and I had not been back in more than a decade. Except for my oldest daughter who held one slender memory of her grandfather, my children never knew any of the six people buried in that place. They had never visited any cemetery before. The whole affair was remote to them and I doubt that they sensed any bond of family solidarity by going there.

We were in a hurry to be on our way, for we had a long way to drive before dark. While the others waited in the car, I ran into the cemetery office and obtained one of those green metal containers. Then I ran into a flower shop, bought a bunch of flowers and carried them back to the graves. While my wife and children waited and watched I felt very odd going through these motions. When I was a child my family had done such things together and it seemed altogether natural that we should do them. But now I felt very much alone. I doubted that my children comprehended what was going on. Why should anyone spend several dollars on a bunch of flowers, put them on the ground and walk away?

Afterwards I thought about this incident quite a bit. Why did I do such a thing? Certainly it was not because I felt bound by the conventions of cemeteries. That sort of thing was very remote from the family setting and trend of thought in which I then lived. Moreover, I deplored the extravagance I had seen go into funeral practices. I suppose I might put into words several reasons explaining why I did it. It was partly for old time's sake. It was partly a way of throwing down the gauntlet at the feet of that last enemy. It may be that I recalled what my father said when shortly before his death someone asked him half facetiously if he wanted flowers at his funeral. His reply was typical of the way he flouted the conventional way of being unconventional. "Of course, plenty of flowers." But words cannot explain what I did. It was a gesture and as such could not be translated into other terms.

That incident set me thinking about gestures and their importance in human life. By gestures I do not mean some form of sign language. I mean any action which has no significance except to express the way we feel. Often we feel such actions are worthless. We call them empty gestures. But unless it is insincere no gesture is ever empty.

No doubt there is added impact to those gestures that, so to speak, have somebody at the other end of them. I mean by that gestures that speak to someone else. When a woman burst in upon Jesus and anointed him with expensive oil, her gesture of devotion was appreciated by him even though others were critical. Jesus himself suggested that her gesture was more helpful than the sort that Joseph and Nicodemus were to perform after he was dead. Yet that is not to say that their act had no value. It had value for them, and as it turned out, it had value for countless others who read about what they did in the Bible.

Even when there is no one at the other end of the gesture, even at a grave, a gesture may have meaning. We only become ourselves through actions that state who we are. A thought unexpressed in words is only the germ of a thought. A sentiment unexpressed in some way is only the rudiments of a sentiment. A prayer unsaid is hardly a prayer at all. We do not think or feel first and then give expression to our thoughts and feelings. Without expression our thoughts and feelings do not fully exist. Indeed, without expression we do not exist. We need gestures in order to state who we are. In the last analysis, we need them in order to become ourselves.

To understand why gestures are indispensable, you have to be something of a romantic. As you must have realized, our church secretary, Dorothy Belt, is an incurable romantic. The tipoff came when I discovered that Cyrano de Bergerac is her favorite play. Cyrano is a man of grand gestures. Mortally wounded by a log dropped on his head, he dies with sword in hand, attacking the one enemy that ever bested him - vanity. He is quite rational when he does this. But unless we appreciate the value of gestures we will find Cyrano quite incomprehensible.

People who expect every action to have some practical outcome will not understand why people place flowers on graves. They will not understand what happens in worship services either. Here too we deal in gestures. Does God, standing at the other end of our gestures, benefit from all we say or do? I don't know. I do know that in praise and prayer we can become something more than we might otherwise become.

As for cemeteries, the day is fast arriving when we can no longer afford so much space for that purpose around our cities. We must rethink our burial customs and bring them in line with both our actual faith today and with our common sense. But I think we shall always need to make room for those small gestures of devotion that bind us both to the living and the dead.