

# The Beings I Love Are Creatures

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*Note:* This address was delivered in May 2006 as a farewell to the Cambridge Massachusetts First Ward shortly before the speaker moved to Salt Lake City.

Lately, I have been thinking a lot about mortality—meetings and partings and human frailty. The poet Geoffrey Hill is retiring from teaching at Boston University this year, and a few weeks ago I heard that he had said life gets easier when you accept the fact that you live in a fallen world. Wilbur Jackson of our bishopric furthered the development of my thought on this topic during that wonderful fifth-Sunday April meeting when he reminded us that we've left Paradise. We're not in Paradise; it's gone, so we're going to suffer, get sick, sin, and die. The important thing, Jackson reminded us, is to be on the right path so we can return to Paradise.

In light of our fallen condition, I wonder what to do about perfectionism. To what extent should I pursue excellence with the exacting standards that will make my contributions genuinely useful and beautiful, and when does my perfectionism fill me with an anxiety that stops me from contributing at all? What if reconciling myself to imperfection means that I won't work hard enough and that I will not do what God wants me to do?

In spiritual terms, my questions reflect the tension between grace and works. When does the pursuit of our spiritual obligations—when do our efforts for the salvation of ourselves and others—begin to impede the work of salvation, because the focus on our own efforts leads us to neglect the key doctrine of salvation, which is the atonement of Jesus Christ?

Rather than contriving easy and false resolutions to these struggles, I believe we are meant to live with them and the many

other paradoxes that plague us in mortality. King Benjamin acknowledges the paradoxes, and I think that they are at the heart of his great oration. He illustrates at length the extent to which we are indebted to God. He calls us sinful—less than the dust of the earth. He urges us to obey the commandments, teach them to our children, and repent. Then he warns that, if we don't,

if that man repenteth not, and remaineth and dieth an enemy to God, the demands of divine justice do awaken his immortal soul to a lively sense of his own guilt, which doth cause him to shrink from the presence of the Lord, and doth fill his breast with anguish, which is like an unquenchable fire, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever.

And now I say unto you, that mercy hath no claim on that man; therefore his final doom is to endure a never-ending torment. (Mosiah 2:38–39)

But following all this hopelessness and damnation, he prophecies of Jesus and explains the atonement—that through faith and repentance we can be saved. He teaches us to know God's goodness, to taste His love, and receive a remission of our sins. He tells us to love each other, to serve each other, and to help the poor without judging them. He tells us that, if we wish to be saved, "ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants." And then he acknowledges the difficulty between receiving atonement and still doing our part. He says: "And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength. And again, it is expedient that he should be diligent, that thereby he might win the prize; therefore, all things must be done in order" (Mosiah 4:26–27).

I am particularly fascinated by a New Testament scene that takes place before the Last Supper, but not long before Christ's betrayal. A woman—some say Mary, some say a notorious sinner—anoints Jesus with expensive ointment, spikenard. Jesus's apostle—some say it was Simon, some say Judas—responds, "To what purpose is this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for much, and given to the poor" (Matt 26:8–9). This sounds to me like an appropriate Christian, leftist, liberal response. (It

takes one to know one). Jesus spent his life healing the outcast, succoring the poor, and rebuking those whose belief in their own worthiness perpetuates the institutional structures that keep the poor poor. Yet in a truer, broader Christian leftist, liberal response, Jesus says,

Why trouble ye the woman? For she hath wrought a good work upon me.

For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.

For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial.

Verily I say unto you, wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her. (Matt. 26:10–13)

We know that Jesus's motives do not include economic gain, but this episode reveals that He does not even work according to economic principles—His primary concern is not to determine laws of maximum efficiency. Throughout the Gospels and in the Book of Mormon, Jesus honors the sanctity of the individual soul, and He honors the power of the moment.

I would like to consider now the power of the moment. For in addition to battling with the imperfections of ourselves and our not-selves, a key aspect of the mortal condition is temporality. I grieve the condition of our temporality as I see my precious babies change and know that, regardless of good things to come, the magical ways we have been together in the past have gone and will not recur. My daughter will never again thrill with the power of pronouncing her first word. *Shoe*. I suffered on account of temporality when my grandmother died and the condition was forced upon me that the woman I loved would be kept from me for a long time.

Temporality also pains me in nature. Sam and I were resident tutors at one of the Harvard dorms for five years, and springtime in the courtyard of our building was so exquisite that it pained me. A landscape architect had choreographed the planting of flowering trees so that a new one would blossom just as the old passed its prime. Their beauty thrilled me, it so transcended the things of this world, and yet those flowers were of this world, and as soon as I began to celebrate them, I began to mourn the inevi-

table brevity of their display. Most of them only flourished for a few days.

I wish to share with you the wisdom of a French mystic and philosopher named Simone Weil. Weil succeeded in the nearly impossible task of articulating spiritual truths with integrity. When I teach writing courses, I recite Weil's warning about hasty thinking: "Above all, our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it. All wrong translations, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style and all faulty connection of ideas . . . all such things are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to truth."<sup>1</sup>

This warning is particularly necessary when approaching Weil's writing, which can be difficult. I've tried to honor her sentiments in preparing my remarks. My ideas are extrapolations that start with her but then find their own way. There are points on which she and I disagree, but in a sense my entire talk is a kind of exegesis of the passage I am about to read. Weil wrote:

The beings I love are creatures. They were born to chance. My meeting with them was also by chance. They will die. What they think, do and say is limited and is a mixture of good and evil. I have to know this with all my soul and not love them the less. I have to imitate God who infinitely loves finite things in that they are finite things. We want everything which has a value to be eternal. Now everything which has a value is the product of a meeting, lasts throughout this meeting and ceases when those things which met are separated. . . . Stars and blossoming fruit trees: utter permanence and extreme fragility give an equal sense of eternity. . . . The vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is a mark of existence. The destruction of Troy. The fall of the petals from fruit trees in blossom. To know that what is most precious is not rooted in existence—that is beautiful. Why? It projects the soul beyond time. The woman who wishes for a child white as snow and red as blood gets it, but she dies and the child is given over to a step-mother.<sup>2</sup>

I want to emphasize the idea that fragility and temporality are beautiful because, as Weil says, they "project the soul beyond time." Our fragility is not a reason for us to despise each other, but it is the reason we must love each other, forgive each other,

cling to each other. In this world of injustice, inadequacy and impermanence, I testify that Jesus lives, that He heals us, that He visits us in His grace. His atonement is enough to compensate for our struggle and our pain.

While He lived, Jesus established a pattern of moment-making. He commanded His disciples to write the story of the woman who anointed Him with spikenard. There was only one last supper, but we remember it every week when we take the sacrament; our attention to this one evening when Jesus broke bread for and drank with His disciples brings Him to us weekly in a real and tangible way. I rely on the sacrament for weekly spiritual rejuvenation and orientation. In February, and March, and April, I rely on the memory of impossible springtime blossoms; and in Utah, I will depend on memories of the moments I have shared with you. The fact of them, that you and I took the trouble to create them, brings me pleasure and meaning. The memory of them will strengthen me and bring you to me. I believe that Christ's love, which binds us to Him and helps us to discern goodness from pollution, is that same love that binds us to each other. I am grateful for what that love has created in my life.

### Notes

1. Siân Miles, ed., *Simone Weil, An Anthology* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 5-6.
2. *Ibid.*, 277-28.