

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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November 6, 2016
Psalm 145:1-13
2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

THE ETERNALS AND INTERNALS

Noted thinker and physicist Albert Einstein was on a train leaving Princeton Junction in New Jersey, heading north on a speaking tour. When the ticket agent came to his seat, Einstein was unable to find his ticket. He searched through all his pockets and looked in his briefcase, becoming extremely disturbed. The agent tried to comfort him, saying, “Dr. Einstein, don’t worry about the ticket. I know who you are and you don’t have to present your ticket to me. I trust that you purchased one.” About twenty minutes later, the ticket agent came down the aisle of the train once again and saw Einstein, still searching widely for the misplaced ticket. The agent again said to him, “Dr. Einstein, please don’t worry about the ticket. I know who you are!” At that, Einstein stood and said in frustration, “Young man, I know who I am, but I am trying to find my ticket because I want to know where I am going!”¹

We are two days away from what has been characterized as a very important election in the life of our nation. For some there is a fair amount of anxiety because of the uncertainty of the outcome of the election combined with the differences between the two main candidates for who will serve as our next president. We know the people of this country are on a train together and we’re not sure where we are headed.

The Apostle Paul wrote to Christians in Thessalonica at a time when many of them thought the world was about to end. He encouraged them to stand firm and hold fast to what they had been taught about their faith. Then he mentioned the eternal and the internal.

At a time when schools were segregated in D.C., Nannie Helen Burroughs started a school for African American girls, a school that after her death got renamed in memory of its founder. Burroughs was a person of faith who worried that society had failed its children because adults had “been too bothered about the external – clothes or money,” when young people needed the internal and the eternal. The Apostle Paul wrote the Thessalonians the following about the eternal and the internal, “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.” With assurance that there was eternal life that awaited them, Paul prayed that such internal as their faith, hope, and love would be strengthened so they could be fully engaged in the current challenges to proclaim the gospel in word and deed.

There is a sense of peace that comes in believing that those who we have loved who have preceded us in death now know eternal life and wellbeing wrapped in God’s loving arms. That prospect for us also can lessen the fear of death or other fears, so we can live fully committed to eternal values and internal integrity.

Last Sunday afternoon, many of us were blessed by the community concert pieced together by our own Peter Smeallie. I enjoyed all the offerings, particularly by the various Warner choirs and instrumentalists. But one of the pieces that Peter had the Einstein High School chamber singers present was a work called “I Believe.” The text consisted of words found scratched on the walls of a cellar in Cologne, Germany by an anonymous Jew who had been hiding from Nazi persecution. “I believe in the sun even when it’s not shining. I believe in love even when I don’t feel it. I believe in God even when God is silent.” There are some external that are beyond our

control, but that's the kind of eternal and internal that God can use to shape us to face frightening prospects in ways that are undaunted.

Exactly one hundred years ago, a short story was published about Sadie Virginia Smithson, who lived in a West Virginia town where the primary way for young women to climb the social ladder was through being a member of the Laurel Literary Society. Sadie very much wanted to belong, but she was never invited to join because, well, she made her living sewing and her father worked at the factory and she lived on the wrong side of the tracks. She committed herself to saving her money for a trip to Europe and then she would offer to share her written experiences with the literary society, who she hoped would then take her in.

It was 1914 when she finally got to take her trip. She traveled with three others. They took a big ocean liner over there, but they arrived just as World War I was breaking out. The group got stranded in Belgium and wanted to make their way to Paris. They got connected with a diplomat who would be driving to Paris to deliver some papers and they were traveling along when they came across a place where a battle had just ended. There were quite a number of seriously wounded English soldiers strewn about near the road and first aid workers had yet to reach them. Sadie heard a wounded soldier moaning for water. She knew she had a collapsible metal cup in her purse and she saw a nearby stream. She got out of the car and scooped up some water to share with the soldier who was near death. Her companions yelled for her to get back in the car, but as Sadie looked around, there were many other wounded soldiers who needed attention. The diplomat was concerned because he had to get his papers to Paris by a certain hour and he threatened to leave without Sadie, who continued to carry out whatever tasks of care she could for those in utmost need. She told her companions to go on, that she couldn't leave. As nightfall approached, she tore her dress to use as a needed bandage and continued to bring water to each of the wounded men. As she heard artillery in the distance, she worked through the night. To help keep her mind from becoming overwhelmed by what was happening, she began to chant a little ditty, but her chant soon gave way to a prayer which she repeated as she offered each cup of water: "God bless us, and keep us, and make His face to shine upon us."

After a night of horror, morning finally came, and medics finally arrived. One of them saw Sadie amidst the carnage and shouted, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?" "I'm Sadie Virginia Smithson, and I've been holding back hell all night." "Well, Miss Sadie Virginia, I'm glad you held some of it back last night, for everybody else was letting it loose!" They got her along with the wounded soldiers back to England.

When Sadie was on the ocean liner going home, she told another traveler her story. The fellow traveler said she was sure the Laurel Literary Society would be glad to have you as a member now. But Sadie replied, "No, I've been face to face with death and hell and God. Do you reckon any of those old things matter now?" "What does matter?" the fellow traveler asked. Sadie replied, "Nothing! Nothing but God and love and doing things for folks."

There are certain eternal and internal that we need wherever we might be headed. It's a good thing we have a God who provides for such needs.

¹This story appears in quite a number of blogs. As to its historicity, I do not know.

²Nannie Helen Burroughs, "Unload Your Uncle Toms," in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Pantheon, 1972) 552.

³Mark A. Miller, "I Believe," Choristers' Guild.

⁴Margaret Prescott Montague, "Of Water and the Spirit," originally printed in *The Atlantic Monthly*, volume 117.