

“Ever the Twain”

Readings before Sermon:

CHALICE

Tony: Samuel Clemens (better known as Mark Twain) was born in 1835, when Halley’s Comet was in the night sky.

He always hoped it’d be there when he died too. As he later put it:

Worship Asst.: I came in with Halley’s Comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it. It will be the greatest disappointment of my life if I don’t go out with Halley’s Comet. The Almighty has said, no doubt: “Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came together, they must go out together.”

Tony: And so he did. Mark Twain died on the day after the perihelion of Halley’s Comet’s return in 1910. In honor of the 100th anniversary of the death of this fiery comet and for the light he still shines on our culture and our faith, we kindle this chalice flame.

GESTURE OF FRIENDSHIP

Peace be with you, and with all humankind.

In one of Mark Twain’s “tall tales” he told of how concerned he was that God’s creatures did not seem to be able to get along together, so he said: To get matters in hand, “I built a cage, and in it I put a dog and a cat. And after a little training, I got the dog and cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds and a monkey. And, after a few adjustments, they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such successes that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim ... and a Buddhist ... along with a Baptist missionary ... And in a very short while there wasn’t a single living thing left in the cage.”

Hoping that will not be the case here, I invite you to learn to live peaceably and in harmony by greeting the sundry creatures around you.

JOYS & CONCERNS

Late in life Mark Twain suffered quite a bit from arthritis and bronchitis, and every time a newspaper reported that he’d had an attack of one of these, hundreds of people would send him prescriptions and home remedies that they thought would cure him. He sent out this standard reply: “Dear Sir (or Madam), I try every remedy sent to me. I am now on No. 87. Yours is 2, 653. I am looking forward to its beneficial results.”

Well, we don't promise any cures here, but we do listen to the joys and concerns of this community – and find a measure of healing in that. Do you have any joys or concerns to share as we light a candle for each?

PRAYER

At Mark Train's funeral 100 years ago, the Rev. Henry Van Dyke, said this about his longtime friend's humor and legacy:

“Nothing is more false than to think that the presence of humor means the absence of seriousness. It was the showing up of the unreal sham, the untruth, that made Mark Twain's humor. He was serious in his humor. But we know that Mark Twain never laughed at the frail, the weak, the poor, and the humble. He used his humor, but for things good and wholesome. He made fun without hatred. He laughed many of the world's false claimants out of court. Under all his humor he made us feel the pathos of life's realities, for he exposed the sham.”

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Spirit of life, in the spirit of Mark Twain, I pray these words from an ancient Aztec prayer:

Grant me, Lord, a little light – but no more than a glowworm gives, which goes about by night – to guide me through this life ... this dream which lasts but a day wherein there are many things on which to stumble, and many things at which to laugh, and others like a stormy path along which one goes leaping. Amen, Thanks, and Blessed be.

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Mark Twain once said:

“I once heard a preacher who was powerful good. I decided to give him every cent I had with me. But he kept it too long. Ten minutes later I decided to keep the bills and give him my loose change. Another ten minutes and I was darned if I'd give him anything at all. Then, when he finally stopped, and the plate came around, I was so exhausted, I stole two dollars from the plate in sheer spite. It all goes to show how a little thing like this can lead to a crime.”

SERMON

Samuel Clemens grew up in Hannibal, Missouri, on the bank of the Mississippi. His father died when he was 12, and to help make ends meet he became a printer's apprentice; then later worked as a printer for the Hannibal Journal, where he first tried his hand at humorous sketches, and took the name W. Epaminondas Adrastris Blabb, satirizing the State legislature.

He worked at other printing jobs until November of 1856 when fate – and a strong wind – blew a 50-dollar bill his way. That made him decide to seek his fortune along the Amazon River; so after

earning some more money he booked passage on a Mississippi riverboat for New Orleans, planning to go from there to South America. But on the way, he decided he'd like to be a riverboat pilot instead, so he convinced the pilot on his boat to take him on as an apprentice; and, after memorizing the 1200 miles of the Mississippi, he eventually became pilot on the largest boat of the River. He earned a good salary until the Civil War began and closed the Mississippi to commercial traffic.

But his years as a pilot left an enduring mark on him. He later said that his riverboat years taught him about human nature. "In that brief, sharp schooling," he said, "I got personally and familiarly acquainted with about all the different types of human nature that are to be found in fiction, biography, or history."

And when he became a professional writer, he took the riverboat term "Mark Twain" as his pen name. The sounding lines on riverboats had marks for each fathom of line. Since "twain" means two (as in Rudyard Kipling's "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet – that is, never the two shall meet – from which I got this terribly corny title for this sermon), "mark twain" means mark two, or the second-fathom mark on the line you throw out to measure the depth of the river. Two fathoms (or 12 feet) was the minimum depth of water you needed to safely pilot a riverboat. So "mark twain" meant, in effect, "safe water."

After his steamboat career Twain went out west to prospect for silver, but never found any, so he became a journalist – first in Carson City, Nevada, and then in San Francisco. He later described himself in those years as being "strangely handsome." I was so handsome, he said, that "in San Francisco, in the rainy season, I was often mistaken for fair weather."

After San Francisco he went on a voyage to the Holy Land, writing back travel letters for the Alta California and the New York Tribune. On this voyage he met a man from New York who showed him a picture of his sister, Livy, whom Mark Twain immediately fell in love with. So he wrangled an invitation to spend a week with the family, and on the last day of his visit he said to the man, a Charles Langdon: "Charley, my week is up, and I must go home."

And Langdon said, "We'll have to stand it, I guess, but you mustn't leave before tonight."

"Oh no," said Mark Twain, "I ought to go by the first train. I am in love."

"In what?"

"In love – with your sister, and I ought to get away from here."

Well, Mr. Langdon thought no one was good enough for his sister, so he said, "Look here, Clemens, there's a train in half an hour. I'll help you catch it. Don't wait till tonight. Go now."

As it turned out, when they were about to go to the station, the seat of their wagon wasn't locked in place properly and it threw them onto the street. And although neither one was seriously hurt, Twain was careful not to recover too quickly, so they took him back into the house, where he stayed another two weeks. And he eventually did marry Livy.

They had a happy enough marriage, but he was always rather more unconventional and irreverent than she was. One morning when he cut himself shaving he started cursing a blue streak. And she thought she'd shame him by repeating every profanity he had just said. But he only listened to her and then said, "You have the words, my dear, but I'm afraid you'll never master the tune."

Mark Twain went on to become the great folk hero of his day, an internationally acclaimed humorist and lecturer, author of not just Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, but The Prince and the Pauper and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, and – as a poor boy who made good – he was for most people an embodiment of the American dream (even though Twain himself was very critical of that dream). Thousands came to hear him, and most of his lectures were sold out.

Once, on one of his tours, he stopped for a shave at the local barbershop in the town where he was going to be speaking that night, and he happened to tell the barber that it was his first visit to that town. The barber said, "Well, you've chosen a good time to come. Mark Twain is going to lecture here tonight. You'll want to go, I suppose?"

Mark Twain said, "I guess so." So the barber said, "Have you bought your ticket yet?" And he said, "No." "Well, it's sold out; you'll have to stand."

"Just my luck, I always have to stand when that fellow lectures."

Twain used to get photographs all the time, by the way, from people claiming to be his double. So, to save writing individual letters he had a couple hundred copies made of this letter:

My Dear Sir,

Thank you very much for your letter and your photograph. In my opinion you are more like me than any other of my numerous doubles. I may even say that you resemble me more closely than I do myself. In fact, I intend to use your picture to shave by.

Yours thankfully,

Mark Twain

As another example of Twain's wide popularity, a group of his friends one night decided to send him a card for his birthday, but no one knew where he was, since he was traveling around the world. So

they just wrote on the envelope: (To) Mark Twain, God knows where. A couple weeks later they got a letter from him. It said: “He did.” (God did know where he was, because he got their card!)

And of course, the stories of the jokes he played on people are many. Once, after attending a church service, he told the minister how much he liked the sermon. He said, “I enjoyed it as an old friend. I have a book at home containing every word of it.”

The minister was offended and said, “I am sure you have not.” And Twain said, “Indeed I have.” The minister asked him to send the book over. And the next day Twain sent him a dictionary.

There are many stories like this, and, of course, his many aphorisms which have been repeated by everyone else over the years, like:

“The report of my death has been greatly exaggerated.”

“When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around.

But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in 7 years.”

And: “In the first place God made idiots. This was for practice. Then he made School Boards.”

Some others I like:

“Always acknowledge a fault frankly. This will throw those in authority off their guard and give you an opportunity to commit more.”

“It’s easy to quit smoking – I’ve done it a hundred times!”

“Do not put off till tomorrow what can be put off till day-after-tomorrow just as well.

“April 1st: The day upon which we are reminded of what we are on the other 364 [days].”

Mark Twain’s views on politics and politicians are well known:

“It could probably be shown by facts and figures,” he said, “that there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress.”

Or, “Suppose you were an idiot, and suppose you were a member of Congress. But – I repeat myself.”

His views on religion were even more fascinating, I think, because he called into question nearly all the traditional beliefs of his day and ours. For example, the bible: “Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture which they cannot understand,” he said, “But as for me, I have always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me the most are those which I do understand.”

Or consider his views on afterlife. In an unfinished manuscript of his entitled “Letters from the Earth,” he wrote: Humanity’s “heaven is a curious place. It has not a single feature in it that people value

on earth. It consists wholly of diversions which on earth they care for not at all...Of the delights of this world, people care most for sex. They will go to any length for it. And what do you think they've done? They have left it out of their heaven! Prayer takes its place!"

He also once said: "If I cannot swear in heaven, I shall not stay there."

Twain also knew that most of the people who were supposedly going to heaven were self-righteous bores. "We may not doubt," he said, "that society in heaven consists mainly of undesirable persons." Or, as he put it on another occasion: "heaven for climate, hell for company."

(At a dinner party in Hartford, Connecticut, the subject of heaven and hell came up and everyone discussed it at length except Twain. A woman finally turned to him and said, "Why don't you say anything? I want your opinion." To which Twain responded, "Madam, you must excuse me. I am silent of necessity. I have friends in both places.")

As for the argument that there must be an afterlife because so many people all over the world have believed in it, he said: "One of the proofs of the immortality of the soul is that myriads have believed it. They also believed the world was flat."

His feelings about God were revealed when his publisher, B.H. Ticknor, was not able to attend a meeting with Twain. Ticknor sent his regrets with a note that said, "God be with you, for I cannot."

And Twain returned the note with his own message on the bottom:

Dear Ticknor:

He didn't come. It has been a great disappointment to the whole family.

Hereafter, appoint a party we can depend on.

Mark Twain, more and more, became cynical about humanity. He saw the ignorance, the cruelty – and I'd like to say the "inhumanity," only Twain would say, it's not inhuman, it's in fact very human – and he couldn't buy the pervasive view of the 19th century that humans are getting better and better, and progress is bringing us onward and upward. "Man," he said, "was made at the end of the week's work, when God was tired."

You may think that Mark Twain had a dismal view of humankind. And if you do, you're kind of right. But it was because he had an exalted view of what we could be. I don't know who it was who said, "I love humanity – it's people I can't stand." But in Twain's case, it was just the opposite. He loved people, it was just humanity-as-a-whole that he couldn't stomach. His daughter, Clara Clemens, said: "He always took for granted that anyone he met must be a nice person." Yet when he thought about humanity-at-large, he wanted a pen "warmed up in hell."

Basically, he had two intense feelings about people: anger at their stupidity, and crassness, and cruelty; and compassion for those who suffered because of that stupidity, crassness, and cruelty.

When Charles Darwin was asked, after all his work on the similarities between animals and humans, “Is there anything that distinguished people from animals?” he said, “Man is the only animal that blushes.” To which Mark Twain added: “Sure, man is the only animal with good reason to blush.”

Twain had good reason to question the popular view of humanity as exalted and noble. When he was a child he saw a white man kill his black slave with a piece of iron, for a trifling offense. And he also saw black men and women chained together, lying on the road, waiting to be shipped down the river, about whom he later wrote, “They had the saddest faces I ever saw.”

Many years later, when he was 61 years old and in India, he saw a white innkeeper brutally strike a native servant across the face, and immediately he flashed back on those early memories of slavery. And he said: For just one moment “all that goes to make the me in me was in a Missourian village on the other side of the globe.”

So you see, he was aware of our inhumanity – and that made him angry – but he was compassionate for the victims of that inhumanity – and that made him loving. He hated people because he loved them so much.

Helen Keller once wrote about his sensitivity to others: “He knew with keen and sure intuition many things about me; how it felt to be blind and not to be able to keep up with the swift ones,” things that others “learned slowly or not at all.” His ability to deeply feel what someone else was feeling, was probably his greatest asset – and his greatest burden.

And the beauty of his writing is that he could so often convey this empathy without being preachy. In Huckleberry Finn, for example, he portrayed the inhumanity of slavery – not by saying how bad it was, but by just recording events in passing – that would say it for him. Huck tells his kindly Aunt Sally that a steamboat has just blown out a cylinder head, and Aunt Sally says, “Good gracious! Anybody hurt?”

And Huck says, “No, [m’am]. [Just] killed a n ____.”

And Aunt Sally says, “Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.”

You can see how there would be controversy about having kids read this stuff today. But for the time, what he was exposing was ordinary white attitudes about black people. “Well, it’s lucky it was just a n---,” says Aunt Sally, “because sometimes people do get hurt.”

Ernest Hemingway later wrote: “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn. And William Faulkner said, “Mark Twain was the first truly American writer, and all of us since are his heirs...”

Part of what Faulkner and Hemingway were saying is that Twain developed the first uniquely American style of writing, with American idiom and slang. But he also developed an American consciousness that could represent American values – and transcend them at the same time. He looked at our harsher side – our ignorance, our meanness, and superficiality – but he did it with enough humor to make it possible for us to see. And although his view of human nature was rather dismal by the end of his life, the very standards that he used to judge it as dismal revealed something rather good and noble.

So, on this 100th anniversary of the death of this printer, pilot, prospector, reporter, lecturer, writer, and comedian – who came into this world when Halley’s comet arrived...and left this world when Halley’s comet returned – I celebrate this fiery comet who brought to life a uniquely American style of literature that revealed who we are and showed us, by contrast, what we could be. And if that’s not a spiritual gift – I don’t know what is.