

“Not in Our Stars”

I once heard a California physician do a half-serious takeoff on the old familiar saying, “If I had my life to live over.” He spoke of how he would limber up, not take so many things seriously, climb more mountains, swim more rivers, watch more sunsets. He said, “I’ve been one of those people who never go anywhere w/o a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had it to do over again, I would go places and do things and travel lighter. I would play hookey more. I wouldn’t make such good grades, except by accident. I would ride on more merry-go-rounds. I’d pick more daisies.”

The good doctor counts on us to recognize the humorous exaggeration, but he is not joking in his belief that we get too solemn, take ourselves too seriously, get too busy to do all sorts of things we’d really like to do, until it’s too late to do them. There’s a great deal of good sense in what he says, including the remark that one should make good grades only by accident. That is, good grades should happen because you are aiming at knowledge, at learning things, and not because you’re aiming directly at grades. And grownups do need to be a little silly and crazy at times, and watch more sunsets, and not lose today by living so many years ahead of it.

My doctor friend had been a high achiever all his life, had worked hard to hone his professional skills, and when I teased him by saying that despite his romantic musings he would probably live his life over again just about the same way he had lived it the first time, he laughed and agreed with me. But I liked the touch of

nostalgia in him, and the rueful sense that in his diligence and discipline he had missed some good things. But what his playful approach really makes me think of this morning is the more somber mood in which all of us at times consider the changes we would make if we had a second chance, especially when we have messed things up with short tempers or loose tongues or weak wills.

It's an interesting speculation, this romantic dreaming that if we could only live our lives over again they would turn out so much better, because it raises one of the most important questions we can ask about the relationship between character and events. In other words, has my life been less than I wanted it to be because of accident, or the ill will of others, or has it been less because of me, because of what I am? If I got a second chance, and went round again, would it really be so different after all unless somehow I were changed myself?

The Bible, as any good student of it could guess, looks at both sides of that question. One of the old Jewish prophets by the name of Jeremiah doubted very much that certain people he knew would do any better. After all, he asks, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" He obviously felt that character is destiny, and that there was little chance some of the people he knew could ever be any different. But not everybody who appears in the biblical stories felt that way. John the Baptist thought people **could** change, and told them in a voice of thunder that they had **better**. And Christ believed in a second chance, although he spoke of it more gently: "You have to change," he said, "and become like little children in order to

enter the kingdom of heaven,” a state of existence I like to call the kingdom of right relationships — a character change described in John’s Gospel as a kind of new birth.

It can be uncomfortable to hear such talk because we learn so well to justify ourselves by blaming others, or blaming circumstances — almost anything to avoid having to confess, “It’s not something else. It’s me, O Lord. I’m the problem.” It’s hard enough to whisper that in **private**, infinitely harder to confess a character flaw in **public** — especially if you are someone of great prominence. I have never forgotten the impact of a luncheon speech I heard one day during my years in St. Louis. A Monsanto executive had invited me to hear Martin Niemoeller, the famous German Lutheran minister who — although it took him a while — finally risked his life in opposing Hitler’s Nazi party.

“In 1933,” he said, “when the Communists were imprisoned, I did not lift my voice. I did not say to my congregation, ‘Be on your guard. There is something wrong happening here.’ And when the feeble-minded were murdered, I said to myself, ‘Am I to be the guardian of the feeble-minded?’ I could not even claim that I was ignorant of the persecution of the Jews, but I did nothing. I only started speaking out when the faith of the Church was persecuted. For this neglect I am greatly to blame. I have sinned.” But if Pastor Niemoeller lived those same Nazi years over again without the benefit of hindsight, would he act any differently? Jeremiah thought not, in his moment of anger, and would probably say that our characters are largely fixed, that we are

what we are, and that even if we cycled back through life again we'd make the same mistakes. Jesus, on the other hand, believed in the possibility of change — new beginnings, fresh starts. So.....is character fixed or flexible?

What I'm about to do next will not sound like typical sermon stuff, so it might be useful to remind those of you I can see (and a much larger radio audience) that Jesus never sounded much like a modern preacher himself. His favorite game plan was to tell little life-stories called parables. He almost never quoted scripture while telling them. I'm now going to follow his example and tell you a parable taken from a play I used one semester while teaching a college course in modern drama, a play I think Jesus would probably have liked well enough to use it in his own sermons if it had existed in his lifetime. I'm hoping you will enjoy hearing how a whimsical Scotch playwright by the name of J. M. Barrie wrestled with the connection between character and circumstance.

Barrie's name may ring a bell with some of you as the author of an amusing play about British social life called *The Admirable Crichton*, but he's better known as the author of *Peter Pan*, which everybody knows, either from having read the play or having seen Mary Martin fly across the stage on Broadway, or in a movie, or on television. So we owe *that* familiar character to J. M., Barrie, but he wrote another play, which I like better than either of the ones I just mentioned, a play called *Dear Brutus*, a title stolen from a couple of lines in

Shakespeare which I'd like to save until later because they so perfectly sum up what Barrie wants us to believe about life.

Barrie liked to get at reality by writing fantasy, and that's how *Dear Brutus* works. When the curtain goes up we discover that a group of people have gathered in a big house occupied by a strange little man whose name is Lob. If we know a little English folklore we catch on right away that this is going to be an unusual play, because Lob is one of the names given to Puck, that mischievous sprite who also shows up in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In fact, the very next thing we learn is that our play is taking place on Midsummer's Eve (June 23rd) when, according to ancient superstition, all sorts of strange things may happen to people.

When we first meet the house guests the women are off by themselves, and they have cooked up a scheme to embarrass the butler of the place, whose name is Matey, and who has already stolen rings from three of them. He thinks they don't know this. They ask him to take a telegram to the post office, but they insist that he read the message aloud before he goes. When he does, it says: "To Police Station: Send officer first thing in the morning to arrest Matey, butler, for theft of rings." He's embarrassed, of course, quickly takes the rings out of his pocket, returns them, and hopes the case is closed. But they insist that as part of the price of their forgiveness, he has to tell them what it is they all have in common, since the owner of the house, Lob, has hinted that this is why they were all invited on this particular night.

Matey begs the women not to make him tell what Lob is up to, and then he pleads his own case by arguing that all our lives are determined by certain turnings, by little tricks of fate, and that with a few breaks things would have worked out better for him and he would not now be a thief. He really believes this. So we know what Matey represents: the almost universal human tendency to blame circumstance rather than character for what we do. "If I had only taken the clerkship that was offered me once," Matey says, "I'd be the most honest man alive today." Please keep that offer of a clerkship in mind for a few minutes.

Matey warns the women not to go into a certain nearby forest which has magical qualities he can only hint at. At this moment the men come in at this point, from another room, and we discover that they, too, think their lives would have been quite different if only circumstances had been different. And now we know that this is what it is that all the guests have in common: the conviction that fate is to blame for their failures. One of them would have written a book if only he had been poor enough to feel compelled to write it. Another guest, Mr. Purdy, is a philanderer who blames first one thing and then another for his shallow, selfish flitting from one woman to another.

And there is Mr. Dearth, who was once a promising artist but who began to drink and lose his talent when he felt his wife had lost faith in him. And there is his wife, who blames everything bad in her character from having had the misfortune to marry him. He's the man in the play who happens to draw back a curtain at

one of the windows, look out at the garden, and then let the curtain fall back like someone who has just gotten a very bad shock. He is so solemn and serious when he turns back to the others that even his wife is impressed. He insists on knowing what is in that garden, which before his eyes had suddenly turned into a forest, and the little man Lob is forced to tell all of them that it is a magical wood — that to go into it is to find what everybody longs for: the miracle of a second chance with life.

So, of course, they all go into it, in one way or another, including Matey the butler, who has been thrown out of the house by his master. When we meet the characters again in Act 2, they are all walking around in the magic wood. The sticky-fingered butler, Matey, has already gotten his second chance. He is now extremely wealthy, although his manners and his language have not changed, and we discover that although he did take that clerkship in this second time around, and is now driving a Rolls Royce, he is still a thief. Only now, instead of stealing small personal items like rings, he is stealing from huge corporations and from national banks. In other words, into a changed set of circumstances he has taken his own unchanged character, and so nothing is really different. As one of the characters puts it, “It’s not Fate. Fate is something outside us. What really plays the dickens with us is something in ourselves. Something that makes us go on doing the same sort of fool things, however many chances we get.”

And sure enough, the philanderer, Mr. Purdy, is also at it again — chasing a different woman this time but using the same tricks and the same talk, and feeling just as sorry for himself. One has the sense that he may be doomed to be this kind of man forever, no matter in what life he finds himself. The same is true of most of the others, but the playwright is too much of a romantic himself not to make a little good news out of all this — which is to say that the gospel is in this play, or I would not be using it this morning. Dearth, the man who once had hope as a painter, is now painting — and with him is the daughter he never had, but always wanted, and he is sublimely happy.

His wife, who was so sure before she went into the woods that things were bad for her because she chose poorly in marriage, now chooses wrong again, and when she returns to the house is in far worse shape than when we first met her. But she and her husband both recognize now their own responsibility for their failures, and they are the one pair for whom the playwright seems to have a real glimmer of hope.

One of the critical Christian themes held up in this play is the importance of self-knowledge, and the willingness to admit that the mistakes we make in life are more likely to have come from flaws in our personalities than from accidents of fate. The play is realistic enough to know that most of us would be the same basic people in the magical wood that we were in real life, but it is also hopeful enough to think that some of us may change. Of the revelations in the magical forest, one character asks, “Is there ever any permanent

effect?” “Once in a while,” Lob admits, and in that quiet statement shines the hope which playwright J. M.

Barrie could never quite abandon, and which Jesus made the centerpiece of his gospel — that it is possible to start over and make life different.

But it only happens when, instead of shifting the blame, we find courage to say the words from which Barrie took his title and his theme, the words I promised you would hear at the end. Two men, named Cassius and Brutus, in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, are talking about Caesar himself, a man inferior in many ways to themselves but to whom they are now required to bow down and worship as if he were a god. Cassius, especially, doesn’t like it, would like to change things. He challenges his friend to create his own destiny. After all, he says, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,/ But in ourselves that we are underlings.” Not in our stars....but in ourselves.

Taking the blame. It may be the toughest confession in the world to make, but if getting a second chance is ever to make any difference, it’s the first step. And I hope you’ve recognized it by now — that when you decided to come to this place today — when you decide to come on any Sunday morning — you enter the magical forest of the second chance.

The rest of us, stumbling around hopefully in that wood, wish you the best of luck!

Help us know as much of the truth about ourselves as we can handle,

gracious Lord, and give us courage to live wisely with what we find out.