

Lecture: Psalm 139:1-6,13-18

Last week on the radio I heard a quote that I think belongs on every refrigerator. I was only half listening at the time, so I have no idea about the context of the quote. I am sure that it has some noble pedigree. I am confident that it was uttered in the midst of some international crisis or at a moment of national emergency. It was certainly the key line in some monumental speech, perhaps a speech uttered in the very shadow of Big Ben in some debate in the British Houses of Parliament or perhaps in the very darkest days of the London Blitz. In my imagination the words were spoken when the horrors of the Nazi terror seemed to be on the verge of overwhelming all that was good and noble and just in the world. The author of the quote is the man whose personal motto was never, never, never, never give up: the great Sir Winston Churchill. The quote I heard was this: "We are all worms, but I do believe that I am a glow worm." "We are all worms, but I do believe that I am a glow worm."

I want to begin with that quote this morning and invite you to think with me for a few moments about who we are and who we are called to be. That we are worms is not a flattering statement of the human condition. That it might be true, that it might be an accurate assessment of the human animal seems to find its proof on the front page of the newspaper every morning. It characterizes much of what

we read about from Iraq or from the Sudan or from the streets of our own cities. It testifies to what most of us know is too true about our own behavior when no one is looking or when our lesser thoughts take possession of our souls or when we imagine ourselves to be slighted or abused by another. Am I the only person here today whose petty hates can boil to the surface with the slightest provocation?

Wormy behavior is a fact of life. In biblical terms, despite the glow reflected in the words Cathy just read about how fearfully and wonderfully God has created us to be, haven't you also heard that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, that none are good, that all are flawed and that everyone is worthy of condemnation? You've heard that before, I am sure. You have heard it and perhaps you believe it, but is it the truth? Is it the end of the story, or could it be, could it just be, that our worm-like human nature is not the end, but rather the beginning of an ongoing story that has a different ending? Dare I suggest to you that Churchill's idea that you and I are glow worms is a better truth, a nobler truth and one with a great deal more possibility?

Let me tell you what I have in mind. Somewhere along the line, most of us acquired an unhealthy dose of poor self-image. Someone, perhaps a parent, perhaps a teacher, perhaps an older sibling, perhaps even a minister made us feel inadequate and less than lovable. Placed in theological terms, someone convinced us that we were sinners and

flawed human beings, unworthy of much more than condemnation. Someone said to you that you were too fat or too skinny or too dumb or too something. Someone convinced you that you were not really a very good person and you believed them.

And then to complicate matters, once we came to believe that we really didn't amount to much, it became easy, too easy, to mess up. And some of us messed up big time and did things in our lives which we truly regret. And then we noticed that we messed up and then we felt guilty and it just confirmed what we had already been told about our worm-like nature. It became a vicious circle and every one of us became the victims of that vicious circle, chasing the tail of our own inadequacies and our own failings and our own imperfections. To say it simply, if we think we are a worm, then behaving like a worm becomes a way of life. And once again, let me say it, if that is the end of the story, then you are pathetic and I am pathetic and the world is pathetic and that is the sum total of a sad tale told by a fool.

But I can't stop there. I can't stop there, because I happen to believe that there is more to it than that. There is the story of God, the biblical story of God stepping out onto the cosmic stage of this drama of human sinfulness and inadequacy and suggesting a different possibility. This God chooses to come onto the stage of human history to make a series of promises to one tribe of people in the middle east---that they will become a light to the nations and become

the first actors in a play which presents a living alternative to the worm show of human history. God says to these people, you will become a blessing and in this blessing, all of the people of the earth will be blessed.

And if you went home this afternoon and started to read that story which we know as the Bible and kept on reading round the clock for the next two weeks, you would read the wormy record of how often the descendents of that tribe of people managed to mess it up with their poor self images and their vile behavior. You would read the story of wars and persecutions and the terrible inhumanity of which human beings are capable, but never once in all of that long and sorry record would you read that God's promise about becoming a blessing was ever revoked. God so loved the world, God so loved you and me that the promise finally took flesh and was born into this wormy world in Jesus. And in his life and in his teachings and in his overcoming of death, the glow worm possibility of life found its fullest expression.

Some time ago, one of you handed me a nine line poem written by that late Mother Teresa of Calcutta. I think all of you know some of her story. How she choose to work among the dying and the hopeless. How she chose to glow with the brightness of God's blessing in the very center of one of the vilest places on this earth. Well, Mother Teresa was a saint and you might well point out to me that none of us are saints so that any comparison between her and us is a wormy one.

I think she would disagree. She would remind us, I think, that a saint is simply a sinner who knows it; that a saint is a worm who chooses in her or his life to become a glow worm; that a saint is a person who finds a way by the grace of God to become a blessing.

The poem she wrote is entitled: "People" and it is written in large letters on the wall of the orphanage she founded in Calcutta, India and I want to share it with you line by line. It sums up the difference between being a worm and being a glow worm.

Line one: "People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered; forgive them anyway." Forgive them and forgive yourself while you are at it. There is no future in the past and as one of you always tells me, you can't make your own candle brighter by trying to blow out some one else's. Forgive and you will be a blessing.

Line two: "If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway." Kindness is like a life ring thrown to a drowning person. Kindness will save your life when your baser instincts attempt to take control of your life. Be kind and you will be a blessing and you will glow with the love of God.

Line three: "If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies; succeed anyway." We all know that success in life is hard to define, but I think we know that it's not about dollars or results or the bottom line as much as it is about integrity and quality

and compassion. Succeed and you will be a blessing, succeed and you will let your light shine.

Line four: “If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you; be honest and frank anyway.” Did anyone ever accuse of you of being “born yesterday.” Did anyone every accuse you of giving too much away? Think about it, if you were born yesterday, you never have to worry about getting old. How much time have we wasted worrying about whether or not we’ve been cheated? Be honest and open with everyone you meet, give for the sake of giving and you will become a blessing and the spark of the divine will warm your heart.

Line five: “What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; build anyway.” None of us can control the future. None of us knows what things good or bad the future will present to our lives. Invest your positive energy in the future, invest it in others and you will be a blessing and the light you share will light the way for others.

Line six: “If you find serenity and happiness, people may be jealous; be happy anyway.”

No matter what happens around you in life, put on a smile. Take the love God has for you as a sure and certain promise and the light of that love will guide you through any dark valley and you will be a blessing.

Line seven: “The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway.” Wherever you are, whenever you can, do

good. No one around you may notice, but you'll know it and in knowing it, you will know the most important thing you can know about yourself. You will have a spark in your soul and by your good deeds you will become a blessing.

Line eight: "Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; give the world the best you've got anyway." Every time we give our best, we peel off a layer of negative energy. We claim our inheritance as the beloved children of God and we are reborn. When we give our best, we light a candle of hope and we become a blessing.

And finally, Mother Teresa says this: "In the final analysis, everything you do is between you and God; it was never between you and other people anyway." Let your light shine, let the love flow, glow in the darkness, glow in the darkness and you will be a blessing. That is the truth about who we are and who we are called to be. Amen.