**Make real the things of God**

Sermon by Eli Schotz  
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West Cummington Congregational Church, Cummington, MA

I want to thank Steve and this congregation for offering me the opportunity to talk this morning about some experiments, some experiences, and some reflections on my faith. I started thinking about the possibility of this sermon after Steve asked me to read “Goethe’s Wish” several months ago for the conclusion of a Sunday service. “Goethe’s Wish” is something a patient gave me years ago, and I often return to it. But in preparing this sermon I saw something new. I saw how its various parts are connected. So let me read it again.

*Goethe’s Wish*

*Health enough to make work a pleasure*  
*Wealth enough to meet your needs*  
*Strength enough to battle difficulties and overcome them*  
*Patience enough to toil until good is accomplished*  
*Love enough to move you to be useful to others*  
*Charity enough to see some good in your neighbor*  
*Grace enough to admit your sins and forsake them*  
*Faith enough to make real the things of God*  
*Hope enough to remove all anxious fears concerning the future.*

How can we apply Goethe’s Wish in ourselves, in our families, in our communities, our state, our nation, and the world? I think it is important to consider it on all these levels. And in our culture which tends to be so atomized and so individualized, it is always easier to think of things on the small scale of self, family, or local community. One of the things that stands in the way of “making real the things of God” on a larger scale is a failure in our capacity to imagine. It is not an accident that people can more easily imagine the end of the world than they can imagine the end of the system under which we live. The system does not wish us to imagine this. And so you don’t see any Hollywood films that suggest any such thing is possible. And it is because it is so difficult to imagine a different kind of country that I want to reflect this morning on a nation that is not part of our system.
For more than fifty years there has been a US economic blockade against the people of Cuba. Many Americans believe that as a result of this blockade, they can’t travel to Cuba. But my wife and I have traveled there a number of times. Two of the most memorable trips were with an organization called Pastors for Peace. Each year Pastors for Peace organizes a group of Americans to challenge the US government blockade by traveling to Cuba without a government license. Pastors for Peace considers it their religious duty to “Love Thy Neighbor.” And since Cuba is one of our neighbors, any attempt to prevent them from traveling to Cuba to bring aid, is an attempt to interfere with Pastors for Peace free exercise of religion. As to being licensed, Pastors for Peace says, “We don’t need government license. Love is our license.” Some might call what Pastors for Peace is engaged in “civil disobedience,” but the founder of Pastors for Peace, the great Reverend Lucius Walker preferred to call this kind of action “civil obedience to a power higher than the US government.” In challenging the US economic blockade against Cuba and seeing Cuba with our own eyes, we realized something. This blockade against Cuba is not only an economic blockade against the Cuban people, it is also a mental and spiritual blockade against the hearts and minds of the American people, a blockade against our capacity to imagine. And so I offer this sermon as a contribution to lifting that mental and spiritual blockade and freeing our ability to imagine a different world and to increase our faith in the capacity of a people to make real the things of God.

In Havana we have repeatedly visited an institution, which used to be a Cuban military naval base, but which has been converted into a medical school. The school is known as ELAM, the Latin American School of Medicine. At ELAM there are 10,000 foreign medical students from underdeveloped countries studying free of charge as guests of the Cuban government and the Cuban people, studying to be doctors, so that they can go back and build health care systems in their own countries. To get an idea of the scale of this Cuban effort, consider the following. The Cuban population is perhaps 1/30 that of the United States. And the US has many more than 30 times Cuba’s financial resources. So imagine for a moment if the United States were to convert 30 of its military bases into 30 medical schools, and were to welcome 300,000 young people from the Third World free of charge to study medicine in order that they could go back to their homelands to build medical systems. This perhaps gives some idea of what Cuba is doing. Think about if we were to use our resources in such a way. What might that do for our national security, not to mention the security of people all over the world. Nor is ELAM an isolated example of Cuba’s solidarity with the poor and disadvantaged. Outside of Havana on one of our trips we visited an educational institution that has thousands of Third World students studying Sport and Physical Rehabilitation to go back to their countries and build programs in these fields.
It is worth remembering the words of Nelson Mandela: “What other country can show as much selflessness as Cuba has in its relations with the African continent? How many countries in the world have benefitted from the assistance of Cuban health workers and educators? What country has ever asked for Cuban assistance and been denied?”

Returning from one of our trips to Cuba we were, like all the rest of you, witness to the terrible suffering and loss of life caused by Hurricane Katrina. Some of you may know that in the aftermath of Katrina Cuba offered to send an emergency medical brigade to New Orleans to aid victims. Its offer was rejected. Perhaps fewer know that some months prior to Katrina, a Category 5 hurricane had struck Cuba. Over a million Cubans were evacuated before the storm hit, as well as equipment, animals, even refrigerators, and not a single Cuban died in this storm. Another example of making real the things of God.

A number of us recently concluded a four-session discussion of Naomi Klein’s book: THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING: CAPITALISM VS THE CLIMATE. We are aware that mankind is heading into very troubled waters. No one can foresee how we will emerge from the present system with a sustainable existence. I don’t know what role nations can or will play in this process. But if they are to have a role, the history and the experience of the Cuban people are worthy of our contemplation and study.

My friend Jim Douglass has written that Christ didn’t actually say “I am not of this world.” Rather Christ said, “I am not of this Order.” Meaning he was not of the Roman Empire. Faith that a different kind of world order is possible to me means not just believing in it, hoping for it, and praying for it. It means to me being open to it, studying past examples, looking for new examples, and investigating and supporting them when you find them. I was raised in an atheistic Jewish secular home, and in our home the prophets were not seen as saying how the world would be, but of how the world ought to be. And it was our duty to try to contribute to making it how it ought to be.

The French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain wrote in 1938 about this concept of Judaism: “It is to be found at the very heart of the world’s structure, stimulating it, exasperating it, moving it. Like an alien body, like an activating ferment injected into the mass, it gives the world no peace, it bars slumber, it teaches the world to be discontented and restless as long as the world has not God, it stimulates the movement of history.”
Finally, I want to end with a warning and a poem. First the warning: If you do ever travel to Cuba, you have to be prepared for some strange experiences. Even if you don’t consider yourself a poet, you may find poems just coming. This is what happened to me. So to close here is one of them:

Jews

An old Jew wandered the world,
Our modern Roman Empire,
A lonely Jew of Old,
Loving learning and non-violence,
Believing Jesus a prophet, not a god,
Eschewing patriotism or power,
He searched for his people.

One day he came upon a strange land.
Here he found a people who alone amongst all the nations
Would not bow to the empire’s God of Gold.
Among them the most vulnerable were secure;
Races and nations mixed freely.
“We have little, but what we have,
we share,” said a teacher.

Finally he saw the words of their leader
Written on a wall,
“We do not ask the people to believe;
We ask the people to read.”
The old Jew thought to himself,
“These are the Jews of our modern Roman Empire.
They call themselves ‘Cubans’.”

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