REMEmBERING JOHN COBURN OF WELLFLEET

This is the Sunday every summer when we remember the history of this place on the feast of its dedication: the Apostle James, whom we remember especially from his origins as a fisherman before, following Jesus, he became a ‘fisher of men’ and women to be disciples of Jesus.

The Gospel for this feast is always startling. The mother of James and his brother John (whose father was named Zebedee) comes to Jesus with a motherly request: make my sons your favorites; when you are Messiah, when you are governing the community of faith, make my sons your chief assistants; let them sit on your left and right hand. Let them be Secretary of State and Secretary of Treasury. I am told by secondary school teachers like Jack Smith and my brother Tom that many mothers and fathers of privileged children in the best schools unabashedly make this kind of request of teachers every day. Jesus answer to this nameless mother is, “You don’t know what you are asking: hard work, suffering and self-sacrifice are the source of greatness in my country. You have to be a servant, even a slave, to your fellow humans to become great in my topsy-turvy world. You may even have to die.”

One of the things we do on this Sunday every summer festival is name and remember members of this summer congregation who have died. Some of them were important people, some of them are very ordinary, modest people. (After BP, I don’t want to refer to “little peoples.”) There are people whose names are probably only remembered in any year when they are read here. This year we have added to the list three people I have known here over the years. One was young: Jessie Murphy, a child born severely disadvantaged. She never saw the sun, but I expect she felt its warmth. She was lovingly cared for by her grandmother, Roberta, who faithfully brought her to our services every week of the summer and fervently believed that she gained some grace by being here. Another was Audrey Sherwin, a figure in Wellfleet for more than half a century, who was only occasionally at the chapel but always thought of herself as part of us. These two are the kind of people followers of Jesus are meant to embrace and serve and support. They join a company of God’s people who will be remembered by us if by relatively few others. It is in their honor that I have asked that we sing a hymn that, despite its poetic triteness, seems to me to say something about the sainthood of the least among us:

I sing a song of the saints of God …

And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
and one was a shepherdess on the green:
they were all of them saints of God, and I mean,
God helping, to be one too. …
You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea,
for the saints of God are just folk like me,
and I mean to be one too.

I think you will understand if I talk chiefly today of a third member of the chapel whom I have
known well and who died last August. He was a person we might well have met in a shop or at
tea (although he thought the hymn I just quoted “corny”), but he was also a major public figure. I
speak of one of the founders of this chapel, who died in his ninety-fifth year, John Bowen
Coburn. The last time he preached here, in 1996, he asked how many in the congregation
remembered or knew anything about another founder, Bishop James Pike, and very few hands
went up. So for those who did not know him, let me very briefly tell you that John Coburn
was
one of the most prominent churchmen of the twentieth century, in whose ministry the chapel had
a relatively small formal part but whose association here was very important to him. He was, in
his long career, a teacher in Istanbul (where he met his wife Ruth), naval chaplain in World War
II, rector in Amherst, cathedral dean in Newark, dean of the Episcopal Theological Seminary,
teacher in a Street Academy in Harlem, rector of St. James’ Church in New York, president of
the House of Deputies of the Episcopal Church who helped steer the church through the turmoil
of the Black power movement and presided over the decision to ordain women to the priesthood,
Bishop of Massachusetts. He was known internationally as a the profound guide to the life of
prayer—to what has come to be called spirituality. He was a person of formidable achievements.
He was, as a public figure, reserved and dignified. Although he was always courteous and
helpful, he must have seemed awesome to many people for his achievements as well as his
demeanor.

This morning, I’d like to remember him by relating three vignettes about John Coburn in
Wellfleet. I’d like to give you a glimpse of the wild side of John Coburn.

We’ll begin with tragedy transcended. In 1956 in Newark, New Jersey, Ruth Coburn was in
hospital, and John was at home with their five children. The youngest, Cynthia Ann, who was
only twenty months old, died suddenly in the night. You can imagine John’s trip to the hospital the next morning!

Out of the suffering and grief of this loss in the Coburn family came what I think is the most beautiful Cape Cod book: *Anne and the Sand Dobbies: A story about death for children and their parents*, a fictionalized retelling of the loss of Cynthia and the burial of her ashes here in the chapel columbarium. The book has a wrapper and end papers by Andrew Wyeth depicting coastal pine woods. The Coburns lived for many years in a house that belonged to a friend named Eli Marsh, who introduced the young Coburns to sand dobbies, little creatures who dance in the shadows of shrubs on the dunes late and early in the day. Eli Marsh (who was a professor of athletics at Amherst College and an amateur painter) not only introduced the Coburn children to the sand dobbies, but he also depicted them in his landscape paintings of the dunes, dancing in the shadows. In *Anne and the Sand Dobbies*, before the burial service for Anne, Mr. Field (the fictional name for Mr. Marsh) says to Dan (aka Mike Coburn) that he has learned over the past winter that the sand dobbies are around all of the time:

“They’re in and out of the trees, and they’re in and out of the ocean and on the sand and on the grass, and they’re in the lakes, and they surround us every minute. I used to believe that they had secret hiding places, but they don’t. They’re right here all the time. … They don’t do anything. They just are.” He goes on to say that, because they just are, sand dobbies, “are whatever is; they hold things together; and they make things just be whatever they are—birds or water or color or sand or beach, grass or whatever.

“Sand dobbies teach us to be just ourselves, …to accept ourselves the way we are; to accept everything that happens so that we can be a part of everything that happens. …Even when death comes, [he went on] let it come. It’s part of life.”

Or, as the preacher at the burial of Anne’s ashes in the book says, we have to let Anne go, to be with God;

“We then can get on with our primary business, which is living right here and being ourselves right here, and trying to love a little bit better than we have before. It is to live with a little bit more joy and a little bit more happiness, to sing a little bit more, not to be so exercised by the things of this world because we know that we belong to another world finally. Anne is in that world. God is there. We’ll be there.”

And the family drives home, getting on with their primary business by singing in the car:

“Old MacDonald Had a Farm”, “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain When She Comes”, “He Told Her He Loved Her, But Oh, How He lied”, and (because it was the only college song they all knew) “Lord Jeffrey Amherst.”

Isn’t that wild? Turning grief into affirmation of life? That was the core of John’s teaching about Christian spirituality. Accept, be, get on with it.
You will find it easier to accept my second vignette as exposing the wild side of Bishop Coburn. It’s a story I’ve never before told in public.

Sometime in the mid-1960s, Ruth Coburn was away for part of the summer, fetching Mike in England where he had spent a year before going to college. John and Georgie and I were invited to dinner up Cape in Cummaquid. John drove, and after dinner (probably after eleven o’clock) on the way home with the windows wide open, the three of us sat in the front seat. (A few of you will remember the days before air conditioning when car windows were open in summer and there were front bench seats that accommodated three people and had no seatbelts. I have never understood how courtships could be conducted since the introduction of two distinct front seats separated by a gear stick.)—We were driving home three abreast in the front seat with the windows open. Two young lads were hitchhiking on Route 6. John stopped and asked where they were going. “Provincetown,” said they. (In those days Provincetown was a Mecca for drug-added, adventure-seeking young people, who quite literally littered Commercial Street and the pier. Straight folks brought their children by day to gape at the “hippies” and to buy tie-died t-shirts.) “Provincetown, eh?” said Coburn to the two youngsters. “If you can get in through the window, I’ll take you part of the way.” In they scrambled.

It was an amazing ride that I’ll bet those lads never forgot. As aging boomers, they may be telling the tale to their grandchildren.

“Do your parents know you are going to Provincetown at this hour of the night?” asked the stranger who had picked them up. “What do they think about it? What do they think you are going to do there? … What are you going to do there? Where are you going to sleep? Do you think this excursion is really a good idea?” On and on the questions went. The boys’ eyes grew wider and wider as they muttered monosyllabic answers. The crowning blow was when John asked where they went to school and learned that they attended a prep school in another state, the name of which few people who pick up hitchhikers would recognize. “Oh,” said the mysterious but omniscient driver, “and are you boys part of the reason your headmaster had to resign last month?” “Who are you?” they gasped. I thought they might jump out the window of the moving car.

When we got to Wellfleet, John stopped well before our turnoff and said that this was as far as we could take our passengers. They started to open the back door of the car. “Oh, no!” said John. “You have to get out the same way you got in.” They tumbled out through the window (it’s much harder to get out of a car window than in), thoroughly shaken, scratching their heads, wondering how and whether they would get the rest of the way to Provincetown.
Said Coburn as we drove off, “My children hate it when I do things like that.”


The third vignette will end with advice about your spiritual life.

For years the Coburns stayed in the house of the sand-dobie man, Eli Marsh. (Marsh thought Wellfleet overpopulated in summer, unfriendly to sand dobbies and to himself, so he got out before the end of June.) The walls of the cottage still feature paintings with sand dobbies, and it faces the Atlantic from the dunes north of Newcomb Hollow beach. To get from the house to the beach, one follows a path that meanders for about half a mile. It starts on the outer edge of the pine woods. The pines soon give way to the kinds shrubs that cast the shadows sand dobbies like best—beach plums, shadblow, bayberry. Then comes a zone of beach grasses interspersed with beach roses and hog-cranberry. Finally, one tumbles down a low sand cliff onto the beach. It is an enchanting journey through distinct ecosystems, each with its own distinct beauty. John loved that beach. He loved to be there with his family and friends; he loved when Ruth was away to walk up the beach to Truro for dinner with friends—and back; he loved to be there alone; and he found God present there as nowhere else. The beach comes up frequently in his writing, and he was fond of the beach poems of such poets as Provincetown’s Mary Oliver.

One of his own prose poems—it was published at the beginning of a book of prayers—describes an early morning when he was alone on the beach. It is called, “Streaking with the Seagulls. Possessed by God.”

What was I doing, O God, running along the beach at five thirty in the morning, clapping my hands and crying, ‘O God, I love you, love you, love you’?

Had I taken leave of my senses or come to my senses? …

So you woke me up at five in the morning. You led me out of bed and down the path over the dunes. You let me hear the birds in the grove in the dawn as I never heard them in my life. You led me to the beach where no person was, no sound but the waves crashing, seagulls crying. You set me off up the beach, over the sand flying (of course not really flying but seeming to fly), the dunes on the left, the breakers on the right. Over the sea the sun’s light, first dim, then brighter and brighter. And so far as the eye could see, nothing but nature—sand, water, seagulls—and you.

And when I dove into the waters, it was you I was diving into. When the waters held me up, it was you. When the waves washed me and cleansed me, it was your washing and cleansing. And when I came out, turned, faced the sun and cried, I was crying to you. When I loved the sun and the water, it was you I was loving. When the wind warmed me, it was you.

He runs and runs, claps his hands, thinks of people he loves, names them as though they were God, because “if it weren’t for them I wouldn’t know you, couldn’t cry to you, couldn’t

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love you. So I say their names out loud too…” He thinks how small he is, but realizes he belongs to God, to this glorious nature, of which he is a part.

“So, you drive me into my senses, not out of them. Or, if driven out of them, then only to come to them—in you.

‘Praise the Lord, my soul. Praise his holy name.’ How can I not praise you when I know who I am?

And then, characteristic Coburn, he comes down to earth. (I expect Ruth had put in her two cents worth before he wrote this.)

But it would have been a little thoughtful of me if I’d left a note for the family saying where I was going at five o’clock in the morning. Sorry God.

But thanks anyway!

I promised advice about your spiritual life at the end of this vignette. It is this: If you want to know God’s glory, God’s love, God’s grace more fully perhaps than you have ever known it before, take yourself some early morning to the beach. It’s probably a good idea (since few of us can come down on Coburn’s path) to walk fifteen or twenty minutes up the beach away from the parking lot. It would be fine if it were a stormy day—especially after a hurricane has sputtered out far out at sea: you’ll have a powerful experience of God’s awesomeness even if you can’t go in the water. But it would be best if it were a brilliantly clear sunrise morning, low tide so that you can bounce and scream in the rollers, streak with the seagulls, wash away shortcomings and sorrow, remember your friends and your other blessings, praise God. I promise you will love it, and you will love the God who made this glorious place and made you part of it.

“Praise the Lord, my soul. Praise God’s holy name.” And blessed be God for the gift of John Coburn. Amen.

Milton McC. Gatch