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The Elusive Search for the Truth: *A book review of Peter Gomes's Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*

Devonya N. Havis, Ph.D.

Abstract

Through his collection of sermons, published in his book *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), Peter Gomes sets out to evoke a transformation in the reader by offering meditations on questions that often arise when we contemplate how to lead the "good life". He offers biblical wisdom as a practical means in which to achieve happiness. Ultimately however, his solution to life's complexities is abstract and he fails to provide a roadmap with which to negotiate the complexities.

Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living, Peter Gomes' latest writing venture, seeks to provide the kind of biblical wisdom that brings hope and assurance during times of crisis and fracture. In these moments, comments Gomes, one needs "strength for the journey" in order to see beyond current circumstances. Dependent on a life of the spirit, such vision takes one beyond the momentary situation. As Gomes notes,

"God gives us the capacity to remove ourselves from where we are to where we ought to be, or would like to be.... So do not give up or give out: do not lose heart.

...We need strength for the journey, for the long haul, so that we may endure and not be done in, so that we may be sustained by the things we cannot see and which are more real than the things we can [see]. (Gomes 2003, 228; 302)

It is this capacity to realize God's love and take up the obligations associated with this transcendent love that gives one the capacity to, "not just survive, but endure." After all, insists Gomes, the spirit is the basis of one's endurance. The spirit is "that which endures when all around ... is decay and disaster. In fact, it allows one to regard what cannot be seen in the material and, along with a relationship with God, grounds a faith that leads to the "consideration of things holy."

While Gomes celebrates the abundance brought by an active life of the spirit, he is clear that such a life also carries obligations and proscriptive expectations that have been exemplified by Jesus Christ's life. There is a weighty burden associated with taking up the Christian journey. Recounting words spoken by author Mark Twain, Gomes more than once remarks that "It is not what I don't understand in the Bible that troubles me, it is what I do understand." the comment illustrates the degree to which many Christians find the greatest challenge in moving beyond their comfort zone. Such movement requires one to give from spiritual abundance in the face of material poverty, or in proportion to one's wealth. One is called to give without regard to material circumstances. Moreover, to be on the journey – which is a daily pilgrimage – one must often disrupt the existing power balance, risk upsetting the "tyranny of normalcy," bear witness by opposing "social sins," see freedom in commitment, and pursue what is virtuous within the Christian context. In short, asserts Gomes, one, by means of the soul, must choose an embodied spiritual life as an expression of "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness,

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gentleness," realizing – within the limits of humanness – the "New Testament list of virtues."

Emphatically issuing the message that "the needs of the human condition" can be met spiritually, Gomes offers this book to evoke a transformation in the reader. A transformation that makes the biblical word flesh and "reclaim[s] an informed people for the Bible and ...reclaim[s] an interpreted Bible for the people...." (Gomes 2003, xiv) He describes this task in the following manner:

"The hope of these sermons is always that the word will work for the transformation of the listener, or reader; and that in making words become flesh... words will be made real in the lives of a hopeful people." (Gomes 2003, xv)

The challenge Gomes sets for himself – joining mind and spirit in the daily Christian practice – becomes paradoxical within the framework outlined in this book. One is expected to join mind and spirit in living a Christian life that allows one to move beyond moments of crisis to the pursuit of God's kingdom. Such movement is not only about spiritual contemplation, action is required. As Gomes writes,

"...courage and moral imagination... not just faithfulness are the key ingredients in the claiming of God's kingdom. You can't just be good, or just think well about goodness.... You have to risk doing good, you have to take risk. You have to imagine what it is like to serve and love a living savior, and then act upon it, and act in the absence of assurances and available information while knowing that you will be held accountable." (Gomes 2003, 249-250)

Gomes readily delivers the message that one must attend to matters of the spirit to gain “strength for the journey of life.” He also insists that daily Christian living is more than the contemplation of “things holy.” He points out that spiritual contemplation can move one through crisis but more is needed to experience the fullness found in faith. One is required to act on behalf of what is good and righteous. And yet, Gomes offers no roadmap to aid the reader in thinking through what could count as legitimate action on behalf of the good. While he is clear that just action begins with inward struggle, one’s only guide to worldly action – found in the sermon on “Things Worth Fighting For” – is far too abstract to be of practical use.

Strength for the Journey is, ultimately, Gomes’ primer on living the “good life,” a pursuit that requires both intellectual and spiritual wisdom. He comments,

“...[W]isdom tells you what you have to know in order to make a life and not just a living. Wisdom, however, is a means and not an end. The end is happiness, and happiness – for the person of faith, for the spiritually minded, for the religious person – is contentment with self and with God. Not self-satisfaction... and one has to work very hard to discern that real happiness, for what passes for happiness is not always so. One of the reasons, perhaps, that happiness is not to be found at the end of a rainbow or in a city, or even in a school or career, is that happiness itself is not a destination but a journey, not a result but a process, not a content but a consequence. It comes from the accumulated experience of seeking to live the good life – that is, a life that is good, a process that begins anew each day....” (Gomes 2003, 69-60)

Gomes offers biblical wisdom as the practical method by which one takes up the journey towards happiness, a result of one's relationship with God. Pursuit of the "good life", insists Gomes, is a daily practice and that includes all life's moments of

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celebration, commiseration, and painful growth. These realities make him keen to explore the difficult questions emerging from the human condition. Among these topics are: whether Christianity works for the individual; what is worth fighting for; how it is possible to know what to do when what seemed real fails, the moral role of education, and freedom.

The meditations on love, freedom, faith, and responsibility proceed by means of the sermon and, as the unifying theme of the book suggests, seek to "connect the living faith" with individual lives thereby giving the *Gospel* meaningful expression by speaking directly to individuals in their circumstance. His assertion is that we need a wisdom that can lend us strength as we move "from where we are to where we ... wish to be." (Gomes 2003, xv) The strength, for Gomes, emanates from a deep, sincere understanding of the Christian Gospel and its practical expression in the context of our daily lives. In short, he addresses the challenges associated with being virtuous and takes up a meditation upon what "makes life worth living." In so far as this is the case, Gomes speaks daily wisdom to provide "strength for the journey." It is clear that, for Gomes, wisdom emanates not from one's isolated will, but in the personal relationship with God. Being a Christian requires spiritual action that often moves one beyond the comfort level dictated by rationality or material possessions. This is a key element in the call to live "beyond excellence and fairness," to look beyond self-interest toward truth, goodness, and virtue. These are the characteristics that

make life worth living and, according to Gomes, provide “strength for the journey of life.” Under the metaphysical reality of these virtues, one’s soul is altered and it becomes possible to regard what is holy. As Gomes points out, it is in the “consideration of things holy,” an activity of the spirit, that one gains sustenance to move beyond mere survival to endure. In the consideration, one comes to understand that “the spirit endures, lasts, and is a reminder – albeit invisible – when what we believed to be *real* fails. [The spirit] is that which endures when all around is decay and disaster.” (Gomes 2003, 159) This is the wisdom that allows one to live beyond “excellence and fairness.”

The sermons, culled from Sunday morning chapel at Harvard College, evoke deeply intellectual reflection upon life’s weighty issues. Moreover, Gomes utilizes the sermonific “art form” to move the spirit in addition to the intellect. However, this method falls short of the mark. Reading the sermons one is always left with the sense of having happened into an intimate conversation already in process. As a result, it is never completely clear what ground has been covered, what is yet to come, and what will remain unspoken. Consequently, one is always at a distance, failing to experience the kind of visceral engagement that usually accompanies sermons. Gomes succeeds in stimulating intellectual sparks, but the spiritual flame is not fully stoked – an outcome that runs counter to his expressed goal – forming a unity of “mind and spirit.” In fact, the blueprint for daily living provided by Gomes, is more about life in the abstract than the concrete – a disturbing outcome in a text that aims to provide wisdom for daily living. The abstractions give one much to consider about the nature of humanity but provide little as a practical guide for discerning what might be required in a particular moment. While Gomes should not be expected to tell the reader what to do in a given moment, it is not over reaching the scope of the book to ask for a roadmap to aid one’s process of discernment.

The book is neither a collection of personal essays, nor treatise, a condition that may account for why it misses the mark Gomes has established. Because his reflections are not based upon examples of how

Gomes used biblical wisdom to navigate personal choices, there is no intimate, visceral connection with the material. Moreover, the fact that the text is not a treatise prevents Gomes from giving the kind of in depth analysis that could “flesh out” such concepts as freedom, virtue, and righteousness, leading to a better understanding of how one might express these qualities in daily life.

Devonya N. Havis earned her doctorate in the Boston College Philosophy Department. She is currently a fellow in the College of Arts and Sciences at the same school. She has most recently undertaken study in Italy at the Collegium Phaenomenologicum where she, along with an international group of philosophers, examined Henri Bergson, Emmanuel Levinas, and Gilles Deleuze's thought. Havis is also a fellow at Harvard University's W.E.B. DuBois Institute.