

Plodding Illuminated by Imagination

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

January 15, 1911¹

The old parable of the mustard seed may still serve to teach a lesson and to adorn a tale.² Fundamentally, it teaches the lesson of nature, the lesson of growth. In the language of today, we express the idea of growth by the word "evolution." In the use of that word, we mean something more than mere growth. We see not only the grain of mustard seed that is deposited in the ground and becomes the large bush, but we see behind that the whole great process of which the grain of mustard seed is but the infinitesimal part, both in size and in time processes. This development from simplicity to complexity we call the process of evolution. It covers the whole range of cosmic phenomena, physical evolution, mental evolution, moral evolution, spiritual evolution. All these are part and parcel of the great process. As part of this process the most vital is that which comes closest to our human lives. Whether it is so in reality from the point of view of the Universe or not, it is true that for us, as conscious living beings dwelling in the midst of this process, our interest in this process is, and must be, centered in its bearing on human life. So, I want to speak of the method of evolution in human life, the method employed for attaining the ends towards which the process tends. I speak of this method as fundamentally the method of plodding illuminated by imagination.

In nature the expected always happens. There is never a miracle. To us, from our limited point of view, things occur which surprise us, and are beyond our power of explanation, but the reason is that our imaginative insight does not permit us to enter into the workings, the ploddings, of forces that have

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #5"—that includes sermons from January 2, 1910 to January 15, 1911. While the manuscript says, "January 15, 1910," it is clear that 1911 is meant. Not only was this manuscript bound after the December 25, 1910 sermon, but tellingly January 15 falls on a Sunday in 1911, but not in 1910.

² Matthew 13:31-32.

produced the surprise in us. We stand in awe at the wonders of plant life. We find some beautiful June morning a rose on the bush. Its color, its form, its delicate lines, all bespeak the beautiful. A marvelous creation of nature, yes, but we forget the infinite ages in which nature has been plodding along, slowly, painfully, plodding along through its manifold forms, variations to the rose. We stand before the oak tree, whose rings of each year's work may tell us that three hundred years of plodding patient growth, plus all eternity, stand behind its rugged strength. We climb our beautiful hills, and eat the products of our fertile valleys, and [take] joy in the life here where nature is beautiful and rewards with sufficient supply the toil in the fields. But we do not always remember that these mountains were once as high as any in the world, and that this great country was covered with the great ice flow of the glacial period. The almost infinite plodding of the work of rain, frost, and summer heat have worn the mountains away speck by speck, [and] have filled the valleys with ground up dirt upon which life can exist and multiply, and now after millions of years of the plodding evolution, we are here living, eating, drinking, thinking, working, struggling, seeking after wealth, power, and ease, comfort and pleasure. We look into the heavens at night and wonder at the glory we behold and think of the Psalmist who said that the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork.³ For millions upon millions of years the vast mill of the universe has been plodding on its rounds of work. Each night the stars have appeared, each year, each century, each age, might one look to the north star, and the great dipper. Had a people lived here millions of years ago the glory of the heavens would have been as it is today. It has not essentially changed. Now we are here with our hopes, dreams, work cares, joys and all the varying richnesses and variations that make up human life. Surely nature is a great plodding machine. Plod, plod, plod, here and there, a slight change, plod, plod, plod, and then another change. That is the method of development, the method of evolution. No miracle, no strange inexplicable phenomena, no interruptions by foreign forces, just plod, plod, plod in [the] development and unfolding of the forces that lie implicit in the universe. It is the method of God; it is God.

³ Psalm 19:1.

It is the method of human life, and that is why I am speaking of it now. Life consists of plodding illuminated by imagination. In that is its greatness and its richness. Just take it home to your own lives and think it out. You come to a moment when the destiny of life hangs in the balance before you. Upon what you do depends great and important things for you and others. Suppose you act in such a way as to feel that you have acted right. When did you gain that victory? At the moment of decision? Not at all. All through your life, the forces have been molding you that way. For a long time, in the quiet of your own inner life, thoughts have been plodding away, making and molding that which we call character. We often speak of the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane as the supreme moment in the life of Jesus.⁴ There it is said he sweat drops of blood in the struggle between life and integrity. That was the battlefield of his ideals to be sure, but back at the carpenter bench, when he thought of life as he worked, among the hills, by the sea of Galilee, in his conversations with his friends, he was marshalling his army of forces to win the battle in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is the dramatic moment of his life, but there is long preparation, the plodding process of thinking, judging and sifting life values. That had been going on quietly and in obscurity. He had become molded in terms of integrity, and integrity won.

Compare that incident with the conduct of Pilate, who granted him to the mob.⁵ Pilate, the ostensible ruler of the mob, was really the servile slave. You can reproduce the kind [of] thinking that he had been preparing himself with by his conduct at the moment. He had lost even before the mob appeared with its clamorous appeals. He had no sense of integrity. Even though he found no fault with the agitator, he must obey the mob, for in their pleasure really rested the tenure of his office, and he cared for his office. The same sort of thing is going on today all over our land. We know how certain legislators will act even before they have uttered a word for we know the interests that mold them.

The same principle applies in our individual life. We win out or sell out at the moment according as we have won out or sold

⁴ Matthew 26:36-46.

⁵ Matthew 27:24.

out in the quiet lonely hours when we have made our estimates of life values.

Or take another side of the same question. You suddenly surprise yourself by conduct, or an opinion that seems at variance with your accustomed habits. Perhaps you have been through the experience that I have been through. You have been accustomed to a complete set of life values. Without any question you have accepted them, and they have answered your purpose so long as you had no real use for them. Suddenly comes the call for use. You summons them to the front. They appear to you cheap, shoddy, mean contemptible. With a crestfallen air you retire them from the field, and plunge into the depths of your nature, and out into the world of experience, trying to discover why all those old values have rotted away, and crumble as you touch them. You find that some experience of your life, or some new variation in your thoughts, has been working away for months and years in the quiet of your inner life, changing your whole point of view. You hardly knew that the process was going on until the fatal moment. Doubt, one of the greatest agencies of life, works in a quiet plodding way, but its work is effective. Then comes the process of clearing away the old rubbish, and laying the foundations for the new values that develop to take the place and do the work of the old. This process itself goes on quietly, working through your whole being, leavening the whole lump of your life. Again, someday you call out your new values for action. They win back for you the confidence and the faith that you once had, but it is a confidence and a faith in different values and different things than once dominated your life. You call the change a revolution in your life. So it is, but it is a revolution only in the sense that it marks, in a dramatic way, the process of evolution that has been going on all the time. It is a milestone in development. It is the plodding preparation, at one with the growth of the flower, the building and the wearing away of mountains, and the swing of the universe through space and time. It is the method of God; it is God.

But you say, "How can I ever accomplish, how can ever these things, these values that I cherish, come to be? I have no freedom. I am hedged in by conventions, prejudices, external limitations and necessities over which I have no control." Yes, so be it, but just because it is the method of the universal life, do you have the freedom to attain? Just that little power

of thinking, just that power of imagination, the gift of life in man is the saving grace. The thoughts which we think today, and which are not absolutely determined by conditions, the thoughts into which we put the power of our personality, are the forces which are making and molding the conditions of tomorrow. The same plodding process that is going on within us, making and molding, is going on elsewhere. The decay of the old and the upbuilding of the new is everywhere going on as it is in you. Let the plodding processes of your own life become illuminated by your imaginative insight into what is going on about you. That which we call the social unrest of our times is but the surface manifestation of the great transformation that is taking place in our modern life. As man thinketh, so is he, and so will his social world become. The conditions without, and the thought forces within, are working together by the slow plodding process of evolution for the establishment and the attainment of the life values that you cherish. The dice of God are always loaded, quotes Emerson,⁶ and nothing can cheat you of the faith that the values of truth, justice and human life shall obtain. Those values, as ideals for humanity, are in you, and others, just because in the plodding processes of evolution, the fullness of time has come when they should appear. The very fact that they are in men today as ideals and dreams is the pledge that they will be realized for humanity tomorrow. The plucky assistant of humanity, doubt, has been at work long upon our values of life, molded after the patterns of mammon, today, as these values are called upon the scene to render assistance, we are ashamed of them for their shoddiness, their shallowness, their brutality. We try to cover them with the clothes of respectability, but they will not be covered. Their doom is sealed. The quiet plodding doubt of years has eaten the very life out [of] their vitality. Nothing is left of them but the shoddy and the brutality. At the command of the call to real service, they slink off the field forever. Then the new values will grow and develop. The process is going on now. Plod, plod, plod. It is one with the growth of the plower, the upbuilding, and the wearing away of mountains, the swing of the stars through space and time. It is one with the development of your personality and mind, it is one with the method of God; it is God.

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) founder of American transcendentalism. This quote is from his essay "Compensation," in *Essays: First Series*, Boston: Phillips, Sampson & Co., 1852, p. 91.

Why am I saying this? Just for this reason. Most of us see the plod, plod, plod, but we do not let the power of our insight illuminate the life that we live by its deep faith in the ultimate reality of the values that we cherish. We become discouraged because the old rubbish is not cleared away more rapidly, we are disheartened by the shoddy, and the brutality that still hover about like wolves howling in the nighttime. But we are deceived by the surface. We forget that the slow steady plodding is going on all the time making ready for the day when the new values shall be called to action, when we shall witness somewhat of the fruits of our thoughts to [the] molding processes of our time. Let the imaginative insight tell you the tale of the process that is going on below the surface in the minds of thousands upon thousands who at their daily tasks, and in the quiet hours of meditation are molding the conditions of tomorrow by the thoughts that they think today. The subtle ties of fellowship draw the like-minded together. Already the unrest that bespeaks the establishment of new values is surging to and over the country like the restless waves of the ocean. Again, let your insight tell you that it bespeaks the force of the plodding work of thought in humanity. Humanity is coming nearer to its own. It is the method of the plower, the mountain, the star, it is the method of God; it is God, the living God speaking in our time as he has spoken in olden times through the children of men.

Above all. the plodding thought takes on a deeper meaning. Life has a dignity of worth, a richness, in the faith that our thoughts in their plodding processes are winning the victories of humanity, achieving the values of humanity, revealing unto humanity its infinite possibilities. It is the method of God. My father worketh until now and I work.⁷ It is God.

⁷ John 5:17.