

DISCOURSE

IN MEMORY OF

OAKES AMES,

DELIVERED

IN THE UNITARIAN CHURCH,

NORTH EASTON,

Sunday Morning, May 18, 1873,

BY THE PASTOR,

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SERMON.

“He being dead, yet speaketh.”—HEBREWS XI, 4.

There are those who doubt if it be possible to form a correct estimate of the character of a friend soon after his death. They assert that our active sympathies blind our judgements,—that our strong affections will paint in too glowing colors the virtues of the departed, neglecting the shadows which would give a soberer though more truthful coloring to the picture. But, as I think, the danger is chiefly on the other side. Life more than death is the deceiver. In life there are many things which interfere with a just estimate of the virtues of others. There are misconceptions growing out of our own selfishness in our relations with them, sectarian and partizan predjudices, envy of their prosperity, rivalry, competition of various kinds, and such personal differences of thought and feeling as often lead us to undervalue the real worth of even our near friends.—From some of these or other causes sometimes the best qualities of our hearts are hidden from those who love us most. But death puts an end to all these deceiving things. Selfishness towards the departed cannot exist. The affections now have full play and they are the truest interpreters. As we never quite understand the true worth of a member of our household,—how good he is, how much we love him,—until he has been absent for awhile, so it is not, perhaps, until a friend has been taken from us that we entirely appreciate his real value and excellence.

It is one of the most touching consolations of bereavement that no sooner does death remove the object of our love than he becomes glorified in our thought. Our dear departed seem to carry their imperfections into their grave and to rise up in our imagination free from them all, purified, idealized. In this higher personality they often act upon us more powerfully for good than when visibly present with us.

Are we, then, deceived by the imagination? Is this higher conception an over estimate of their character and disposition? Are we thinking they are better than they really were? But high as it may be, perhaps we never formed so true an estimate of them before. Our thoughtless or selfish acts, the outbursts of passion, the defeat of the will under strong temptation when our better feelings loudly protested,—it is on many such things as these that judgements are based, when these often do not truly represent our real inner life. What then if, after death, we do represent our friends as even better than they seemed while living? They are better than they seemed. If, by its divining rod, death has touched the fount of love in our hearts, revealing depths there we were not conscious of before, making us grieve over our own acts of unkindness, showing that these misrepresented the true feeling of our hearts, so let us acknowledge that it was with them. Death, by revealing their heretofore but half acknowledged virtues and graces, comes not to confuse, but to rectify our judgements.

To me there is no more significant saying of Jesus than that concerning the wandering prodigal: "And when he came to himself, he said I will arise and go to my father." "And when he came to himself!" So his conduct, his evil ways were not to be taken as the measure of his true self, though such would no doubt have been our estimate. Love I say, is the best interpreter; and it was the sympathy and

love of Jesus which made him recognize in such a man a better self than his life would seem to warrant. There is a depth of feeling, a latent power of sacrifice, heroism and generous service in many hearts of which we know very little and which seem at variance with much of their conduct. There is something in them better than they appear, the full expression of which is hindered by force of circumstance, cares, pre-occupation, thoughtlessness, and other things. Once in a while something may occur which reveals all this, some great emergency of pain and misfortune. Death is one of these revealers. It directs our gaze down below the superficial faults to the true self beneath, the self that grieves at the sin men condemn as wilful, that struggles, aspires, hopes and loves so strongly as to prophesy a final victory. Thus this idealizing of our departed friends represents no fiction, but a veritable fact. And though there is danger of excess in this direction yet I think we are nearer a true judgement, nearer the judgement of God Himself, when thus moved by our affections and sympathies.

Besides is it not probable that death itself may so help to purify and enoble them as to make our thought of them become true? Death certainly is the removal of every physical hindrance and passion. The irritability, impatience and moodiness resulting from diseased conditions; the frailty of appetite and the many infirmities coming from our connection with the body, these, at one stroke, death redeems the soul from. And it also removes it from the contaminating power of all earthly evil. Their real nature goes with them, it is true, but it is now a nature redeemed from all physical sense and passion, and therefore better, purer than it was. If then our dear friends are thus glorified in our thought by death, it is not because we are now deceived, but because we have been deceived hitherto, and now, for the first time, perhaps, we see them as they are.

A few weeks ago many of us formed a part of the large

gathering of friends who met to welcome home their honored representative and fellow citizen. With one accord they gathered to assure him that however he might be misrepresented and maligned elsewhere, here, where he was best and had been longest known, we confided absolutely in his integrity and honor. After the detraction and censure of the previous weeks, how pleasant to him was that hearty assurance of the continued confidence and respect of neighbors and lifelong friends. For though fortified by the conviction of having done and intended no wrong, it was indeed grateful for him to find that those, whose friendship and confidence he valued most, maintained for him the same unshaken regard.

Only a week ago we met again to honor him and to bring to him the last offerings of our affection. But under circumstances how different! The manly form which, at our first meeting, was seated upright among us, then lay lifeless and cold. The eyes, which many a time that night filled with tears of gratified affection, were forever closed. The face, whose pleasant smiles had reflected the glad feelings of our hearts, was then placid and peaceful in death. With a hand as gentle as a mother's upon her sleeping infant's cheek, death had smoothed away the deep lines of anxious toil from his careworn face, and left there her own sweet smile of trust and peace. The same gentle hand had lifted the heavy burdens from his shoulders and soothed the toilworn frame into a restful slumber, and loving hands with gifts of exquisite flowers had woven and placed about him the beautiful emblems of sacrifice, of faith and hope, of victory and reward.

So we speak of the body, the visible symbol and manifestation of all we hold dearest. Though disease and pain no longer disturb it, though without another pang it will dissolve back to its native dust, yet it cannot be laid away without the deepest sorrow. But let us not be in error

here. Let not the senses deceive us. Man is not a body that has a soul. Man is a soul who has a body. This body is its earthly tenement, a shelter and abode for a while, but eventually so out of repair and ruined that it must be untenanted: it is the instrument by which the soul, the man, does his work in the world, but which may be worn out, or prematurely broken, and should then be laid away without incurable regret. We are to remember that the body, and not the man is dead. Our thought and feeling may cling tenaciously to the mortal and visible, when it should find its solace by looking higher. It is a beautiful thing to adorn what we mis-call the "homes of our dead." It is evidence of the fervency of our affection, the strength of our remembrance of the departed. But let not this sight of beauty, this homage to the visible, hold our gaze downward and so detain the thought which ought to soar above; rather give heed to the word of the angel, who when Mary of Magdalen was looking down into the sepulcher, said to her: "He is not here, he is risen."

God has taken care that our thoughts shall turn away from what is mortal and perishable in our friends who are taken from us. Did the bodies of our dead retain the exact condition in which death leaves them, unchanged in the solemn beauty which it leaves upon them, we should be unwilling to part with them. What mother could lay away from her sight the lovely infant form, which had been the centre of hope and joy, were not this a necessity of nature? No, we should keep these forms with us but for this, and not only fall into a kind of Egyptian idolatry of the dead, not only would the presence of these solemn reminders of lost hopes become a hindrance to happiness, but we should think far less of the immortal world, their spirits' bright abode. And so God's goodness has ordained that, though it sometimes almost breaks the heart, the forces of nature shall compel us to lose sight of these mortal frames so that

our gaze shall be turned upward to the skies, that, as one by one our friends transfer their dwelling place from earth to heaven, we may fix there our affection, our longing and hope.

Though thus the destruction of the body, what is death to the soul? Not a destroyer, but a redeemer, not loss but gain, not death but life. Unchanged by this physical dying and decay, he whom you loved rises through death's portal out of the region of earthly cares and sorrow. No more shall lingering disease or pain or weakness cripple his energies or make life burdensome. No more shall he be weighed down under heavy responsibilities and toils. No more shall voices of detraction and persecution have power to disturb his peace. And if we cannot quite exclude the sad and bitter thought that this mournful event may have been hastened by the unjust accusations of last winter, yet let us not forget that this is our sorrow and not his; these things shall trouble him no more. No, conscious of the integrity of his own purposes, with a life of unsullied honor behind him, sustained by the remembrance of achievements which are a blessing to our country he is now far above the blame of men and he does not need their praise.

Though others have spoken wisely and well of his character and work, it seems fitting that, here in this place where he was so constantly present with us, we should honor him with our affectionate remembrance today. With no attempt at extravagant eulogy, which he would be the first to rebuke, but in the simplest manner possible, I would recall the impression he has made upon my memory. I have often been struck with the strength of attachment manifested toward him by acquaintances here in humble walks of life. I have heard them speak of him with tearful eyes, and to repel as most unprovoked slanders the charges made against him months ago. The secret of this regard was largely the simplicity of his manners, the absence of all pretension. There

was no assumption of superiority, no narrow exclusiveness about him. He met all men on the plane of a common manhood, exacting no deference on account of his wealth or position, so that the humblest person approached him with the freedom and confidence of familiar friendship.

He was hearty and genial in all his intercourse with those he esteemed his friends. His hand was constantly extended and greeted them with a cordial grasp which showed his soul was in it. This evident heartiness and social feeling, showing itself in a pleasant smile and kindly word, is the quality for which many will longest remember him and by which he was most endeared to them. Though frank, plain and blunt even in word and bearing, without any sentimentalism, he was of a kind and sympathetic disposition. Those who had seen his sturdy and apparently unconcerned demeanor during the investigation at Washington, were hardly prepared for the tears he could not restrain at the eloquent recognition by friends in Congress of his eminent services to the nation, and for the strong emotion shown during the welcome it was our happiness to give him on his return.

With all the seeming ruggedness of his disposition, he had a tender and affectionate heart. While stopping with him on the first Sunday I came here, nearly six years ago, as I sat with him at his home after the morning service, wondering what sort of man at heart this pre-occupied, silent person was, a little grand-daughter entered the room, and I shall never forget with what a smile of affectionate welcome this little child was taken to his arms, and I felt that my question was answered, for there is nothing like the presence of a little child to lay bare our hearts.

He was upright, downright and outright in his intercourse, never restrained by any false delicacy from expressing dissent with your opinions if he considered them incorrect, hating all hypocrisy and pretense with a cordial ha-

tred, judging men by their actual merits and seeking no other judgement upon himself. He was a positive and decided character, manly and straightforward in word and deed. Simple and unostentatious, going perhaps to the extreme in his disregard of the refining luxuries of life, he cared little for mere show and appearances. Of his generosity, his readiness to respond to private and public claims upon his sympathy, we should know far more, were it not that he took no pleasure in parading his charities to win the approbation of others. It is only since his death that many of these have come to light, his friends having received numerous letters from those whom he had befriended in some hour of need and who remembered him with the warmest affection. And in the splendid gift of fifty thousand dollars to what was known as District No. 7, our own village here, a bequest to become a fund for the advancement of education and the benefit of our children, he has established a claim to our deepest gratitude.

These my friends are some of the qualities by which he was best known and will be longest remembered by us. But to the public at large the most prominent characteristics were his indomitable energy, perseverance, and working power, and it was by these that he has made an ineffaceable mark upon this generation. He was pre-eminently a worker, ready to lay hold of and carry to completion great enterprises from which others shrank. When once he put his hand to the plough he never looked back, but with a tenacity and hopefulness which defied seemingly invincible obstacles, he kept right on, and, if his co-workers in any enterprise fainted and deserted, he only redoubled his exertions, and, in addition to the burdens which weighed him down, assumed those they could not or were unwilling to carry.

It was this far seeing sagacity, courage and persevering energy which marked him out as the man of all others to

undertake the great work of which so much has been said and whose successful accomplishment will constitute the chief claim of himself and his associates to the gratitude of the nation and the world. I am told by one of his friends here that before undertaking this task he had determined to free himself somewhat from the entanglement of business life and take life more easily. It was hardly in him to do so, perhaps. He was one of those who would die in harness. Yet we cannot but recall that remark in this connection, for doubtless it was the tremendous strain upon his energies, the anxieties, opposition and difficulties connected with this enterprise, together with the troubles of last winter which grew out of it, that broke him down at last, and made him in reality a martyr to his greatest work.

His fitness for the official position which for the last few years he occupied, though called in question, we may confidently affirm. Besides his well known business integrity and honesty, his long and active life in such close connection with the industrial interests of the country was a sufficient preparation for his responsibilities as a legislator. It is not scholastic refinements, but the education which grows out of mingling in the great affairs and economies of active life which best prepares men for dealing intelligently with important public interests. The legislation of the country is more largely concerned with economical and business interests than with anything else, and in these we need the practical common sense and actual experience with such interests which business men usually have in the largest degree. Our own confidence in his fitness for that position may be increased by knowing that he was urgently advised to accept it by wise and patriotic Gov. Andrew, who knew him well.

In this connection I may be permitted, for the first and last time here, to say a word concerning the transactions of last winter at Washington. There are several very important

statements bearing upon that subject which have impressed me, and which I feel it proper to be stated here to-day. It is to be noticed that, within two or three years, the public has been startled by revelations of great corruptions in the political and business circles of our country. In New York City, especially, there were exposures of transactions on the part of high officials and leading business men, which were so disgraceful and infamous as to create in the public mind a deep distrust in regard to the honesty of politicians, corporations and men of business. Extensive frauds had come to light and the people were prepared to credit their existence everywhere. At just that time, for political ends, an outcry was made concerning the relations of Congressmen with the Pacific Rail Road Company. Charges of extensive bribery and corruption were made. Such a chronic distrust and suspicion had been caused in the public mind by apparantly similar affairs, that, so soon as the cry of "investigation" was raised, men made up their minds in advance that the charges were true, and in their minds the verdict was prejudged. It was taken for granted, previous to examination, that the transactions were criminal, and the case proceeded burdened all the way through by this prejudgement. And this impression once created, it was difficult to remove, although it was confessedly not sustained by the evidence in the case.

And the hitherto high character of the men who were charged with being bribed, whom no man would have been likely to approach with such intent, the absence of all attempts at concealment, the fact that no pledges were asked or given, that these men were already friends of the enterprise in support of which they were supposed to be corruptly influenced, that no legislation was asked for or expected, these are considerations which should be decisive as against the charges made. Neither those who accepted or declined the offers believed or suspected they were offered

with any wrong purpose, those who gave up their interests, doing so from the fear of the uncertainty and annoyance of legal contention,—one person only fearing his action might be unduly influenced by the possession of such property, thus showing a distrust of himself but no distrust of the man charged with guilt. And, to crown all, since no corrupt intent was proved by the evidence, and at the very worst there was only an appearance of evil, we are of necessity compelled to interpret this action by the light of the whole career and character of our late townsman. And who needs to question what that is? Dealing personally with a larger number of men than most any other financier, because so largely doing his own work instead of delegating it to others, dealing, I say, in every kind of business relation with so many men for so many years, and yet all this time to have maintained a reputation for business integrity and honor unsullied, how can we, how can even those to whom he was not personally known, suppose him guilty of any conduct that should deserve the censure of Congress, the persecution of the press and the distrust of reasonable men?

Already however we see a change in the judgement of these men. Many of the journals, which have been bitterest in their opposition, have, since his death, contained just and eulogistic tributes to the excellence of his character and the greatness of his work, and by these acts of tardy justice they, by implication, condemn their former treatment of him. And even before his departure, the countless greetings he received from citizens of this and other states, and the hosts of letters from all classes of men must have proved to him that with the large majority of men his bearing during the investigation and the nature of the evidence had increased rather than lessened their confidence in him. The whole matter may be left to the verdict of posterity without a fear. When the passions of the hour are calmed, the so-

ber judgement of the people will be one of which his descendants will have reason to be proud.

We have followed his mortal remains to their last resting place in the quiet grave. Above them affectionate hands will rear some monumental shaft. But, for the nation at large, he has built his own monument in that splendid achievement which has united the Atlantic with the Pacific shores, and which he was so instrumental in accomplishing, while his manly personal qualities, his sturdy independence, hatred of all unreality and hypocrisy, his simplicity, his kind, generous disposition and cordial attachments have left a record in our hearts, and in those of his nearest friends, more enduring than monumental marble.

And now, dear friends, for those of you whose thoughts seek to pierce the invisible realm, to discover just what and where he now is, let me say just this. As he lay upon his bed during those last few days, in the strong but gentle grasp of his final disease, what were the feelings of those who stood beside him, of wife and children and dear friends? Who indeed can ever feel, what words can ever tell the tumultuous emotions of their hearts? What unutterable sympathy, what yearning love, what eager longing to do something that would restore to health and joy again that stricken form! What possible sacrifice of anything they held dearest would they not have gladly made for his sake? And now just think of it! Are not those tenderest affections and sympathies the truest indications of God's feeling towards us? And if our love, with all its selfish alloy, clings so deathlessly to its object and refuses to be happy so long as that suffers, O! with what an infinite depth of pity and affection must our Heavenly Father look upon and regard us in that hour of our extremest need. With what tender hands does he wait to receive to himself these children of his love. And so let it suffice for you that that Hand leads him still, that the love which made the

world bright for him here, a love not measured by three score years and ten, but which is from everlasting to everlasting, will watch over and bless him forevermore. And with some new feeling and confidence in that love, let us best honor our dear friend by resolving beside his grave to live faithful children of God, the heirs of immortality.