SERMON

 The preacher came from the hills of Tennessee, and went by the name of the Reverend Dalton Pierce. An impressive man with a deep baritone voice and sharp blue eyes, Dalton was tall and rugged. Pierce had grown up on a farm, and his strong, large hands still retained some rough calluses. The Rev. Pierce was not a college-educated man, but he heard the calling, and studied, and was formally ordained into the ministry at the age of thirty-two. Dalton had a devoted wife, Annie, and three fine children. This was his fifth year as a minister.

 One Sunday, Rev. Pierce stepped to the pulpit in his little country church in the pines of his small town and gave a most memorable sermon. No one in attendance that fateful day ever forgot his stirring words, for it ultimately changed many of their lives for the better.

 This is what he preached:

 "My dear friends, I thank you for joining us here together on this beautiful June morning.

 I want to share my thoughts, which have been stirring around my mind for the last several days. I feel that God is especially using me today to deliver an important and simple message to you.

 Now, I've come to the conclusion that it doesn't really matter what religion you are. I hope that statement doesn't startle you too much. You can read and study the Bible, or the Koran, or the Talmud, or the sayings of history's various enlightened spiritual teachers. You can be a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew, a Moslem, a Buddhist, a Hindu, or any other faith. My words could be said as truthfully if I was a priest, an imam, a rabbi, a minister, a monk, or any other religious person -- man or woman. You'll know the words I am about to share with you are real through the reaction within your own inner conscience. Your heart and soul will be the judge -- no one else. So please heed these words.

 Every Sunday we come together and you listen to my sermons. Some of my talks are hopefully inspiring, but I know that some days I probably fall short and disappoint you. Please forgive me for those times. I try my best, believe me.

 Naturally, I look out upon you, the congregation, as I preach: some of you are closing your eyes, I assume in concentration, to my message, or maybe you're just taking a nap instead (congregation chuckled); I know that some of you have your minds elsewhere -- thinking about your personal problems, or what chores you have to do after the service; I notice some of you slyly looking around the room at your neighbors, perhaps checking out how they are dressed, or seeing if their kids are behaving; and some of you are here because your family dragged you in the door against your wishes, when you'd rather be doing something else on your day of rest -- perhaps fishing or going on a Sunday drive for a picnic.

 Sometimes, I sense that you leave our church feeling energized and optimistic. But other times, as you leave, I sense that some of you are depressed or feel increasingly lost or even doubtful of your very faith. Why did I bother to come to church? What is the point? Does any of this religion stuff really matter?

 Well, my dear friends, I am here today to tell you that God accepts us all. He truly loves us all. He takes us in when we are ready to come, if we simply open our hearts to Him. He knows your struggles and He hears your prayers. Of all his earthly creations, we are His most special accomplishment. He has endowed us with amazing intelligence, and free will, and great creativity. He delights when we do good, but He is disappointed -- yet forgiving --when we do bad. God always wants us to do better and try harder next time whenever we fail.

 God has no gender or skin color. We are all His children equally. If you want to envision Him as black or brown or yellow or white, that is O.K. However you see Him, your loving feelings in your heart towards Him are what matters the most.

 When I was a boy, I asked my Daddy what kind of clothes God wore. Pa said that God really didn't need to wear any clothes -- but if He did, it would probably not be a fancy tuxedo or an expensive pin-striped suit. 'I often picture God in worn denim bib-overalls. He's a hard-working Creator, much like a farmer -- productive, focused, and dedicated,' my Daddy told me. And you know what? I reckon that my Pa was right (People chuckled again).

 You know, we humans have delved deeply into trying to figure God out over the centuries. Much smarter men than me have devised vast, complex theologies and theories and philosophies in an attempt to explain why God does the things He does. Why, we ask, does He permit such apparent irrationalities to exist -- things like suffering, or wars, or disease, or crime, or racism, or poverty? Why do we have to see our loved ones grow old and feeble? And what is the meaning of the inevitability of death itself?

 It's important to realize, my friends, that God doesn't do bad things to us. Because we have free will, we actually set into motion most of these terrible things -- wars, murders, crime, poverty, racism, etc. -- through our own actions and decisions. Such events are not God's doing! As for health and aging issues, God has created us not to have an immortal physical body, but only an immortal soul. So it is only natural that our bodies will get sick, grow old, and die. Those burdens are not any kind of unfair punishment by God. The life cycles of every living thing on earth must be kept in harmony -- birth, growth, maturity, slow decline, and finally, death -- to permit new life to emerge and continue."

 The Reverend paused for a moment to take a sip of water from a tumbler beside his pulpit. Everyone in the audience was fully attentive. Dalton's wife and their three children smiled from their seats in the front row. The room's large ceiling fans spun the air, and kept the assembly relatively comfortable on this typical June morning. Preacher Pierce then passionately resumed his sermon, his blue eyes flashing, his voice steady, clear, and convincing.

 "God absolutely exists, whether people want to believe it or not. God wants us to be filled with His Spirit. He wants us to be joyful -- to realize and fulfill the daily miracle of our existence. He wants us not to worry. He wants our hearts to be peaceful. He wants us to love and care for each other. God also wants us to be good stewards of our planet, and to treasure all of the life He has created on earth for our benefit.

 He wants each of us to look within ourselves and realize the vital spark of His divine energy -- which entered our being when we were first conceived, and which will continue to endure forever after we die. Everything is as it should be, my dear friends. Everything we need is already here for our use. Right here. Right now.

 So this opportunity remains our choice:

 We can either accept God's incredible gifts -- using them wisely, and helping evolve our earth into a wonderful, amazing paradise -- or we can reject His loving plan, and destroy ourselves through hatred, greed, and blind arrogance.

 Which path will the human race choose?

 Which path will YOU chose?

 That's all I wanted to say to you today.

 May God bless you all.

 Let us bow our heads now, and give thanks..."

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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