

"A CHANGE OF PACE"

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus chose twelve young men to serve with him. At first they simply followed him as he went about his work. They listened to what he had to say; they watched the wonderful things he did. They learned a great deal by observing and imitating his style, his manner.

One day, however, he sent them out on their own mission. He himself did not go with them. They went on their own. He gave them instructions. They went in pairs - two by two - from house to house. He told them to take no money and no luggage, and he asked them to do two things: to preach and to heal. The burden of their preaching was the message of repentance. They urged the people to make a radical change in the direction of their thinking and their acting. And they healed the sick in great numbers.

Their mission was a great success. The response was greater than they had expected; the people were ready and were glad to take them in. When they came back to Jesus they told him all that had taken place and after they completed their report to him, he said:

"Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest awhile"

And the narrative, according to St. Mark's Gospel, adds this word: "For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves".

THE NEED TO WITHDRAW

Jesus knew that they probably didn't feel tired. They were to exhilarated, too excited, to know that they were tired, and rest was the last thing, I'm sure, that they felt in need of. But Jesus knew that what they had been doing had taken something out of them. He knew this from his own experience. He knew how much people took out of him when he was really giving himself to them - it was his own vitality that he gave them. He knew that he had to withdraw in order to replenish his own reserves, and this he did time and again throughout his ministry. There were those times when he found it necessary to go off to the desert, to the lonely place, to the sea - in order to be alone. I think he knew that his twelve friends needed at this point to do the same thing - that the time had come for a rest, for a change in pace.

One of the remarkable things about Jesus, as I read and try to understand his life as it is given to us in the Gospels, is the fact that he never lost his common sense, never lost sight of the facts of existence. I think many men of genius have a way of forgetting the common requirements of a mortal being. They seem to live high up in the clouds and often lose sight of the ground upon which they stand. So many of them have extraordinary capacities for work and possess enormous reserves of creative energy, and they forget that there is a limit to their own capacity, and so often they are unmindful of the fact that their associates do not have the same apparently unlimited capacity that they have.

Jesus never forget either. He never forgot that he himself - in spite of his unusual capacity for sustained effort, had to let up from time to time, and that the men working with him had to do the same. He knew that human activity is something like the respiration of the body - that it consists of two actions - in-haling and ex-haling. You must breathe in before you can breathe out - and if you never breathe in, you have nothing to breathe out.

COME AWAY.... Now what Jesus said to the twelve men he is, in a sense, saying to us as we stand on the threshold of another Lent: "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest awhile."

The circumstances, of course, are not all the same. We have not been on an intensive preaching and healing mission - traveling about from place to place, without money or luggage, and staying in the homes of other people.

We haven't been doing anything at all like that. We have been living, however, under the normal and sometimes abnormal, pressures of life. We have been pushing, striving, worrying, promoting and deciding. We have been struggling sometimes just to keep ourselves going, and sometimes to keep up with things. And what an abundance of things there are to keep up with. Think of the ones that come to your minds immediately: the drives - drives for money by various organizations and institutions - schools and scouts and churches, hospitals and homes. There are lectures to be heard, exhibits to be seen, travels that are tempting us on every page of every magazine - dinners, meetings, books, plays, concerts, movies, letters to be answered - and on top of it all - the papers, the newspapers, to be read in order to keep up with what is going on in the world.

We have not been pre-occupied with the things pertaining to God as the twelve disciples had been; rather we have been pre-occupied with the things of everyday life. Nevertheless, Jesus speaks to us even as he did to them. And perhaps what he is saying to us now, if we hear him correctly, is similar to what he said to the twelve. "You can't go on like this.....you need to let up....have a change of pace... don't let people tell you that you have to be constantly involved in everything that is going on in the world, no matter how good it is. Remember there were many things happening in my time that I wasn't involved in at all. There was the Liberation Party, the party working for the freedom of Palestine....I wasn't involved in that at all. The palace scandal that rocked the nation and resulted in the death of John the Baptist.....I wasn't involved in that at all. The movement to free the slaves, or to police the roads of Palestine....I didn't have anything to do with with such movements.....I didn't initiate any such action.....I think if you try to be involved in everything, the result may be that you may ~~end up being involved in nothing significant/at all....~~ be significantly involved in nothing at all."

The secret, he is suggesting to us, is to be involved in some one thing that is great enough to draw all your capacities to be burning point. This does not mean that every other interest is excluded, but rather that every other interest is drawn into that one supreme interest, and instead of being spread too thin you are concentrated in one place and all your energies are brought to focus on one thing. For Jesus - it was the Kingdom.

He goes on and says something like this to us: "Don't let people tell you that you have to be involved all the time....before I even began my ministry, I spent six weeks alone. After I began it, I went off by myself again and again. Remember that you cannot give if you never take in."

As I hear Jesus saying these things, I can hear you saying to yourself - it is all well and good to say such things, and it rings a bell with me - but how can I do it? I have many things to do and I must do them. I have a job....responsibilities to be met....people to care for.....myself to manage. The only way that I can rest is to get out of things entirely and I can't do that. We agree that what Jesus says to us makes sense, and we see the wisdom in it, the rightness of it, feel the need for it, BUT we don't know how we can do it.

SOME THINGS WE CAN DO

Now there are some things that we can do if we want to do them. I know it is bold of me to suggest them, and I always have some hesitation in doing this kind of thing because I know that in a congregation like this everyone is different, and what I say, no matter how sincerely I try to cover all the bases and touch each life, what I say will not apply to everyone. If it doesn't apply to you, don't take it. You will know whether it does or doesn't touch your life.

First of all, we can stop doing some of the things that we ordinarily do. Think for a moment of some of the things you have been pushing to do these past six weeks that you didn't really have to do - not wrong things, or bad things, but things, shall we say, that were over and above the requirements of life and yet drained a certain amount of your energy, took something out of you. You may have been doing more entertaining than necessary. Or you may have gone skiing on the weekends - I haven't, but perhaps you have. You may have spent time at the movies. You may enjoy the cocktail parties, or perhaps the theater or concerts. Or, if these things don't attract you at all and don't usurp your energies, you may have spent an unusual amount of time fussing about yourself, or an extravagant amount of time on the telephone - talking, talking, talking, sometimes about essential things and many times talking about non-essential things. We can begin to let up on some of these things. We don't have to do these things all the time, and it might rest us to stop doing some of them for a while and leave some open spaces on our busy calendars.

In their place, we can do some things that we ordinarily do not do. If you don't often read a good, serious, up-lifting book, you could do that. Some of you probably read a great deal and the chances are that it would not be any rest to you to add another book to your list, but a great many of us, living in a country that publishes more books every day than any other country in the world, never read a serious book from one year to the next. This would be something you could do in the time you gain by stopping some of the other things that you do. Here in the church, under Mr. Witmer's direction, a group is going to spend a couple of hours each Tuesday evening during Lent reading, studying and discussing the book, Reuell Howe, "The Miracle of Dialogue"

To come closer to the point of our central interest, you could study one of the Gospel accounts of the life of our Lord. This would be a significant thing to do during Lent. When I say study it, I mean read it carefully and thoughtfully, perhaps with some help from a commentary; not the way a student in the seminary might read it, picking it apart phrase by phrase, but reading it carefully so that you see and feel that it is saying. For some, it may have been a long time since you did this. I myself would enjoy the experience of doing this with a group here in the church and if you would like to share in it, speak to me following the service.

Another thing you can do, if these things do not appeal to you at all, is to do something - some one thing - for someone else, and do it consistently for a period of six weeks. This would be a change; this would rest you because you would be doing something different, something that might not be easy, but in the end immensely rewarding. Paradoxically, we sometimes take most in when we give most out.

A fourth thing that some can do is this: you can stay home one out of four times when you are tempted to go away, and settle down in your own house, find something interesting to do there, and calm that increasing compulsiveness to be on the move all the time from one place to another, so fast that you can hardly take in any place at all. Spend more time at home...

And then there is another thing that you can do. This is the fifth and the last one I shall recommend, and the thing that I am going to try to do myself. Whether I will do it regularly I cannot say, but I am going to try to do it. You can sit still for one half hour every day during Lent. Get away from the telephone - from the doorbell. Find a time of day when you are not likely to be interrupted by friends or by children, or anyone else, and sit still for one half hour. It will be very difficult for you to do - your mind will wander, the time may drag.

I think in order to do it and get the most out of it, we will need something to think about, something specific to concentrate on. It might be helpful to have a pad and pencil and write down what comes to you. Write what comes to your mind until you begin to come to a focal point where you can think about something beside the things that you are doing all the time, something other than the activities that take the most of your time. If you can learn to do this - if you can sit still, things will begin to happen to you. Thoughts will come to you; leads will be given you; strength will return to you.

TWO SIMPLE LAWS AT WORK: In all of this, ^A ~~two~~ very simple laws are at work. The ~~first is this.~~ Once the pressure is taken off, the energy begins to rise again. When Jesus asked his twelve friends to go off where they could be quiet, they said they would and the pressure was immediately relieved. They relaxed. When you do that, when you experience a change in pace, if only for a moment, the energy begins to rise again so that when the first demand is made upon you, you are then able to meet it.

The ~~second law was put to me by a doctor friend who said it in these words:~~ ^{POT} a change in attention is a change in tension. You change the object of your attention, and you discover that the tension in one part of your body, or your mind, or your spirit, is relaxed for the time being and you are rested while you are thinking and concentrating on something else.

We stand on the threshold of another Lent - another six week period in the year. As Phillips Brooks said: (referring to Lent...come to mind) -

"There is no magic in its days. It is only that we have resolved till Easter to give more time and thought to our inner life - our religious life - All this may come to much, or it may come to nothing. I beg of you - let it come to much".

LET US PRAY Help us, O God, as we draw apart from the world during this season of Lent - this season of refreshment and renewal, to see Jesus with new eyes and understanding, and to find in him that which makes him unlike all others who ever lived. Help us when we see him to follow him and to show him to the world we live in. All these things we ask in His name. Amen