

A PART YOU CAN PLAY

INTRODUCTION

Those of you who were here last Sunday morning will recall that the sermon on that occasion had to do with the unhealthy moral and spiritual climate that is just underneath the shining surface of American prosperity. It was intended to be something of a warning. I was attempting to point out to you that we here in America are in real danger of being drowned in a sea of things that money can buy. And often in our eagerness and great desire to have these things that money can buy, we become less concerned and less aware of the way that we go about getting them. We thought of these things in light of the recent Congressional Hearings in Washington. Your response to what was said was gratifying; it was reassuring to me to know that I was getting through to you. Several comments that were made to me at coffee hour and several letters that came to me this past week in connection with what was said last Sunday made me realize that something more should be said on this subject, that it was not simply enough to issue a warning and let things go at that, that it was still part of my responsibility to suggest to you something constructive and positive that can be done in order to change this moral climate that has slowly been descending upon our country.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

And so the question facing us this morning is this: what can we do, or where do we begin in this entire matter. You know as well as I do that you cannot begin with society as a whole, that is with a general law passed by Congress. You cannot legislate a change in the moral and spiritual climate of a country; we tried to do something like this back in the days of prohibition, and it failed. The place, I think, to begin is with the individual, with individuals, who one by one make up the body politic. It all goes back to them. Indeed it goes back even further; ultimately it goes back to the family. No man is what he is by himself. He's largely, at least, what his family has made him and the spiritual climate of this country in the future will be determined by the kind of family that it produces. Therefore, in a very real way, what I am asking you to think about today is the part the family can play in the reconstruction of American life.

I realize all too well that in a congregation like this there are bound to be some whose families have already been reared. Their children have grown up and left home and have been successfully launched on the open seas of life. I realize too that there are others who have no family and probably never will have. But there are quite a few people in this church who are at the present time in the process of raising families, like myself, and many others who in the near future will begin to make their homes and establish their families. This sermon will probably have more meaning for this group than for others, but it is my hope that all of you will profit from it and take it to yourself whenever it is possible and wherever it applies.

THE MODEL FAMILY

Moving on then, it is true, is it not, that whenever we want to build something, whether it is a ship or a family, we almost always look instinctively for a model, and we who are Christians turn to a particular family living in Nazareth long, long ago as the model of family life. On the surface, of course, it may appear to you that this particular family in Nazareth will not be of much help to us because we know so very little about it. About all

that we do know can be put into a few brief sentences. For instance, we know that the father's name was Joseph, and that he was a carpenter. From that we immediately conclude that he belonged to the laboring class, and while the family was not poverty stricken, it certainly was not acquainted with the many luxuries that you and I often take for granted. We know that the mother's name was Mary. She had several children; we do not know all of their names. But we do know that she had one boy whose name was Jesus and that people ever since the world over in great numbers have found no better way to describe him than to call him the Son of God.

There is one brief story that comes to mind that has to do with this family. It may provide us with something of a clue as to what life in that family was like. It's hardly more than a fragment and I think that nine out of ten of you who are here this morning probably are familiar with this story. It's the story of the pilgrimage that this family made to Jerusalem when Jesus was a boy of twelve. Remember the story. Remember how Mary and Joseph were returning to Nazareth following the great celebration in Jerusalem. Remember too how they had been on the road for a day when they discovered that their son Jesus was not with them. Somehow I've always thought that this story was not altogether flattering to their competence as parents, but at any rate, they turned around and went back to look for Jesus. They had to go back all the way to Jerusalem, and finally when they did find him, they found him in the Temple sitting in the center of the learned Rabbis, listening to them, learning from them with an infinite curiosity and wonder about the things of God. There is one phrase which comes at the end of this story which caught my attention, and this is the phrase: "And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was SUBJECT unto them". It's the word subject that caught my attention. The word 'subject' here means 'obedient'. J. B. Phillips in his translation of the Gospels puts it this way: "Then Jesus went home with them to Nazareth and obeyed them".

HOW ALL OF THIS
RELATES TO US..

One thing is evident from that line and it is this that Jesus grew up in a home where children were expected to obey their parents. To be sure, perhaps he strayed a bit in this experience in Jerusalem. You might say it was his first taste of independence, trying his wings for the first time. We see him here beginning to live his own life which, as time went on, his family found difficult to understand. After this experience in the city, he returned home and did exactly as they told him.

All of this leads me to make this statement. Once again it is a statement that I have no way of proving, a statement with which you may disagree. But I have the feeling and this feeling is based upon my own observations, I have the feeling that the children in most of our American families (perhaps I should say in many of our American families) do not do as they are told. It seems to me that parents more and more are obeying their children rather than the children obeying the parents. I think that parents in this country have been educated to believe that if they stop a child from doing something that he wants to do, they may stunt his growth and hinder the free expression of his spirit. Up to a point this may be true, and we are grateful for the light that the psychiatrists and psychologists have thrown upon the mysterious world of a child's consciousness. Parents have been taught that repression will wreck a child's life, and up to a point it may be true, but beyond a point it seems to me to be a lot of nonsense.

Very seriously now, I think it comes back around to this horrible word that so many Americans dislike - the word discipline. How do you stop a child from doing what you think is wrong? The answer, I think, still rests in this word - discipline. Discipline administered in a spirit of love and patient understanding. Of course as I was writing this sermon, I couldn't help but think back on the home in which I was raised. I well remember the Congressional Hearings that were often held in my home, and there were times when they led to the back woodshed., too, mind you. Of course, it's dangerous and difficult for me to make generalities about things of this nature, but it seems to me that when children grow up without the benefit of discipline of any kind, two things happen. First of all, the whole family is unhappy, including the children. Children who are free to do exactly as they please are the most unhappy children you are likely to see anywhere. They're living under the burden of making decisions which they are not yet prepared to make and which should be made with them and perhaps even for them. And the other thing that happens is that the child goes out into the world totally unprepared to meet life as it really is. For we live in a world in which we cannot always do exactly as we want to when we want to do it. And the child who have never been introduced to this fact of life is sent into a world completely unprepared for adult life.

ANOTHER THING
WE KNOW.....

Moving on then to a second thing that we know about the home in which Jesus was reared and this largely by implication and by inference from what we know about Jewish families in general, namely this that the father was the head of it. The head of every Jewish family then, and to a large extent even now is the father. The mother, you might say, was the heart of it. They were divided in function and united in action. Jesus was subject unto both of them because while their functions were different (the father the head, and the mother the heart), they acted in unison and when the father spoke, the mother's heart and mind were behind it, and when the mother loved and cared, the father was there to support her.

That's the way it ought to be, but the trouble is that it's not always that way in many of our families. More and more the mother is becoming the head of the family. Mind you I'm not suggesting that this is a backward step, but I would point out to you that it is more and more the mother who makes the plans and calls the plays, and in some instances is out making the money in order to keep the family going. It reminds me of the mother tucking the youngest into bed at night: "Now dear, if you need anything during the night, just call Mother and Daddy will come". Seriously, more and more the mother is becoming the head of the family and the father has been put into the position of being not much more than just an overnight guest.

And of course when the mother takes the father's place, she often loses her own unique place. The one thing that a woman is divinely equipped to do is to make a home where both husband and children are safe and happy and secure. It seems to me that too many of our American women, mothers of our families, are too busy making money or doing outside things, to be in the home long enough to make it a home. Far too many children are growing up today seldom seeing their mothers and hardly knowing their fathers. Far too many mothers resent the fact that after all of their education and training they are being forced to spend most of their time washing dishes and caring for the baby. And what I would say to them if only I had the opportunity would be something like this: what do you think a woman could possibly do that is more important than raising a family of children. I sometimes have the feeling that we have educated our young women for everything but the art of making a home.

"A hundred years ago today a wilderness was here;
A man with powder in his gun went forth to hunt a deer.
But now the times have changed somewhat along a different
plan,
A dear with powder on her nose goes forth to hunt a man"

To be sure, things have changed in one hundred years in this area of our common lives. Women have been given a fuller place in the life of this country and for this we are thankful. None of us, I think, would want to turn back the clock. Let that be understood. We're glad that there are some women who are called to a career in the world. Let them accept that call and let the world benefit from their talent and effort. But for most women their career is their family, and to pursue that career they have got to be in their homes most of the time, and they have to be there because they want to be there, knowing that in being useful - not as the head of the family, but as the heart, the two working together as one in such a way as to make a home in which obedience is the natural response to the authority of love - knowing that in doing this she is creating the moral and spiritual climate of tomorrow's world.

AND ONE FINAL WORD There is one other thing that we know about the family of Jesus and perhaps this will be the most important thing of all. The children in that home obeyed their parents because they saw their parents obeying something higher. It's not necessary for me to elaborate on this. I think you know what I mean. The very fact that they were taking the pilgrimage to Jerusalem under such difficult circumstances is evidence that here were two people who were subject to the great God of Israel.

It seems to me that one of the reasons why parents today have little authority over their children is because the parents themselves are living under no great authority. In trivial things like traffic laws, they treat them lightly and laugh at the breaking of them. In things like drinking, they drink too excess and let the children do pretty much as they want to do when this matter comes up. They go to church when they feel like it, a great many of them; some of them not at all. They put their highest values on mediocre things and then wonder why their children follow suit. They are committed to a multitude of minor things - things of little lasting value - uncommitted to one supreme concern for which they are willing to make a few sacrifices and in the light of which they make their judgments. And then so often when something goes wrong in the family and they call in the local pastor, they start to ask questions: where did we go wrong? where did we make our mistakes? why has this happened to us?

All of this, to my way of thinking raises an even greater question. It's the question that in one way or another ought to come at the end of every sermon. TO WHAT THEN OUGHT WE TO BE COMMITTED? My answer is always the same although I put it to you in different ways and in different words. The head of the family (the father) and the heart of the family (the mother) need to be fully committed, not just to the PTA, or the WSCS, or the DAR, not just to the school, the church and the country, although these are all good in themselves, but they need above all else to be committed unreservedly to that new way of life that we have experienced in that man who was raised in a family in Nazareth, and that new way of life is the way of love. As a person becomes committed wholeheartedly to that new life, he begins to live more and more under Divine Authority. And as the head and the heart of the family live under that Divine Authority, they shall discover that their children will respond more and more to their authority and they will be given the

respect, the obedience and the love that is needed. And so to put it all into one brief sentence here at the end, it would be this. The part that you as individuals can play in the reconstruction of American life is to bring that element of Divine Authority back into the family life of this country. And what better time to begin than today, the first Sunday of Advent, as we begin to prepare ourselves for the birthday of our Lord. This is a part that you can play: to bring the Divine Authority back into the family life of this country.

LET US PRAY:

God, Our Father, we would remember before thee at this time the families of our land....from so many backgrounds and with so many different problems and holding so many different beliefs and convictions. Guide them and strengthen them and the homes of our lands cradles of thy truth and love. We ask this in thy name and for thy sake. Amen