

"A SECRET ABOUT LIFE"

INTRODUCTION

The sermon this morning begins with the assumption that all of us want to make the most that we can out of life, and that life, inspite of its difficulties and its many moments of frustration, still has a great deal to offer. I sometimes have the feeling, and perhaps you have it too, that life is just too short for all of the things that we'd like to do. There are books to be read, great music to be heard, places to be visited, people to be enjoyed, families to be raised, things to be done, and crusades to be undertaken. Life has so many wonderful things to offer. You might say that it's like a tree, every branch of which is just loaded down with fruit, and I might add, I think we want our fair share of that fruit. That is to say, that all of us want our fair share of happiness and personal satisfaction. All of us want our fair share of health, enjoyment and pleasure. And I might even go one step further, and say, although perhaps somewhat shyly, we're determined to get it. In fact, sometimes the younger we are, the more determined we are to get what we can out of life.

In this mood, and in this frame of mind, we approach these words of Jesus, words, mind you, that may cause you to wonder, words, that may slightly puzzle you:

"For he that finds his life shall lose it; and he that loses his life, for my sake, shall find it."

The chances are that you've heard these words before. They're certainly not new to us. In fact, we may have heard them so many times that they're likely to be worn so smooth that our minds fail to pick up their meaning. BUT if we could hear them for the first time, and admit to ourselves how we really feel about life, and how we want our fair share of the fruits of life, then these words could be very disturbing to us. Certainly the last thing we want to do is lose life, even in order to find it. And so the purpose of this sermon this morning is to examine these words, attempting to bring their meaning closer to us, and to show that in these words, as strange and as paradoxical as they may appear on the surface to be, we do have here nevertheless one of those great spiritual insights into this business of living.

"For he that finds his life shall lose it; and he that loses his life, for my sake, shall find it."

LIFE NEVER YIELDS ITS FRUIT TO THOSE WHO SHAKE ITS TREE TOO VIOLENTLY....

The first thought that grows out of this observation made by Jesus is that

life never yields its fruit to those who shake its tree too violently. The picture I have in mind is that of a tree loaded with precious fruits, and a small boy who rather aggressively thinks that by grabbing the trunk of the tree and shaking it, the fruit will fall to the ground for his enjoyment. Unfortunately there are people who approach life in this spirit, but life never yields its most precious fruit to those who shake its tree in that fashion.

You might say that life is something like a strange city visited by two people. (Perhaps those of you who have had the opportunity to travel will be able to appreciate this illustration). One person is what you might call a disciplined sight-seer, determined to take the city by storm. And so he goes out early in the morning, camera in one hand and his guidebook in the other hand, determined to see everything that there is to see in that city, and to visit every place that's

mentioned in his guidebook. Ten hours later, with tired feet and a batch of good pictures, he returns to the hotel room. Having "done" the city, he now moves on to the next city. But now the second person approaches the city in a different fashion. He may have a little longer time to spend in the city. Perhaps he even wastes time in the city. He isn't concerned with the guide book, and the cook's tour of the city. In fact, on occasion he just slips out into the city streets losing himself in the sea of strange faces. He makes no attempt to storm the city for he realizes that a city never yields itself to the person who tries to storm it. He knows that a city yields its spirit and its mystery to the person who takes time to wait upon it, to the person who allows some of its spirit to flow into him as he moves quietly from place to place. To be sure, this person may lose something. He may not see every picture in the art gallery. He may not photograph every statue in the city. In fact, you might say he loses the city in order to really find it!

POINT THAT ONE OF THE REASONS.

This brings us around to this conclusion that so many of us miss so much in life because we're so busy trying to find life that we miss life when it passes right before our very eyes. I spoke of the tourist going out with a camera. Nine out of ten Americans today travel with a camera around their neck. It reminds me of a trip I made to Palestine several years ago with a group of twenty five Americans. Twenty-five Americans in the group, but thirty-five cameras. We all carry these cameras, and we do for good reasons. And we treasure the pictures that we bring back. But what I started out to say was something like this. Don't you get depressed when you see a person, shall we say, standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial for the first time, and who, instead of looking up at the beauty and majesty of the structure, and soaking up some of the strength of character reflected in that great statue of Lincoln, is busy getting out his camera, setting up his tri-pod, taking a light reading, all of this, just to put the moment down on paper. In his attempt to find the life of the moment, and preserve it forever, he misses it completely. He doesn't really see or really feel the Lincoln Memorial. He just gets a picture of it. In the very act of finding it, he loses it.

You know, as well as I do, that there are some people who are so busy making a living that they never really live. God pity them. There are some people who are so busy defending themselves against a future disaster that might never take place anyway, that they miss the thrill of splendor of life as it passes right before their eyes. What I'd like to say to you in connection with the first point of this sermon is something like this, that life's not like the postage stamps that you can collect, and put into an album and place in a drawer. Life's more subtle, more mysterious and more evasive. It's like the sunlight. You can't put your hands on it. You can only bathe yourself in it, and if you're so busy when the sun breaks through the clouds warming your back that you don't see it, then you miss it altogether. The person who really finds life is the person who is willing to let life go and approaches it with a kind of quietness that we find wonderfully expressed in a letter that John Keats wrote to his friend Bailey:

"Let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey, bee like, buzzing here and there impatientlybut let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive - budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every noble insect that favors us with a visit."

LIFE NEVER OFFERS ITS BEST TO THOSE WHO AIM DIRECTLY AT LIFE ITSELF....

The second point of the sermon can be expressed in this fashion: life never offers its

best to those who aim directly at life itself. In other words, there are some things that you never get unless you aim beyond them. It's something like shooting ducks. I'm innocent of the sport myself, but my wife's brother enjoys shooting ducks. On one occasion I asked him how he managed to hit a duck that was flying, and what he told me was something that all of you know, and I would have known too, if only I had taken time to think it through. He said something like this: "You aim just ahead of the duck and if your calculation is accurate, and you aim just enough ahead, and not too far ahead, you hit the duck"

I suppose you might say that it's something like that in life. There are some things that you never get unless you aim beyond them. Seriously, you find this principle operating in different areas of life. It's true in the realm of social reform. An Englishman by the name of Lord Elton once offered this comment: "WHO ARE THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE GREAT SOCIAL ADVANCES IN HISTORY? PRECISELY THOSE WHO WERE PRIMARILY CONCERNED NOT WITH SOCIAL ADVANCES OR WITH THIS WORLD AT ALL, BUT WITH GOD." And in order to substantiate his point, he lists several people, and I'm not going to take the time to read all of the people he mentions, but there is one person that he mentioned that some of you know something about - Florence Nightingale. This is what he had to say about her: FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE....WHOSE FIRST AIM WAS UNITY WITH GOD, BUT WHO CREATED MODERN HOSPITAL NURSING.

Certainly what's true in the field of social reform is equally true in the field of marital relationships. It seems to me that human life as it's constructed on the various levels of matter, mind and spirit, operates in such a way so that no one level of life fully and completely realizes itself until it reaches up to and is included in the level of life above it. Some couples get married today for the primary purposes of enjoying the sexual relationship of marriage. They do for a while, but not for long. The pleasure begins to fade, and they wonder why. The reason is not difficult to locate. One level of life never realizes itself completely until it reaches up and relates itself to the higher level of the spiritual values and qualities. When a couple aims at a union of two complete personalities, knit together in one inseparable life built around the highest values of society, then the fruits of marriage on its physical level will never be lacking.

There's a wonderful life at the end of Paul's letter to the Romans that suggests this idea. Paul is saying that he would like to come and visit the Christians in Rome, and in fact, he promises to visit them. He expresses it in this fashion: "I hope to visit you on my way to Spain". Paul was a great traveler as you know, but I don't think he ever got as far as Spain. But I suppose part of the reason that he got as far as he did, namely Rome, was because he was always aiming for Spain. We miss so much in life because we're not aiming for Spain. We're content with things as ~~xxxxx~~ they are, content with the things before us, the things that we want right now. We need to remember however, that life never offers its best to those who aim directly at life itself, that is, there are some things that you never get unless you aim beyond them.

LIFE NEVER GIVES US WHAT WE WANT UNTIL
WE LOSE OURSELVES IN SOMETHING GREAT..

All of this brings us around
to the third and final point
of the sermon which can be

summed up in this fashion: life never gives us what we want until we lose ourselves in something greater than ourselves. It's a basic lesson of life, and yet we often forget it.

I don't know whether you've ever had this experience of being at a party or a social gathering, and feeling very conspicuous, awkward and ill at ease. I've often had this feeling. You feel that if anyone should look at you, you might just curl up and drop to the floor. And then all of a sudden someone comes into the room, someone who catches your attention and absorbs your interest, and fascinates you, and before you know it you lose yourself in conversation with that person. You forget about your awkward inhibitions, and soon you're enjoying yourself. What's the reason - you've lost yourself in something other than yourself.

Elevating this principle to a higher level, I might just say that it continues to amaze me how people who lose themselves in what we call the Christ Spirit soon begin to find themselves. I suppose ministers are in a position to see this type of thing happen quite often, but it continues to amaze me out this happens. Some of you may have experienced this. Life somehow never seems to give us what we really want until we begin to lose ourselves in something greater than ourselves.

I might just share with you a few lines from a letter that I received some time ago from an old friend. This friend is married, in fact, he's been married for quite a few years, and the very thing that both he and his wife have been wanting, namely an addition to the family, has strangely been withheld from them. I don't know any of the details as to why they weren't able to have any children, but I do know this that as soon as they began to lose themselves in something far greater than themselves, their lives took on a new dimension, to put it as delicately as I can, their lives took on a third dimension, and now they have a baby. I started out by telling you about the letter that I received from the husband. In it he said:

"Seriously, my wife and I feel that this is in a sense, a reward from God for our efforts towards living a better life, and one that includes him. In a way it illustrates to me the real power and glory of the almighty. We certainly owe a great deal to the church for helping us along these lines and getting us back on the right road."

I don't think it's necessary for me to elaborate on this point. Strange and great things begin to happen to people when they lose themselves in this Christ - spirit. It's a mystery. It's a paradox of life - he that finds his life in one sense loses it, and he who loses his life in something greater than himself, finds it. These then are just three ideas that came to me this past week as I thought about these words of Jesus. (1) Life never yields its fruit to those who shake its tree to violently (2) Life never offers its best to those who aim directly at life itself. (3) Life never give us what we want until we lose ourselves in something greater than ourselves.

And so just to bring everything together in one sentence, let me say this that if you've come to that point in your own life where you feel that life doesn't have very much to offer you, then consider these words of Jesus very seriously, and in so doing you'll discover what so many other people have discovered, that in losing yourself in the Christ-spirit, you'll really begin to find yourself:

"For he that finds his life shall lose it.
And he that loses his life for my sake
shall find it."

LET US PRAY:

Guide us Our Father through the mysterious ways of life.
Save us from thinking that we can storm the gates of life,
picking the fruit for ourselves. Give us the tranquil
spirit of waiting and watching, that we may go about our
ways quietly, so that when the great experiences of life
come, we may be ready to receive them and enjoy them. In
thy name we pray. Amen