

'A SPIRITUAL EXAMINATION'

INTRODUCTION

Today, on this World-wide Communion Sunday, the great hymns of our church are being sung with equal fervor by Eskimos and Fiji Islanders - in Park Avenue Churches and in small African huts. Today, on this World-wide Communion Sunday, the Bible is being read with reverence in practically every known tongue. Today, from Maine to Manilla, from Brussels to Bombay, Christians are kneeling at the table of our Lord. It is reassuring in this troubled, warring world to come across this phrase - "World-wide Communion". And so it is with great gratitude that you and I share this hour in the only true world family.

The observance of World-wide Communion not only expresses the world-wide fellowship of our faith, but in recent years it has also come to be a time when Christians around the world examine their lives for the purpose of deepening their relationship to Christ and strengthening their loyalties to the church. Since we are beginning another year of service in this church, I thought it would be well for us to spend a few moments this morning considering our own lives in terms of our relationship to Christ and loyalty to this church. I hesitate, of course, to preach a sermon that concerns primarily the members of just my own church for I recognize that there are usually some people here from other parts of the country and occasionally from other parts of the world. But I do this on occasion, however, when I feel it is right and necessary always hoping that our visiting friends will translate what is said into terms of their own church loyalties.

A TIME FOR A SPIRITUAL EXAMINATION

With these few words then by way of an introduction, suppose we proceed to the spiritual examination. When a person joins this church, or any Methodist for that matter, he is asked this question at the altar: "Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord and pledge your allegiance to His Kingdom?" What exactly does this mean. It means several things to me. For one thing, it means this: are you honestly and seriously trying to follow His way of life, applying his teachings to the decisions of everyday life. It means this: are you making every effort to be pure in thought, word, and deed. It means this: are you willing to declare your discipleship on important social issues rather than deny it. It means this: are you giving conscious effort in your life to the cultivation of religious habits - for instance, taking time out daily to pray and to read your Bible.

There is a phrase that appears in the Holy Communion Ritual that goes something like this - "Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins and are in love and charity with your neighbors" Are you in love and charity with your neighbor. Think about it. You know it disturbs me a great deal, much more than I every let on, as I move around the parish to discover how little love some of you have for each other - how many little personality conflicts, petty jealousies and hurt feelings there are in the church, how many people that have to be handled with kid gloves. For instance, do you know that when Miss Hedman and I make out a new coffee hour list (the list of ladies who contribute their time and service in order that we can have a coffee hour following the service) when we

make out the list we have to be so careful and see to it that we are not putting people together on the list for a particular Sunday who do not get along with each other. This is just one little example. But when you get this sort of thing going on in a dozen or so different areas in a small church like ours, it does get to be something of a concern. I think some of you would be quite surprised to discover and perhaps deeply ashamed how much time a minister has to spend in trying to patch up hurt feelings, in trying to smooth things over, in trying to balance and juggle things in the church in order to avoid petty tensions and conflicts. And this is not peculiar to just our church. Who was it who said: "Lord make the bad good and make the good people more loveable" And we might add: "O God, make the Christian Church more Christian". Are you in love and charity with your neighbor? If you aren't perhaps you have no right in coming forward to the altar of our Lord.

A TIME FOR COMMITMENT

There is another question that a person is required to answer before he joins this church. I trust you're familiar with it; all of you who are members answered this question in the affirmative. "Will you be loyal to this Methodist Church and uphold it by your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service?" What exactly does this mean in mature terms of Christian discipleship? Well, to begin with it means that you will be loyal to this particular church, through thick and thin, through summer as well as winter, regardless of who the minister may be, regardless of how many times you may get your feelings hurt. It means this: will you uphold your church with a positive attitude rather than a critical attitude. Uphold it with your prayers, with your presence at its services in so far as it is humanly possible, and with your gifts, giving regularly through the pledge and envelope system, and last but not least, upholding your church with your own service, your own voluntary contribution of whatever time or talent you possess.

Once again to be quite frank with you and to speak the truth in love, let me say this: it concerns me to see how many of our members fail to comprehend what is involved when they join the church - what the church expects of them. Of course, I recognize that perhaps the ones who need to hear this word of truth spoken in a spirit of love are not with us.

There is in the city of Washington a very remarkable Protestant Church called the Church of the Saviour, in which membership is sparingly given. This is a church which began twelve years ago with three members. Today it has about sixty members, with an annual budget of over sixty thousand dollars. Membership in that church is granted only after arduous training and preparation. Specific commitments to the life of discipleship are required. In that particular church there are no passengers going along for a free ride; there is only the crew. All members are involved in worshipping, working and witnessing. The members are required to tithe; they are required to take real courses in the Bible, Church History and the Faith. They are required, I believe, to bring along with them to church in the course of ten Sundays at least ten people. Before a person can join that church, he must have at least a thousand hours of counselling with others already in the church so that they may know the people and the ways in which God works in human lives.

There are times when I would like to do something like that in this church but I wonder how many of you would be prepared to go along with such high demands of discipleship. What we must do in this church is to translate that which lives so powerfully in the Church of the Saviour into the setting of our own church.

Dr. McCracken of Riverside Church tells the story of a young minister in a small Kentucky mountain town who made a rather unusual funeral announcement from his pulpit. He was getting ready to move on to another charge, perhaps because he was given to making such announcements. He said, "The funeral of Mr. John Brown will be held from this church tomorrow afternoon at three o'clock. And Mr. Brown will be here himself - in person - for the first time in three years." Apparently Mr. Brown had been neglectful of outward observance of his religious convictions. Am I unfair and unkind in suggesting that this may be the case with many of our own people. I think not.

Let me ask you this: how long has it been since you led another person to Christ? How long has it been since you brought someone to church with you? How many persons today are Christians because of your concern and personal witness. Is it costing you anything to be a Christian. If it isn't, then the chances are that you're not an effective Christian. Are you taking a stand for Christ - where it really counts - in your home, in your work, in your church life.

CONCLUSION You have put me into the position of being your minister, and I am sharing with you some of the things on my heart. There are times when we must speak the truth in love. Those of you who know me well probably realize that I do not particularly enjoy doing it, and as hard as it is for me to do it, as hard as it is for you to hear it, there are times when we must have these things put before us. It is my hope that before you come to the altar this morning that each and every one of you will look into his own heart, and meditate quietly upon his own measure of loyalty to Christ and to this church. It is my hope that out of this penetrating self-examination that you will find new strength for the fulfillment of the holy purpose to which you have pledged your life. Let this service be for you a time of new beginnings. Let it be a time of re-dedication, re-affirmation and re-renewal. Let it be a time of re-commitment as you share in this service with Christians around the world.

PRAYER: Grant, Our Father, that this universal experience of which we are a part will lead each one of us to a deep understanding of ourselves and to a more spiritual fellowship with our Christian brothers the world over. In the quietness and hush of the sacred moments, may we hear thy voice speaking in our hearts. Amen