

A WARNING FOR OUR TIME

INTRODUCTION

Earlier this past week I asked to be excused from a social engagement on the ground that I needed every bit of my time to prepare a sermon for this special Thanksgiving Day Sunday occasion. The person with whom my wife and I had to break this social engagement suggested to me that I reach down into my barrel of sermons and preach an old one. To be quite frank, I was tempted to do it. I hate to miss out on social engagements, as some of you know, where delicious food is involved. I went so far as to bring out on to my desk the only two sermons that I've written on a Thanksgiving theme, and after reading them both over very carefully I decided against using them. For one thing, some of you have heard them both and you might remember them; I wouldn't want you to think that I was getting lazy. There was another reason involved as to why I hesitated to use them. After looking them over very carefully, I had the feeling that they were not suitable to Thanksgiving this year. The reason, I think, for this is quite plain for while the foreground of Thanksgiving is the same from year to year, the background nevertheless does change. The foreground - composed of family dinner parties, ritual observances of the day, perhaps a football game - is more or less the same each year. But the background of national and world events is not always the same. It changes from year to year. This year, it seems to me, it is composed of two contrasting factors - first, an abundance of material prosperity here at home, and second, an ever growing awareness of the state of moral decay that is just underneath the shining surface of American prosperity. The economic condition of our country is indeed good and prosperous and for this we are thankful, but the moral condition of our land is not, shall I say, as good as we would like it to be. We are becoming more and more aware with each passing day of the moral decay and rottenness which has invaded our way of life and slowly but surely corroding the moral fibre of our nation. And when I seriously began to consider what a Christian minister ought to say to his people on Thanksgiving Sunday 1959, I was somehow reminded of words spoken by Jesus of Nazareth long ago on the hillsides of Galilee, and it is around those words that I have constructed this sermon:

"A man's life" said Jesus, "does not consist in the abundance of the things that he possesses....."

DEVELOPMENT OF THIS TEXT.....

I think we have here one of those swift and direct statements of fact that Jesus was continually making, and which like a shaft of light penetrated the darkness pushing it to one side. To put these words into more contemporary English, it would be something like this - a man's ~~real~~ life does not depend on the things that he possesses - things like his house and its furnishings, his automobile, his clothes, his Hi-Fi, his TV and radio sets, his money, his pictures and books, his silver and personal treasures. These things, Jesus would say, are not his real life. His real life consists of, or depends upon things like the quality of his human relationships, the power and validity of his ideals, the things he believes in, the richness of his mind and the responsiveness of his spirit. These are the things that life really depends upon. You know as well as I do that a man can have all of the things that money can buy and still be mean and miserable. A man's life does not increase in either depth or intensity, happiness or usefulness in direct proportion to his possessions. In fact, I've seen instances of where it has

diminished as his possessions have increased. It is not the "Things" that make a person's life. It is the person inside. This is the gist of what Jesus was saying. And I'm sure that nine out of ten of you here this morning would in your better moments agree with him and it may be that you're saying to yourself "Well yes....all you say is certainly true". "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses".

A BACKGROUND
OF THE TEXT.

However, before we settle down in our agreement on this matter, suppose we take a moment or two to look behind the scenes and consider the situation to which Jesus addressed this remark. As you know he always made his remarks within the context of a human situation. Often because of the many years that separate him from us, we do not always know exactly what the context was, but we know this much that whatever he said, he said to someone about something very specific.

In this particular case, he was speaking to a man who had come to him out of the crowd with a complaint. Apparently his complaint had to do with his father's will. The father had left practically everything to another son, to the brother of the man who was standing before Jesus. This man was asking Jesus to help him persuade his brother to share his rightful inheritance with him. They were having trouble settling their father's will, and in passing it reminds us of things that happen in our own more enlightened culture. It is sad, but true, isn't it, that even today we see families split in two by disagreement over money left to them. Jesus went on to say something like this, "This isn't exactly my line. My work has to do with greater things than that although I am concerned over this rift between you and your brother. My work has to do with things that are deeper and more profound and ultimately more essential. I am here to warn you and my warning is this: beware of covetousness. Remember a man's life does not consist in the things that he possesses".

This word covetousness is one of those stuffy old words in our religious vocabulary that has lost some of its edge and meaning and yet I think all of you know what it means. Covetousness is nothing more than desire that gets out of hand. Covetousness is desire when it drives you to want things that belong to other people, or too want things that will do you more harm than good. Covetousness is desire that drives you to want things so desperately that you will do almost any thing to get them. It is desire that has deteriorated into selfish greed.

And so Jesus was saying to this man: "Watch out for your desires when they get out of hand. They can ruin you. Perhaps it will destroy your relationship with your brother. Perhaps it has already. It can do worse than that. It can shrink your soul gradually until there is nothing left of it. To be sure you have a problem here with your rightful inheritance - the justice and the fairness of it. But that isn't your real problem. Your real problem is what you are in yourself. What you really want in life. What you're aiming at. If you're clear on the basic issues, these disputes near the surface will largely taken care of themselves. Take heed and beware of covetousness because a man's life does not consist in the abundance of things which he possesses." The revelation of a truth aimed at a man, at one particular man, who was in danger of being drowned in his desires, and the revelation took the shape of a warning. Take heed and beware.

RELATING THIS TO OUR TIME

That warning that Jesus gave to unknown man two thousand years ago, never had greater urgency than it has at this very moment in our own land. The purpose of

this sermon is to sound that warning - here and now - in such a way that the truth may be revealed to you.

Let me take a moment to preface this warning by making one or two things clear to you - namely this that things are important and they do have a place in a person's life. Personally I feel it is important that a person have a decent home in which to live and in which to raise his family. It is important that a man have enough money to live on so that his family can be protected from the ravages of extreme poverty. It is important that a man have things like parks and playgrounds, hospitals and medical care to keep his body fit, and it is important also that he have things like books and pictures, music to enrich his mind and enlarge his thinking. And in this country we have made more of these things available to more people than at any other time, and in any other country for the world. We're proud of this and we have a right to be and should be thankful for it.

But having said all that I would go on and say this to you that there is a very real danger involved for it appears that the more things we have the more we want, and the more we want, the less we are aware and concerned with how we get them, the more we cut corners in our eagerness to get them, and the more thickskinned we become to the needs and the desires of other people. The charge that I am making, quite humbly, because I'm as deeply involved in this as much as you are, is that we in this country are becoming a covetous people. Some of you might be less kind and say in light of the headlines that confront us daily, that we have already become a covetous people.

And if there was any question about this charge it should have been answered a few weeks ago by the Congressional hearings in Washington. In one way, I hesitate to say anything about them for what was revealed was so shattering and disgusting that one hardly dares to speak about it. As you know, one young man was drawn to the center of the stage. Speaking for myself, I can only say that my heart aches for him and for his family. And yet no matter how many allowances you make, no matter how much you try to understand why he did what he did, and no matter how ready you are to help him pick up the pieces of his life and make the most of it, you must say that he did wrong.

All of this situation has made me very much aware of this fact that there is in our country today a great deal of confusion in the relationship between love and judgment. What I mean to suggest is that we often think that if we love a person we must never say anything unpleasant to him, never make any judgment upon him. This is why so many children are growing up today without any moorings. It is because their parents, thinking that they love them and wanting to love them, never dare to criticize them. In the name of love, they let them make mistakes without telling them that they are making them. The deeper the love is, the more clearly it sees the faults of those whom it loves and the more it longs to deliver them from those faults.

But going back momentarily to the Congressional hearings, it seems that the real tragedy lies in the fact that what happened to one man has revealed to us the shocking state of moral decay that is just underneath the surface of American prosperity. Some people knew it was there all along. People with any perception at all could see the cracks in the surface, but tragically enough it often takes some single event like this one to stir the conscience and awaken the people at large. Some

may say well it's only subtle deception and let it go at that. And yet it's this same subtle deception that is causing this unhealthy climate in our country, one in which the human soul can barely breathe. It's all around us. We're encountering it daily. We find it in the advertising business, stretching the truth in order to make people buy something even though they don't want it or need it. Subtle deception. We're not always aware of it. It's crept slowly into so many areas of life. I've often wonder how Madison Avenue would handle some ecclesiastical accounts if they were to be given them. It might be interesting. Can't you just picture some of colored ads that might appear in our magazines featuring a rugged fullback emerging from a church with the caption "Join the men who know; get that big clean feeling every Sunday morning. Go to Church". Or perhaps it might be something like this: "First Church has reduced theological irritants to the lowest level among all leading pulpits. The preaching of 1st Church is smooth. It's first for filtered truth". TV ads could feature the preacher standing in his pulpit by saying "It's what's up front that counts". Or the man emerging from a Unitarian Church with these words: "I prefer a thinking man's church". The competition might claim, "Remember the brand makes no difference. Wherever the church bells ring out you always get the real thing."

Subtle deception? I'd go on a little farther and suggest this to you. I have the feeling that the average level of personal integrity in this country today is not as high as it was fifty years ago. Of course I have no way of proving such a statement, but it seems to me that men in public life were more dependable then than they are now. That men in private life were more responsible and lived by a higher code of ethical standards. That men and women in all walks of life were more honest than than they are now even though it may have meant being poor. And so you see all of us are in a sense involved in this situation. These events of the past few weeks have reflected our entire society and perhaps in some smaller way we have seen ourselves reflected. Our thirst for publicity (we all love it and will do almost anything to get it). Our craving for things that will give us status - all sorts of things whether they are worth having or not. Our continual over-indulgence in things that tear down human personality rather than build it up. It's all there. It includes all of us. All we have to do is to use a bit of imagination and turn the spot-light upon ourselves.

One could go on and say more. One dreadful event has exposed a whole continent of decay. Some of you are perhaps concerned as to what other countries will think of us. It's only natural. We like to be well thought of by other countries, and it may bother us a bit as we think of these things being spread throughout the world. I can't help but wonder what the Russians think of all this, and this too whether our nation considering the way we are going will be able in the long run to compete with the purposeful, serious and well disciplined society of the Soviet Union. What I am primarily concerned with is what you think about this. Some of you may be taking all of this lightly without any seriousness, like the person who remarked to me recently about the man who was so sensationally involved, "Well I'm sorry he got caught".

About all I can do in a sermon is to issue a warning, and to make you think about some of these things in reference to your own life and make you aware of where you may stand at the present moment in regard to some of these matters. I would encourage you to make a silent and personal rededication here this morning to those values that we associate with those who came to the shores of Massachusetts in

the year 1620. Our Pilgrim Fathers had a richness of soul and spaciousness of mind that we need to recapture. There were quick to write off wrong doing and shoddiness in moral affairs and subtle deceit. Black was black for them and white was white. There was no in between. Perhaps they did not invest as heavily in love and compassion and forgiveness as we would like to have had them, but there was a sternness and a measure of inner self-discipline ~~about~~ them that we have lost. And those who celebrated that first Thanksgiving years ago had some deep convictions concerning the relationship of their religious faith to life, to freedom and to their responsibility to their fellow man. And in America today, as she now stands and in the apparent direction in which she is drifting, we need to recover something of their outlook on life.

LET "Take heed and beware of covetousness. For a man's life does not consist in the abundance of things which he possesses. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

LET US PRAY

Our prayer today is a silent searching of our hearts and minds and consciences. Help us, O God, to lay these things to heart and save us from the mistake of making judgments upon others which we refuse to make upon ourselves. Amen