

"A WILL, BUT NO WAY"

A Sermon

By

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INTRODUCTION

Several months ago someone put into my hands a book with a rather ominous title, Is It Worth Dying For? It's one of the many books written about stress and about burn-out. I'm not sure what the person had in mind when he gave me that book. We'd just been to a clergy luncheon together where the speaker had talked about burn-out and the stress that is peculiar to ministers. We had taken those tests at the luncheon, familiar to some of you, which are used to determine whether you're type A or type B personality. Type A, of course, is the type that is susceptible to stress. Type A people are often the successes in life - the achievers, the managers, and the worriers. Type B personalities, on the other hand, are easy-going, laid back people. And I got the impression, reading the characteristics of Type B personality, that B stands for boring. And I guess I scored well in the B type personality, which discovery caused me to be anxious and worry and lose sleep. So I don't know what type I belong to.

The book, Is It Worth Dying For? claims to show a direct link between stress and heart disease, and gives some helpful hints on how to handle stress in your life. Other books I've read, however, are not so helpful. They say things like if you worry too much, don't worry so much. Helpful things like that. I think the problem lies much deeper than that. The problem lies in the way we look at life, and that's why we cannot easily change our behavior, in spite of our best intention.

OUR PROBLEM

The problem is that we're Americans. That is to say, we have been conditioned to believe that we can do anything in this life, that there are no limits upon our lives. Historians of America have pointed out that it's the frontier that gave rise to this unique American optimism about life - the idea that we can do whatever we want in life. Right from the beginning America had a frontier, a great expanse in which to move and to grow and to expand. If you were dissatisfied with the life that you were living, all you had to do was pull up stakes and move West, start over again. Somone said that when Americans die and go to Heaven that they immediately start moving West. I believe it was Robert Frost who once said that,

"The land has shaped us as much as we have shaped the land."

that is, the boundlessness of it all, the seemingly endless frontier, and the bountiful natural resources that have always been there to exploit. Living on that kind of continent has shaped our spirit and it has made us optimistic, industrious, resourceful, determined, eager and impatient.

It's in our blood - this idea of the frontier - right down into the sixties and Kennedy's concept of "The New Frontier" and now into the computer age, the space age. All of this has helped fashion the creed: where there is a will, there is a way. And if we try hard enough we can do anything. The only obstacle# to our success is finding the right technique.

ILLUSTRATION / COMMENT

I think it was back in the late sixties that a man down in Florida named Glenn Turner was speaking to thousands of people each year. He was one of the most popular of all of the motivational speakers. He was not distinctive in appearance. If you looked at the head table you couldn't tell which one of those men "up there" was Glenn Turner.

When he stood up to speak you noticed that he had a speech impediment and his grammar would cause an English teacher to pass out. The first line of his speech was always the same, "I am here to speak to you tonight about success". And then for the next hour he would have his audience in the palm of his hand. His delivery and his content sounded something like a revival message.

He told the story of a backwoods boy, a poor boy with a handicap, who overcame all of the obstacles that life threw in his path to become a great success. He presented himself as a living testimony to that creed, where there's a will, there's a way. If you try hard enough you can do anything. He would end his speeches with this line, "If it is possible, it has already been done. If it is impossible, it will be done!"

We believe that. I think we believe it because there is something deep inside of us that wants to believe it. It's there - in our blood. And it works. For many people it works - at least to achieve certain goals in this life. It works primarily for Type A personalities, as long as there are frontiers to conquer, space to move around in, and resources to exploit. And in that kind of world impatience is a virtue.

BUT IF YOU IMPOSE BOUNDARIES

But you impose boundaries on that kind of a person - shut some doors...give her something that won't budget...put him with people who won't cooperate and you'll kill them.

And that's what these books on stress and burn-out seem to be saying to us. They say that stress occurs when two things happen: when you can't flee and when you can't fight. That is to say, when you can't pick up and start over again, go someplace else and get away from your problems. When your responsibilities, your obligations make it necessary for you to stay right where you are and face the resistance. Or, when you are facing something like a bureaucracy, that is too impersonal, too big, too unmanageable for you to conquer. There's nothing you can do. In such situations patience is not a virtue; it's a liability. It just won't work. In fact, it will burn you out the way an engine burns out when it meets a resistance that won't move.

When that happens the answer is not to keep on trying harder and harder; the answer is to get a different view of life. A religious view of life, the one that you find in the Bible. It begins by saying that there are limits on your life. That's what it means to be a human being. By definition, to be a human being means that you are not God. There are limits and boundaries that you have to live within. There are things that you just cannot control in this life. But there is One, it says, who is in control beyond your power, and the secret of life is to have a bit of trust in Him.

THE SCRIPTURES

Now the Old Testament Lesson from Ezekiel, written to some exiles who are frustrated because they cannot live the life they want to live...they're held within boundaries, and they can't get out of them. Hear it again:

"Thus says the Lord, 'I will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, and will set it out...on the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bring forth

boughs...and become a noble cedar, and under it will dwell all kinds of beasts; and in its shade every bird shall build a nest.'"

And from the Gospel of Mark, written to those who were frustrated because they could not bring in the Kingdom of God. They had worked for it and they had prayed for it. They had tried everything they could, and there is nothing in sight no that even faintly resembles the Kingdom of God. They are deeply frustrated. And then Jesus said to them,

"With what can we compare the Kingdom of God? ...It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest seed on the earth; but when it grows up and becomes the largest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make their nests in its shade..."

The message of both passages is to be patient. It says that you are not in charge around here. If you feel like you can't end the exile that you're in, or the feelings of abandonment, or loneliness that you're experiencing, or that feeling of being separated from the life that you know you're supposed to live - then remember that there is a power at work in this world that has already take a sprig and planted it, and it will be a giant cedar some day. That's Jerusalem he's talking about. He's talking to people who believed they would never see Jerusalem again - never! And he says, it will come, but in my time. Not in your time. So....be patient.

And if you can't bring in the future that you've always dreamed about, if you can't, as the early Church tries to do, make things look like the Kingdom of God for you, if your efforts always seem to be futile, then remember that you're not in charge of the future - God is! And that seed has already been planted. Don't worry about it. In fact, it's going to come whether you worry about it or not. Worrying isn't going to do any good. So...be patient.

BOTANY'S LESSON

Anne Dillard in her book, Pilgrim At Tinker Creek, said, "Anybody who really thinks about life and seeks wisdom ends up in botany."

What botany teaches is that there is a deep-down determination in nature to bring life into being no matter what the odds. There's a power botany points to beyond our power that is always creating and always re-creating. When Jesus wanted us to see that power, He turned to botany and said, "look at the mustard seed". And He turned to the farmer who plants the seed and pointed out that that farmer plants the seed, goes about his chores, and then goes home to eat supper, read the paper, listens to the 10 O'Clock News and gets a good night's sleep - and lets God grow the seed. He can't grow it. God grows it. The farmer knows the limits on his life. He knows what he can do and he does it, and lets God do the rest!

That's pour problem. That's my problem, I know. We don't trust life is going to be good for us unless it's the way we want it to be. Unless our dreams come true. Unless the plans that we have are fulfilled. So when boundaries are slapped on us by age or illness or death or divorce or other people's thought-

lessness or our own mistakes, we push against those boundaries resentfully, stressfully. We want that seed to grow. We want that flower to blossom now. We want the harvest to come when we want it to come. But nothing we do makes any difference. Nothing that we do seems to do any good at all.

When you feel that kind of frustration, Jesus says, when you feel like you want to fight or flee, that means you've come up against some boundary. You've come to the end of your rope. You know now what it means to be a human being. There's only one thing left for you to do: have patience, knowing that when we've done all that we can do, we can trust that God will keep His promise and do what only He can do. You think deeply about life and seek wisdom and you'll end up in botany, or in history.

HISTORY'S WORD Barbara Tuchman points out that history teaches us only one lesson and that is that nothing ever works out quite the way we intended or expected. She wrote, "History shows us that the best laid plans often go awry". And if you study it, you'll get what experience and age can only teach you. That is wisdom. And wisdom, she defines, as enabling you to get rid of all the illusions you have about what we can do and therefore guard against the disillusion that occurs when what we planned isn't what happens.

And for people of great faith, that wisdom about history is a source of genuine optimism. For people who believe in God, the most optimistic statement you can make is that the future is uncertain. We don't know what will happen. We believe in God, and that means anything can happen. Yes, you think deeply about life and seek wisdom and you'll end up in botany, or in history, or in medicine.

MEDICINE'S MESSAGE Morris Abram, an Atlanta lawyer, wrote an autobiography after his recovery from cancer. He entitled the book, The Day Is Short. And the title is taken from a Talmudic saying which goes:

"The day is short, the work is great
It is not thy duty to complete the work
But neither art thou free to desist from it."

He learned that wisdom fighting the disease. He did all he could. He fought it vigorously and strenuously. He never desisted, but he knew that in the end it was something other than his own effort that brought the healing. He wrote:

"The tendency of the cancer to recur was held at bay, or perhaps even wiped out, by my will to live, by a new love and new interests, by immunotherapy, maybe by good fortune, maybe by God. I give respectable scientific method the credit due and reserve for the unknown factors the awesome name of the mystery which I refuse to confuse with science."

Wherever you turn you run into that mystery. It's always there, always at work, on its own time, according to its own plan. And wisdom learns to wait patiently for it to do its job. What Jesus wants you to see is that that mystery is on your side and that power is working for you.

"So why are you anxious. And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to your span of life? Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow. Tomorrow will be anxious for itself".

CONCLUSION We began this sermon twenty minutes ago by talking about a book written to instruct us on how to avoid burn-out. I read these books occasionally, but I seldom recommend them to anybody else because they often seem to me to be too simplistic. I know you can't write specific advice about how to improve your life and have it apply to everybody. You can't do it because everybody's different. But I thought I would risk it anyway and end this sermon with four things to remember when you have a will, but there is no way.

First, remember that what you're facing is not unique to you, that most everybody runs into boundaries, has doors shut in their face, loses someone they depended on, or are let down by someone they trusted. Most everybody faces problems in this life that they think they can't solve. I think that part of the danger when you face one of those things is that you will think it's your fault and that you haven't tried hard enough. If you could only be better or do better, but the fact is that everybody reaches a boundary in their life. And some of those who are so spectacularly successful now, or people who don't seem to feel the burden of anxiety in their life, who are spiritually mature, at one time faced what you are now facing. So remember that, and remember that they became successful and spiritually mature by facing what you are facing.

Secondly, remember that you are a human being - not a superman or superwoman. And to be a human being by definition means to have limits on your life, and the older you get the more limits there are. All that is expected of you is that you do your best and leave the rest to God. All you can control is your effort. You cannot control the results.

And this leads to the third point. Remember, though, you are not in control that God is. He is that mysterious power that works in botany to make things grow against all odds. He is that mysterious power in history that brings new beginnings when everybody thought it was the end. He is that mysterious power in healing that we should never confuse with science.

And fourth and finally - be patient. Don't give up! But don't expect that everything you do is going to change things. Keep working quietly...patiently.. and keep alert. Be ready. Watch for something to happen that you never planned.

Irving Langmuir of GE talks about the research laboratory at General Electric. He said:

"We can't plan discoveries. We can only plan for work that might lead to discoveries. You can't know everything that is going to happen, and it is many of those unexpected things that are most likely to prove useful."

You can translate that into the spiritual life and that's why you should be patient, like a farmer. You plant the seed. You can do that. But you can't make it grow. All of your worrying isn't going to make any difference at all. All you can do is wait - until the right time. Not your time, but God's time. And I tell you - there will be a harvest. And that little seed, the one that you never even noticed, will grow so large that all the birds there are will be able to build their nests in its shade!