

"AND JESUS LOOKING UPON HIM, LOVED HIM"

INTRODUCTION Over the years, in times of tension and stress, and for reasons never totally clear, one line of Scripture from the New Testament has continually come to mind. It's found in the Story of the Rich Young Ruler (as told in Mark's Gospel) and this is the line:

"And Jesus looking upon him, loved him".

It's a beautiful line. As I say, I don't know why this line keeps coming to mind except perhaps as a reminder that our human judgments are so often lacking in compassion and understanding, but never the judgment of God as we see it at work in Jesus. In any case, let's take these words as our text this morning and think about them. "And Jesus looking upon him, loved him". (Mark 10: 21)

DEVELOPMENT What a difference there is between the love represented by Jesus, God's love in person on earth, and that symbolized by Cupid, an infant in diapers, and blindfolded to boot. Cupid's love may be blind but God's love is visionary, piercing through every facade - or armor - to perceive the individual that each one of us is, an individual with a half that is repentant and another half that is not, that will never repent; an individual with a half that entreats the Lord and with another half that can't bring itself to entreat.

God's visionary love sees not only the small strengths and small weaknesses which even our dim perceptions can grasp, but also great strength side-by-side with great weakness, something we generally have trouble understanding. And God's piercing love sees our persistent perversity - that we go through life shoving our best foot forward when it's the other foot that needs the attention! And yet, at that very moment in our lives when, like this young rich man, we are about to receive and refuse the finest offer a person can ever received, "Come, follow me" that is constant companionship with Jesus...at that very moment, Jesus looks upon us and loves us! Think of it.

Sometimes I think God in His ways must be as perverse as we are in ours. Why should He keep pouring out so much love to His children when the returns are so pitiful? Yet, if we struggle with this question we come up with a clear answer.

In September of 1945, the then Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, suggested that the only way to avoid a feverish arms race with the Soviets was to share fully with them all of our atomic secrets. He was then 84 years old, and he wrote:

"The chief lesson I have learned in a long life is that the only way you can make a man trustworthy is to trust him, and the surest way to make him untrustworthy is to distrust him and to show him you distrust."

To me, that's wisdom from on high and I've tried to remember it with my dealings with others. And the only way to make a person loveable is to love him. So Jesus, our Lord, "looked upon him, and loved him".

CHURCH / HOME We often speak of a Church, this Church as "home"...and the members and friends of this church as "family". I think this is good and proper....nothing wrong with it. For when we stop to think of it this is one place where you are expected to come through the door shoving the best foot forward...yes - but dragging the other foot along, too. This, thank God, is a

place where you can come and bring both halves - the repentant and that other half that never seems to want to repent. Church is where you can come in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, knowing that you will be both seen and loved by God, by Jesus, and not least of all - by others. And to me, not only is this the "bottom line" of what we're all about, but it's also such a heart-warming and momentous thought that I suggest we take a moment right now to make an inner resolve to cast a loving and caring eye on a friend or neighbor here in the Church today and to embrace that neighbor with love and understanding before we depart and to hopefully receive in return a loving glance and warm embrace.

~~Pick out some person you don't know that well; that's always fun!~~ That ~~can be good~~, or perhaps pick out someone you don't always hit it off with. There was a cartoon in a magazine that caught my attention some time ago. It showed two monks talking together in a monastery cloister. A third monk, Brother Valentine, passed by. As he moved away from them, one monk said to the other in a low whisper, "I think my love for Brother Valentine is less than my love for anyone else in the entire world". Perhaps you feel that way about some one here in the Church. Try out the embrace with that acquaintance.

RICH YOUNG MAN Now, things become more difficult as we turn from Jesus to the rich, young man. Most of us are like him, in that when in distress we seek the guidance of some spiritual leader, we think we do so because we want change. Actually, in this story...as, we want to remain the same and feel better about it. In psychological terms what we really want is to be more effective neurotics, as Sheldon Kopp puts it:

"preferring the security of known misery,
to the misery of unfamiliar insecurity."

Listen once again to what Jesus says to this young man. Listen carefully to the underlying essence behind His words:

"You lack one thing. Go and sell what you have and give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me!"

Powerful words here. Words which could build a stewardship sermon, which this is not...but if there's "fall-out" in that direction...OK, we'll take it. But what I hear Jesus saying and offering this man is his freedom, which is just another word for nothing left to lose. But instead of the excitement of freedom, the exhilaration of the constant companionship of Jesus, the rewards of truth and righteousness and peace, the man chooses the security of "his golden chains" no matter how pedestrian their possibilities. "At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions". What a scene that must have been.

HOW ABOUT YOU? Where do you see yourself in it. Yes, how about you? Did you come to Church today to entertain the possibility of change, to walk with Jesus a few steps....or to seek a way to stay the way you are and feel better about it? Jesus is looking upon you and....loving you...and saying, "Come, follow me".

"Come, follow me". That's what Abraham Maslow would call the "growth choice", as opposed to "the fear choice"...elected by the young man in this story. And, of course, the man was right to be fearful...for Jesus, you see, gets us into altogether as much trouble as He saves us from. But it's good trouble. It's healthy trouble.

It's useful trouble. It's the kind of trouble in which we ourselves live our lives and are not lived by them. That kind of trouble doesn't represent another bout of "unearned unhappiness" which seems to blight the lives of so many people we know.

FIRST WAY We come to Church to be loved and that means we come to Church to be changed - hopefully. And let me suggest two ways that we can help each other, those of us who wish to be changed.

The first is to read and to study and to pray together. Don't tell me that "nobody was ever changed by a book", and I won't tell you that books only change people for the good. As a matter of fact, since the invention of writing, books have won people over to both good and evil, to both revolution and reaction, to atheism and to faith. Books are potent. Remember that. Think of Augustine, seduced by St. Paul's Epistle. Think what Thomas Paine's tracts did for the French Revolution, what that little book, Uncle Tom's Cabin did in this country in the mid-19th century. Where would the Church be without Thomas A Kempis' The Imitation of Christ, or The Canticles of St. Francis. Books are potent, so too is the Bible. We need to make a renewed effort to spend more time reading and studying a chapter or two each day of the Bible with a friend and quietly sealing that time with prayer.

Have you ever read In His Steps by Charles Sheldon. I remember reading it as a teenager and can recall its effect on my life. Did you know it's the third best seller of all time, right behind Bunyan's Pilgrim Progress. By reading and studying I mean that kind of reading and discussion that is personal, the kind that quietly leads to and guides personal struggle, self-surrender and profound religious insight and experience. Books are potent.

SECOND WAY And then to indicate a second way to help each other change I want to read opening lines from a book by the South African novelist and Christian, Alan Paton. He writes in Too Late the Phalarope: (Fal' a - rope)

"Perhaps I could have saved him with only a word, two words, out of my mouth. Perhaps I could have saved us all. But I never spoke them...for he spoke hard and bitter words to me, and shut the door of his soul on me, and I withdrew. But I should have hammered on it. I should have broken it down with my naked hands, I should have cried out there not ceasing...for behind it was a man in danger, the bravest and gentlest of us all."

There is no place in the Church for the brutality that masquerades as frankness. I think we need to remind ourselves of that and exercise care when tempted to let fly with hurtful words like poisoned darts in to another's life. Yes, there is such a thing as knowledge and verbal expression for destruction.

But, as Paton indicates, there's also knowledge for salvation, and we must not withhold it from one another just because it's painful. Remember Jesus hurt the rich young ruler, as he probably hurt others in helping them to grow, but he never hurt anyone without meaning to. And He spoke the truth to people...always in love. That's where we often fall short. He spoke the truth in love. In our frankness, I'm not sure we always do that. He spoke the truth, always in love. Which is to say, dear brothers and sister in Christ, if we are deeply Christian, we shall be both kind and candid, and so help one another to grow, to mature, to change. The truth in love...as He spoke it.

And so we come to our church home to love...to be loved...to change...and to help bring about change.

CLOSING IT UP

We can't close this sermon up, however, without briefly recognizing that when Jesus said to the Rich Young Ruler, "Come...follow me", He meant not only that this young man would be changed, but that as a follower, a disciple, he would in turn become Christ's fellow worker in shaping the world after His desire.

Charity, it is said, begins at home...but it never stops there. It is not enough to walk around this city wearing a button that says, "I love New York" and do nothing. What does it mean to love New York? Don't you have to study NY, struggle for NY, bleed for it, suffer for it? And doesn't the religious community have a primary responsibility in trying to make this inhuman place a little bit more human? I believe it does.

And so as these words of our Lord Jesus come to us across the centuries, "Come...follow me", it means following Him into places like NY and being significantly involved in a Christian fellowship in this city...putting down some roots...putting our lives on the line...not drifting in and drifting out... a church tramp...but taking hold as He would have us, if we really believe in Him, and giving of ourselves - our time, our prayers, our money, our service. To make a difference. As we do, we find somehow this inhuman place we call home, becomes more human, warmer, smaller. The rich, young ruler couldn't take it, and we read:

"At that...his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions."

CHURCH: OUR HOME

The church is our home. Here we love one another intimately and intensely. Yet, our intensity and intimacy ought never to be at the expense of universality. God's universe is our home - a church without walls. And Christian hearts ought to be as wide as God's universe. In praise of our church home and in thanks for the warm and wonderful blessings that are ours in this fellowship, that membership brings to us, I want to end with an inscription over the door of St. Steven's Church in the heart of London. May it be our prayer and as I read it, may I invite you to bow your heads in prayer and let it be our closing prayer:

"O God, make the door of this house wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship, narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife.

Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children, nor to strained feet, but rugged and strong enough to turn back the temptor's power.

God, make the door of this house the gateway to thine eternal kingdom. Amen"