

## "BETTING YOUR LIFE ON GOD"

### INTRODUCTION

In order to get today's subject before you, I should like to share two incidents with you. The first one involves a small town atheist. The second concerns a university co-ed.

The first incident. There lives in a small mid-western community a convinced and convincing atheist who holds a full professorship in a Big Ten University. One day he was invited by a student pastor to address a meeting of Christians. The place was pretty well filled; it was confrontation time. The guest spoke flawlessly for about forty minutes to the point that no one can really prove the existence of God. When he was finished speaking, he asked, "Now...are there questions...comments?" Silence. "Well....do you agree or disagree with what I have said?" More silence. At last a frail gentleman sitting near the back raised a hand and with a thin voice spoke up. "I guess we agree. And that's why...we are trying to live the life of faith".

The second incident. A college Junior came in to see her minister and got directly to what was on her mind. She said something like this:

"I can explain my life in physical and bio-chemical terms. I'm here because one night my father and mother slept together. My personality traits and aptitudes derive from my genes and my glands. And it's only an accident that I'm in this school. I changed to meet up four years ago with a boy who had gone here and who liked it."

The minister replied,

"I could interpret my life that way, too...but I choose not to. I admit that my choosing ~~not~~ to is an act of faith."

### EVERYONE LIVES BY FAITH

Now both of these incidents serve to remind us that everyone lives by faith. That is, everyone lives on the basis of certain assumptions, intuitions and propositions that cannot be proven.

The hedonist takes for granted the validity of the pleasure principle. How does he or she know that there is no higher good beyond pleasure. The scientist assumes that his work matters...that whatever he discovers will be universally valid, that what he finds out will be added to a significant body of knowledge. But how does he know that any part of the human experience has any lasting meaning at all. He, too, lives by faith.

Reformers of every kind assume that people really count for something, that they have certain inalienable rights: the right to live, the right to be free, the right to learn. But how do we know? Many kings and philosophers have thought otherwise. Everyone lives by faith. Each of us acts on more than he or she can prove.

It is neither surprising nor unique that Christians live by faith, that we, too, live by a knowledge of the heart. What distinguishes Christians is not the fact of their faith - but rather the content and the substance of it. Not that they believe, but what or in whom they believe.

So Abraham goes out "not knowing whither he goes"....and becomes the father of the faithful. Having heard and believed a promise, he becomes a pilgrim. Obviously, this is never in any time or place for any person an easy thing....to take this "leap of faith", and to become a pilgrim.

As some of you know, there are parts of our country in which newspapers feature a Scripture verse of the day. And usually some minister in the town submits it and his name is then appended at the bottom. It would not be hard to imagine a situation where on the very front page the verse appeared, neatly boxed in: "The Lord is good and greatly to be praised" - submitted by the Reverend John Wesley Lord of the Faith United Methodist Church, Pilgrim Road. And yet on that same page in ghastly juxtaposition, there would be stories of bombings and muggings and murders and crashes and fires and plagues and droughts and hunger and political "hanky-panky" and a Heinz variety of lies and infidelities.

Is God around? Is God good? It takes a lot of faith to believe it, doesn't it? However, it takes faith to deny it, too? Everyone lives by faith. And that's the first point to nail down in today's message.

FAITH REQUIRES RISK And the second thought to pin down is that all faith entails risk. In other words, it's something of a gamble. This is what Studdert Kennedy was saying so graphically in those lines that appeared in The Unutterable Beauty. He wrote,

"How do I know that God is good? I don't.  
I gamble like a man. I bet my life  
Upon one side in life's great war. I must.  
I can't stand out. I must take sides. The man  
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All faith entails risk. What risk? For one thing, the risk of being wrong. The risk of shutting out other perceptions of reality. The risk of sitting loose to disturbing evidence. The risk of an overly-narrow reading of history. The risk of wasting our years in service to a fantasy. Imagine believing for a life-time, for instance, in white supremacy and discovering at the end that God is black.

All faith entails risk - including the Christian's faith. We've done a rather thorough job of obscuring this truth in our churches. You'd never guess by coming here on a Sunday morning, or any other time for that matter, that there is a sizeable risk attached to everything we do. Our programs and our services run along fairly smoothly. We debate only ways and means in our committee meetings. We never debate whether. At least not here.

The strategy here and in every Church is what might be called an "as if" strategy. We pray "as if" His power were a caring, loving power; we sing the hymns "as if" God were present to be worshipped. We teach our children "as if" the faith were true. We read and cherish the Bible "as if" it had the promises to see us through this life. We carry the banner of a thousand different causes into a badgered world "as if" they mattered. We reverence and obey Christ "as if" the power of His death and Resurrection could save us from all deaths - present and to come.

How easy it must all seem on the surface. But, to those who do not find it easy to believe we must admit, you could be right. And so they could. All faith entails risk.

I happened to come across this ad under "Community Happenings" in the latest issue of Our Town.

"Lay Committee for Inactive Catholics and the Unchurched - discussion of causes which prevent Christians from practicing their faith. (Desert and coffee.) Holy Family Church. East 47th Street. Wednesday, April 1st."

*THAT ALWAYS HELPS - LIKE THE MAN WHO SAID - "I CAN'T BELIEVE IN GOD TILL I HAVE MY COFFEE"*

Kennedy goes on in his poem and asks:

"How is it proved?  
It isn't proved, you fool, it can't be proved.  
How can you prove a victory before  
It's won? How can you prove a man who leads,  
To be a leader worth the following,  
Unless you follow to the death - and out  
Beyond mere death, which is not anything  
But Satan's lie upon eternal life?  
Well - God's my leader, and I hold that He  
Is good, and strong enough to work His plan  
And purpose out to its appointed end".

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RISKING ALL BRINGS JOY Today is the Fourth Sunday in Lent. Hopefully, these forty days that began back there on March 4th are drawing us closer to Christ. If so, we will discover in Him one who risked all.

There's an intriguing verse in Hebrews 12 where the writer exhorts us to look to Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, caring nothing for its shame, and is seated at the right hand of God". What a strange context for the word "joy"! Perhaps the reason for Jesus' joy - even as He set His face toward Jerusalem and certain death upon the cross - is because only those who risk it all know what joy is about.

I sometimes have the feeling that there's not enough joy in our religion... that for many it's a joyless, listless, take-it-or-leave-it business....because we have hedged our bet and are willing to risk so little.

In the old Astor Hotel downtown they had two paintings of Peter Stuyvesant. Any youngster reared in this city will remember that Peter Stuyvesant had a wooden leg. Apparently as time went on it became a matter of doubt as to which leg it was. Thus, in the lobby of the Astor, one depiction of Stuyvesant showed him with a pegged left leg, while across the way another likeness showed him with a pegged right leg. That's called, hedging your bet. You can never be altogether wrong like that, but you can never be altogether right.

HOW MUCH DOES OUR FAITH AFFECT OUR LIVES

The question I want you to turn over in your minds today is: how

much does our faith affect our lives? I think we could say that how we live reveals how much we have wagered on the Kingdom! To me, a silent movie of the life of our Lord would be more convincing to me than a tape recorded of His words. Think about it. We have a way of talking a good wager, or thinking a good wager and assuming that our thoughts and words add up to risk.

Forgive me for using an out-of-season sporting reference, but every Monday morning during the football season the various teams that played on Sunday sit down in a locker room to view the film of the previous day's game. Missed assignments and bungled plays show up large and clear. Bear in mind that the movie is a silent movie and that the players have no chance to reach for a mike to explain or rationalize what happened. The only voice ever heard is apt to be that of the coach who might say to the projectionist, "Run that one again, and let Harry see how badly he blew it". So there you sit. What you meant to do on that busted play you never did because you thought you heard a whistle and stopped. But you can't say it. Or, perhaps your cleat got caught as you made a move and you twisted an ankle. But you can't say it. You just look on and watch the action as it's played back. And I suppose this is how we measure the size of our wager, by the story of our lives minus all the words, all the speeches, all the excuses.

To put the question in this fashion: are we backing what we say we believe with a distinctly different way of life? John Henry Newman once wrote about the difference between notional assent that says "Of course, there's a God!" and real assent that generates power for triumphant living. I fear that much of our religion comes to rest in words and ideas, that it fails to take form and substance beyond verbal assent and expression.

CLOSING        Where is all this leading? To this question: ~~have~~ we really bet our lives on God? Or, have we bet only a small portion of it on Him?

We call ourselves Christians. Are we any different from those who do not consider themselves to be such? I wonder...whether folks who sat down to watch a silent movie of our lives would know on which side we've wagered and for how much? Betting your life on God. In involves faith. It involves risk. But that faith and risk leads to joy. It's a gamble...taking that "leap of faith"... but try it and as you do, keep those words of Studdert Kennedy in mind:

"I can't stand out. I must take sides.  
The man who is neutral in this fight  
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PRAYER        Forgive us, Lord, for our hestiancy and caution...our almost believing, almost daring. Draw near to us in these days of this Lenten Season... the better to press thy claims upon us, the more clearly to evoke from us an unconditional 'yes'. Make us willing to bet our lives completely on You...to take that leap of faith that is required to find joy and peace. Through Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen

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The second incident. A college junior came in to see a minister and got directly to what was on her mind. She said,

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HOW MUCH DOES OUR FAITH AFFECT OUR LIVES The question I want you to turn over in your minds today is: how much does our faith affect our lives. I think we could say that how we live reveals how much we have wagered on the kingdom. To me, a silent movie of the life of our Lord would be more convincing than a tape recorder of His words. Think about it. We have a way of talking a good wager, or thinking a good wager, and assuming that our thoughts and words add up to risk.

Forgive me for using an out-of-season sporting reference, but every Monday morning during the National Football League season the various teams sit down in a locker room to view the film of the previous day's game. Missed assignments and bungled plays show up large and clear. Bear in mind that the movie is a silent movie, and that the players have no chance to reach for a microphone to rationalize or explain away what happened. The only voice ever heard is the voice of the coach who might say to the projectionist: "Run that one again. Let Harry see how bad he blew it". So there you sit. What you meant to do on that

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You'll recall that back in January a number of articles were published and sermons preached that paid tribute to Albert Schweitzer on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of his birth. About that time I was teaching a course on World Religions to a number of high school students and one morning we got talking about Schweitzer and his contributions. Some felt that we had excessively eulogized the man and at the same time successfully concealed his faults and weaknesses. The man's faults were seldom touched on. Of Teutonic stock, he was a bit imperious. He did not quite reproduce NY Hospital or the Mayo Clinic in Africa. He was too concerned about a "one to one" righteousness and somewhat naive about systems and structures. For me the reason why so many articles appeared and sermons were preached in celebration of his birth is because he is one of the few men of this century with universal visibility who truly backed his convictions with his life. Perhaps you can name one or two others, but there haven't been that many.

Which leads to this question: are we backing what we say we believe with a distinctly different way of life. John Henry Newman once wrote about the difference between notional assent that says "Of course, there's a God!" and real assent that generates power for living. I fear that much of our religion comes to rest in words and ideas, that it fails to take form and substance beyond verbal assent and expression.

CLOSING Have we really bet our lives on God? Or have we bet only a small portion of it on Him? There are those times, I confess, in my own life when I think my religion is a mere appendage to a comfortable life. If you let me explain my life, I can close the gap. But if you just look at it - without the words or explanations - then you've got me. Do you ever feel that way?

Is there really any difference between how we spend our money and how our pagan friends spend theirs? Is there that much difference between how we spend our time and how they spend theirs? Any appreciable difference between what angers or pleases you and what angers or pleases them? I don't have the answers for this....only questions. We call ourselves Christians? I wonder...whether folks who watched a silent movies of our lives would know on which side we have wagered and for how much. Betting your life on God? It involves faith. Taking that "leap of faith"...it involves a risk. It's a gamble, but those who have made it find great joy. As Kennedy put it:

"I can't stand out. I must take sides. The  
Man who is neutral in this fight is not  
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PRAYER Forgive us, O God, for our hesitance and fear....our almost believing, almost daring, almost going all the way. Draw near to us in these days of this Season of Lent....the better to press thy claims upon us, the more clearly to evoke from us an unconditional yes. Make us willing to bet our lives completely on Thee, to take that leap of faith that is required and to find joy peace and life. Through Christ, who found it. Amen

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busted play you never did because you thought you heard a whistle and stopped. But you can't say it. Or, perhaps your cleat got caught as you made your move and you twisted an ankle. But you can't say it. No mental reconstructions are allowed. You just look on and watch the action as it's played back. This is how we measure the size of our wager, by the story of our lives minus all speech.

You'll recall that back in January a number of articles were published and sermons preached that paid tribute to Albert Schweitzer on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of his birth. About that time I was teaching a course on World Religions to a number of high school students and one morning we got talking about Schweitzer and his contributions. Some felt that we had excessively eulogized the man and at the same time successfully concealed his faults and weaknesses. The man's faults were seldom touched on. Of Teutonic stock, he was a bit imperious. He did not quite reproduce NY Hospital or the Mayo Clinic in Africa. He was too concerned about a "one to one" righteousness and somewhat naive about systems and structures. For me the reason why so many articles appeared and sermons were preached in celebration of his birth is because he is one of the few men of this century with universal visibility who truly backed his convictions with his life. Perhaps you can name one or two others, but there haven't been that many.

Which leads to this question: are we backing what we say we believe with a distinctly different way of life. John Henry Newman once wrote about the difference between notional assent that says "Of course, there's a God!" and real assent that generates power for living. I fear that much of our religion comes to rest in words and ideas, that it fails to take form and substance beyond verbal assent and expression.

CLOSING Have we really bet our lives on God? Or have we bet only a small portion of it on Him? There are those times, I confess, in my own life when I think my religion is a mere appendage to a comfortable life. If you let me explain my life, I can close the gap. But if you just look at it - without the words or explanations - then you've got me. Do you ever feel that way?

Is there really any difference between how we spend our money and how our pagan friends spend theirs? Is there that much difference between how we spend our time and how they spend theirs? Any appreciable difference between what angers or pleases you and what angers or pleases them? I don't have the answers for this....only questions. We call ourselves Christians? I wonder...whether folks who watched a silent movies of our lives would know on which side we have wagered and for how much. Betting your life on God? It involves faith. Taking that "leap of faith"...it involves a risk. It's a gamble, but those who have made it find great joy. As Kennedy put it:

"I can't stand out. I must take sides. The  
Man who is neutral in this fight is not  
A man!"

PRAYER Forgive us, O God, for our hesitance and fear....our almost believing, almost daring, almost going all the way. Draw near to us in these days of this Season of Lent....the better to press thy claims upon us, the more clearly to evoke from us an unconditional yes. Make us willing to bet our lives completely on Thee, to take that leap of faith that is required and to find joy peace and life. Through Christ, who found it. Amen