

"CATCHING THE SPIRIT OF JESUS"

INTRODUCTION

The meditation this morning begins with the observation that there is in many human beings a strong impulse to copy the best they know. Master pieces have a way of casting a spell over people. Often we turn to see or to hear how the "great ones" have done it. We try to catch their style and copy their form.

I remember once hearing that Beethoven, in his early days as a composer, lived under the spell of Mozart. Perry Como told us recently on one of the talk shows that in his early days as a singer he lived under the spell of Bing Crosby. And how many boys growing up on the sandlots of baseball in this country have tried to imitate the playing style of some major leaguer. The spell bound person is tempted to copy the work that he admires so extravagantly. Beethoven, for instance, copied Mozart. Perry Como copied Bing Crosby. In so doing, they lost neither their independence nor their integrity. They were practicing the art of imitation.

Few people, however, are content to remain imitators. As they mature, as their own powers develop, they catch the spirit of their master, of their idol and they go on to re-create it in some new form of their own. Beethoven, for instance, caught the spirit of Mozart and recreated it in symphonies of his own never before dreamed of. Perry Como caught the easy, graceful style of Bing Crosby and re-created it in new forms of his own.

DEVELOPMENT

In something of the same fashion, there have been people who have had an irresistible desire to imitate Jesus of Nazareth. Limited as their own human proportions are, high above them as he is in holiness, they instinctively reach out to Him with all of their powers of imitation. Quite literally, He casts a spell over them. His words have a strange music which they find difficult to forget. His movement has a gracefulness that they cannot cease to admire. His spirit has a comprehension that they cannot easily dismiss. No matter how often they may fail him, his spell never quite loses its power over them.

We need not be surprised then to find ourselves at times consciously, deliberately and clumsily, to be sure, trying to copy Jesus. Indeed, we might be surprised that we do not copy him more continually. He prayed, so we pray. He cared for the common man, so we try to care for the common man. He was calm and confident and courageous in the storms of life, so we try to be calm, courageous and confident as we pass through life's stormy experiences. He made a foreigner, a Samaritan, a model of good will, so we let down the barriers to men from other lands, to men of other backgrounds, of other races. He forgave his enemies. We try to follow him more and more in that spirit of forgiveness. He had an affection and high regard for all sorts of people and we try to follow him in that example, too.

We're never proud because we fall short, but neither are we discouraged because the more sincerely we copy him the more our habits of thought and action are controlled by him. Like all imitators there are times when we get only his mannerisms, but there are other times when it seems, perhaps only for a moment, Christ's spirit is alive within us.

NOT ENOUGH TO COPY

However, to simply copy is not enough. It doesn't allow the creative spirit of a person enough room. It doesn't provide for that time when the circumstances are so different that no exact copying is possible.

Jesus, for instance, did not work in a coal mine, but Vincent Van Gogh did. Van Gogh could not copy Jesus, but he could catch his spirit and re-create it in the hopeless lives of the miners. Jesus never lived in a slum, but that great Christian spirit of Japan, Kagawa, did. Kagawa could not copy Jesus line for line, but he could catch the spirit of His love and then recreate it in terms of tenement houses and families of faith. Jesus never lived in a jungle, but Albert Schweitzer did. He could not copy Jesus line for line, but he was able to catch His spirit and reproduce it in remedies for healing. Jesus never served as the Secretary General of the United Nations, but Dag Hammarskjold did. He couldn't copy Jesus for the situations he faced were unlike any that Jesus ever knew. But Hammarskjold caught something of His spirit and lived and worked in such a way as to move the entire world, and by moving it, take away some of its violence and separation.

CLIMAX The world in which Jesus lived was different from our own. He never had to contend with the tensions involved in office routine. He never had to deal with the responsibilities of rearing children. He knew nothing of the cut-throat competitive ways of the business world. He never had to face the pressures of a technological, urban society. He never had to deal with the issues of global war or the complexities of an international peace...pollution problems.

We cannot copy him as we try to find our way through these difficult areas of modern life. There's no detailed blue-print in the New Testament for handling such concerns. But what we can do is to catch the spirit of love and of goodwill that was His and try to re-create it in the new forms that this age and our personal situations demand. It was a love so strong that it made strong men good. It was a love embracing compassion, understanding, and trust - a love that was capable of transforming human hearts and difficult situations. It was a love that was built on a reverence for life and for the respect for the dignity of others. That spirit of love is reproduceable. First: self-consciously and deliberately by imitators, and then: spontaneously and creatively - and to the degree that it is reproduced in us, to that same degree it can be said of us: he or she is a real Christian!

One of the great Christians of the middle ages was Francis of Assisi. We're told that in his early years he made a conscious effort to imitate Jesus - to copy his style and mannerisms. But we also know that Francis went on from there and in his own way, in his own time, caught the spirit of the life of Jesus and reproduced that measure of love in different ways. We remember a prayer he once wrote that catches this Christ-spirit. I close with it and ask you to bow your head and listen thoughtfully to it as I read it to you.

"Lord - make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen