

## CENTERING YOUR LIFE IN GOD"

### INTRODUCTION

The meditation this morning begins with this observation that every human life has this much in common with a circle: it must have a center if it is to be true - a point around which everything else revolves, something that ties it all together, something that coordinates its manifold activities and interests, something that keeps it from going off in all directions at once, from dissipating its energies so that instead of being channelled they are spilled over on the ground like a bucket of water, spread over the earth with no intention or result.

Unlike a circle, however, a human life does not always have a center. There are scores of people whose lives seem, at least, to have no center at all. Several years ago someone described the city of Los Angeles as sixty suburbs in search of a city. There are many people whose lives could be described in something of a similar fashion. Sixty, or a hundred or more, activities and interests in search of a person, a center that would give them significance and direction.

### THE CENTER OF YOUR LIFE

Let me ask you this: what is the center of your life? Is it your own self? I wouldn't be surprised if it is for this, I think, is the natural center. All of your natural instincts draw you to it. All of us, I suppose, have the natural inclination to organize our lives around the things we want - the way we want to live, the pleasures we enjoy, the things that give us satisfaction. When you're in danger, you have the natural instinct to protect yourself. When you want something, you have the natural impulse to take it. It goes without saying, and it's not to be wondered at, that there are thousands of completely self-centered people in the world. They are invariably miserable and very seldom they do not know it. But everyone else knows it, but so often they do not.

Perhaps in helping you to look at your own life so that you can examine more closely than you may have done in some time what the center of it is, this might help. Remember that a self-centered person is not necessarily a selfish person. Do you see what I mean? As a matter of fact, some of the most self-centered persons I have known have been the most generous. The point is that their generosity is always bent inward to themselves. Let not, therefore, your generosity deceive you. It may only be a device by which you seek to draw people to yourself.

On the other hand, if the center of your life is not your self, it may be your work. There are people whose lives revolve entirely around their work. Renoir was one of the French painters of the 19th century who did magical things with flesh tones. He started out as the son of a tailor, and it took him a long time before he realized his ambition and become one of the great painters of France. When he was in his sixties, his hands became so crippled that they could no longer hold a brush. His biographer writes this of him: With brushes strapped to his hands he continued to paint. He was not to be denied the work that was his life itself to him. So a man's work can become the center of his life.

The man or the woman who says, "I live to paint pictures". "I

live to take care of the sick". "I live to teach children". "I Live raise a family". "I live to make a better and more honest government is, I think, a great deal better off, happier, and more useful than the person who says "I live for my own life. I don't ask for anything except to live life as I want to live it".

Or is God the center of your life? That may startle you. What does that mean? In order to suggest dramatically to you what it means let me take you back across the centuries of time, to the first century to an event which is recorded for us in the New Testament narrative. The followers of our Lord, after he had been killed, were forbidden to speak about him or to do anything that might attract attention to him. Nonetheless, as you know, they did this. They went right on talking about him; they went right on working in his name. Soon some of them were arrested and put in jail. By hook or by crook, by prison guard or guardian angel, they managed to escape from jail and when the authorities went to find them they were not there. When they finally caught up with them to their amazement they found them in the Temple telling the people there all about this new way of life. The authorities took the disciples into custody, took them back to the courtroom to put them back on trial, and it was there that Peter stood up and spoke those memorable words: "We ought to obey God rather than men!"

"We ought to obey God rather than men". God, you see, had come to them in Christ and Christ had led them into the very presence of God. Claims had been laid upon them - the claims of love given and love received. God, in Christ, had become the center of their lives and everything else now revolved around this center - their families, their jobs, their pleasures, their free-time. I'd venture to say that it was of no great personal advantage to them to center their lives in this new and crucial event. I'd venture to say it was something of a risk to their own personal well being. It probably didn't help their businesses at all. As a matter of fact, it may have ruined them. But this was the highest and the deepest that they knew and once their lives became centered in God whom they met in Christ, their lives had a range that they had never had before. There was a serenity about them that enabled them to meet everything that came their way without panic. They had a confidence that was far more than bravado. They had peace and power. They had what every man has who centers his life in God - life from the depths and life from the heights - in the world yet beyond the world. This may give you some clue as to what it means to center your life in God.

#### HOW CAN WE CENTER OUR LIVES IN GOD?

Perhaps by now a question may be forming in your minds. You may be asking this question: how can we center our lives in God? How do we 20th century Americans go about doing this....self-centered by nature....caught up in a culture of material values. Even if we want to do this, even if we see something in other people who do this that draws us to them, how can we do it?

To be sure no one can tell you exactly how to do this, but my own thought would run along this line that you have to begin with some real experience of God, no matter how slight it may be. You can be sure of this: you can't center your life in someone who have never met, but only heard about. And this too - (this may help some of you you do not meet God every day. Even those people whom we call the mystics, the ones who have had the most intimate union with God, have

not had it continuously. Rufus Jones is an illustration of the sort of thing I have in mind. He was not only a writer about the mystics, but he was also a mystic himself in the sense that in his own way he shared in the mystical experience. But he tells us that he had only two experiences in his entire lifetime that he would put in this class: one when he was in college, the other once when he was on his way to Europe. The night before he docked he tells us: "I suddenly found myself surrounded by an enfolding Presence and held as though by invisible arms. My entire being was fortified and I was inwardly prepared to meet the message of sorrow that greeted me the next day at the dock". The message was that his son was dangerously ill and two days later another message came that his son was dead.

No matter when or how this experience comes to a person the essence of it is (and these are things mind you that we speak about with the greatest hesitation) - the essence of it is always the same. A sense of a Presence - sometimes protecting you, sometimes fortifying you; sometimes making demands upon you which in turn stir you out of your lethargy and complacency. It strengthens you. Helps you to see things in a better perspective. It's like the tide coming in - bringing new energies, new visions, new hopes, filling up the little eddies of your life.

You may say well I've never had an experience like that. For my own part I suppose I would rather you say that you haven't if you really haven't than to pretend you have. But my guess is that most of you may have had some experience like this even though you may not have recognized it, or identified it. You may not be able like some people can to pin it down to an exact hour or moment in your life. It doesn't always happen in the traditional figures, not always in the conventional language of religious terminology. I remember an experience I had as a young man, just about the time I was going into college, an experience that was so meaningful, an experience that seemed to carry me completely outside of myself that it brought me into the Lord's work. And so I started out to tell others of this wonderful thing and although I haven't always been able to quite convey to others what I felt, I knew something had happened to me, and I have wanted to see it happen to others.

The chances are that somewhere along the line you may have had an experience like that. Remember it. And then go back to it. Search it out. Feed it. Cultivate it. This is what you do with a human relationship. You meet a person you're drawn to. You may not be with that person all the time. But you try to remember him. You think about him. On a larger and vaster scale you do the same thing with God. You meet him as the disciples met him in Christ. For them God and Christ were inseparable, as indeed they are for us. I sometimes find myself speaking about God without specifically referring to Christ, but I always see God through Christ and I cannot think of him apart from Christ. Sometimes I speak of Christ without referring to God, but I never come close to Christ that I am not brought closer to God. The two are inseparable in Christian experience.

However small a fragment of this experience may come to you. Cultivate it. Nourish it. Feed it. Even when you're not thinking about him particularly, you will find that he is with you as a kind of invisible presence - a spirit - influencing you and strengthening you and enabling you to do so many things that might seem to you

otherwise impossible.

What is center of your life? If you have no center, you are lost. If the center of your life is your self, you will be miserable and in the end alone. If the center of your life is your work, you will be happier and infinitely more useful in the world. If it is God, you will have the joy and peace that passes a man's understanding. As you come to the communion rail today I wish you could have a real meeting with God, even though you may never have had it before - the infinite love of the Father....invading the crowded ways of your life so that as you remember it, feed it, cultivate it, and go back to it and experience it later on, it will become more and more nearly the center of your life.

LET US PRAY:

God, our Father, we know that we are moving through deep waters. We know that everything in and about ourselves tempts us to center our lives upon ourselves. Lead us outward and as we meet Thee in Christ, may our lives become more and more centered in Thee, that we may have peace, joy and confidence. Amen