

"FOR THE HEALING OF THE HURTING"

INTRODUCTION

There was a cartoon a few years back that spoke volumes about human nature. It was in four sequential sections. The first picture portrayed a business executive angrily denouncing a subordinate in the office. The second picture revealed that employee at home berating his wife. The third picture showed the wife impatiently scolding their little boy. And the fourth picture disclosed the lad imperiously punishing the family dog. It was a vivid demonstration of the chain reaction to frustration and hurt.

This tendency to hurt another when we ourselves get hurt is not only human nature; it is animal nature. Scientists at Western Michigan University have discovered that the aggression of many species of animals is an instantaneous reaction to pain. This is the way a report reads: instantaneous

"A rat which has received a shock will instantly turn to attack another rat if one is near. Pain will cause an animal to attack a member of a different species, including species which it normally avoids. A racoon, for example, will attack a rat which had nothing to do with its experience of pain. If it can't find another animal, the hurt animal will attack anything - even a stuffed toy"

We humans are often like the animals in this respect. When we are hurt - not so much in body as in mind and spirit - we often lash out at the nearest person, to vent our anger and our anguish. This is a pretty basic psychological law that should deepen our understanding of a great deal of behaviour that we observe.

IT SHOULD HELP

It should help us to understand individuals that we come in contact with...In little ways, as when we encounter the irritation of friend or family, associate or acquaintance. So often this is not the personal resentment that it appears to be - it is the chain reaction of that cartoon in which a person is simply taking out his frustrations on the most convenient person. If only we had the patience and the perspective to realize that so much of the cloudy weather that we encounter in people is like a thunder storm that is soon past, and that the squalls should not be taken too seriously or too personally, how much trouble and grief we could save ourselves.

But in larger ways, too, as sometimes we come up against people who are characteristically bitter and vindictive. I remember in one church that I was associated with, early in my ministry, a friend said of a certain man, "He has the most vitriolic tongue in this congregation". And I guess he did. For to meet him generally meant an encounter with criticism and cynicism. But as time went on, that man revealed something of the hurts that he had received in his lifetime - as a child, as a youth, - tragic, traumatic hurts that had left their scars upon his soul. By no means could I condone his sometimes vindictive spirit and I often wished that he might have experienced more of the transforming grace of God, but at least I could far better understand the hurts that he relayed when I saw the hurts that he had received.

So much psychiatry, of course, is devoted to a kind of dredging in an attempt to bring to the surface the hurts and the damage done to a person in some earlier day. Some of us would contend that the pendulum has swung a little too far in the direction of trying to explain and excuse all adult behaviour on the basis of childhood environment. There is still a place for personal responsibility and for

Christian redemption no matter what the circumstances of a person's life, and no person needs to go whining and excusing his way through life....but there is also a rightful concern for the hurts of early years. When homes are insecure and values are twisted and love is either sparse or possessive, then hurts are often inflicted which go on infecting other lives across the years.

I used to have trouble with that verse in the Bible which talks about "the iniquities of the fathers being visited upon the children to the third and fourth generations". But I have come to see a sense in which it is profoundly true. The sins and the selfishness of parents are visited upon their children - and often perpetuated from generation to generation - in a kind of tragic enlargement of the cartoon with which we started this sermon. And at least some of the raw hurting inflicted on others in our time can be traced back to love-less, faith-less, care-less homes. And again, that is not to excuse, but it is in part to explain.

IT SHOULD HELP US TO UNDERSTAND GROUPS, TOO

Just as this sensitivity to scars should help us in our understanding of individuals, so it should deepen our understanding of groups as we look out on the contemporary scene. Sometimes people resent aggressive Jews, and complain about certain traits in certain people which they find offensive. But who among us really ever stops to think or care about the suffering which the "Jewish *friends*" people have experienced. For centuries, a haunted, hounded race - excluded, ridiculed, discriminated against - and in our time experiencing persecution at Hitler's hand at the cost of six million lives - a monstrous crime that found the Christian church strangely silent. One of the best antidotes when anti-semitism comes knocking at our souls is the remembrance of the suffering of the Jewish people, and a concern for something of the empathy suggested by Shakespeare in those words which he put into Shylock's mouth: *Shylock's speech*

"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

Or again, how readily these days do we react in shock and anger at the threats and tactics of black militants. And indeed how can the followers of Jesus Christ be other than disturbed at methods of violence and intimidation, which are the very antithesis of his way. We may not be able to go all the way with the methods of a James Forman, but let Christians go deeper and probe further to understand the conditions that can spawn the fury and frustration of a James Forman or a James Baldwin or a Malcolm X. I have a Negro friend who says that trouble comes among his people when "frustration out runs hope". And what do most of us know about the depth of frustration or the heritage of hurting that has attended slavery and discrimination and life in the ghettos. Can I be so sure - or can you be so sure - that we should not act like a Forman or a Baldwin if that had been our background? Are we not all related to the characters in that cartoon who kept passing along their frustrations - and is not much of society today related to the animals in that experiment who took out their hurts on the object nearest them?

MAIN POINT OF SERMON

But the main point of this sermon is not so much to understand the harvest of hurting, as it is to suggest that through Christ we have been given quite another way of responding to hurting. When one of the New Testament writers came to write down his appraisal of Jesus, there was one thing in particular that stood out in his memory, and this is what he said of Jesus:

"When He was reviled, he did not revile in return". or as translated in New English Bible: "When he was abused, he did not retort with abuse"

That Jesus should have preached that doctrine, as he did in the Sermon on the Mount, that was amazing enough - but that Jesus should actually have lived by that doctrine, as he did on the cross and on the way to the cross, that was almost incredible. "When He was reviled, he did not revile in return". And said the author of that New Testament letter, "To this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps".

TWO THINGS THAT HAPPEN

There are at least two things that happen when people follow very far in Christ's steps in their response to hurting. First-off, they are better able to absorb hurts without blindly striking out at someone else. Harry Truman had a sign on his desk when he was in the White House that read, "The buck stops here". The tall Christian has a sign about his life that in effect reads, "The hurt stops here"

This ability to absorb hurts grows out of the nature and status of a person's faith. In Christ, he has glimpsed the power of restraint which is greater than the power of revenge. In Christ, he has found a measure of healing for his own hurting. Through Christ, he is given a grace to accept the hurts without the necessity of forever playing the game of "pass it on".

Every now and again we discover people who humble us by the way they handle the hurts of life. Roland Hayes has been one of the great concert singers of our time, with a clear voice matched by a clear spirit. One night before a concert, a reporter came to interview him and found him eating his supper in a dingy hotel room because the hotel denied him a better place in which to dine. The reporter, a white man, exploded in anger about this treatment of the Negro singer, but Mr. Hayes said to him,

"My earliest teacher in voice, himself a Negro, told me that as an artist, a black artist, I would suffer terribly if I allowed the barbs to penetrate my soul; but if my heart was right, and my spirit divinely disciplined, then nobody in all the world would be able to hurt me. I know now this is true. I try every moment of every day to live in such awareness of the divine that no bitterness can creep into my heart. Thus I have learned how to be happy, and I have discovered that nobody in all the world can hurt me except myself..."

"To live in such awareness of the divine that no bitterness can creep into my heart". How better can you describe one specification of what it means to be a Christian?

But there is something else. Not only should Christians grow in some ability to handle their hurts, but they should grow in some skills for the healing of hurting, wherever they find it. There is so much hurting in the world today. The hurting of hunger, of privation, of separation, of hatred. John Gardner, the former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, summed it up:

"This is a day of divisive dissent. Everyone is speaking with unbridled anger in behalf of his point of view or of his party or of his people and the fissures in our society are dangerously deep. We need some new emphasis on things that hold us together".

Which is another way of saying that we need people who are the instruments of healing.

Years ago, as some of you may remember, it was the custom in some of the rural parts of our country to say when two young people started going together that "John is paying attention to Mary". Paying attention. I think that paying attention is quite literally part of the process of understanding and of affection - not only between two people - but between diverse elements in a nation or a world. The most serious question of our time, as I see it, is whether enough people are willing to pay attention.....whether there can be listening as well as talking... between youth and age, between black and white, between city and suburb. We face the choice at so many points between escalating the hurting we see and feel - or alleviating the hurting. And in some degree, it is the choice that every person, young or old, faces - to hurt or to heal, to strike back or to revile not in return.

AN INCIDENT William Stringfellow is an Episcopal layman who has devoted much of his life to the problems of the inner city. In a recent book he tells of an incident that took place in one part of our city - a Puerto Rican gang and an Italian gang were fighting over the right to swim in a public pool. With knives and chains and bottles, they waged war.

The author said that in every gang there is a war counsellor, whose task is to chart the activity of the gang - where they will rob, whom they will fight, how they will do it. The brother of the war counsellor for the Italian gang was killed. The counsellor brooded all night afterward planning how the gang would get its revenge. Suddenly there came the realization that if they got revenge, it would be somebody else's brother who would get killed.

Early the next morning, he went alone without weapons, and unbeknown to any of the members of his gang, to seek out the war counsellor of the rival Puerto Rican gang that had killed his brother. He wanted to know if there was some way their gang warfare could be stopped without more killing or without either of the gangs losing face. So, instead of plotting against each other, the two boys worked out a plan of peace and reconciliation. And says William Stringfellow, because of what he did, peace came to that particular section of the East Harlem community.

This is not the kind of activity that makes the news - any more than some activity that took place on a hill outside Jerusalem on a certain Friday long ago caused much of a sensation in the Roman Empire. But because of the power and the persistence of the cross, the Man from Nazareth still stands for many of us as "the way, the truth, and the life". And part of that way, of that truth, of that life is simply stated in Paul's advice which I put before you as the word the week: "Repay no one evil for evil.....do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good".

PRAYER: Take the hatred and the hurting from our hearts, O God, and in turn help teach us to lessen the hurting in the hearts of others. Make us, Lord, instruments of thy peace and thy healing. Where there is hatred, let us sow love, where there is injury, pardon, whether there is doubt, faith, where there is darking, light, where there is sadness, joy - through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen