

HOW DOES ONE MEET SORROW?

INTRODUCTION

The sermons on the last three Sundays have all begun with questions. You'll recall that three weeks ago we began by asking this question: Does prayer really make a difference? Two weeks ago we focused our attention on this question: How can I get along with others? Last Sunday we centered our thoughts around this question: How Does one find inner quietness? The sermon this morning moves off in still another direction for together we shall be thinking about sorrow. It's not necessary for me to define my terms. All of us know what sorrow is. Some of you know all too well what it is, and this you know from first hand experience. HOW DOES ONE MEET SORROW?

I would like to begin by sharing with you a letter that a young lady living in California during World War II wrote to her former pastor, Dr. James Gordon Gilkey. Dr. Gilkey later included this letter in a book that he wrote entitled, When Life Gets Hard. Her letter in part read:

"My fiance, a naval officer in the Pacific, has been killed in action. I know he died as he would have chosen - in the service of his country. For that I am grateful. But of course I myself have now lost everything. Does the solution of my problem lie in mere resignation to my loss, or in something else? Is there anything I can go on when the best things in life have now been taken away from me"

I think that this young woman was expressing that feeling of loneliness that comes to all of us when someone very close to us has been taken away by death. Few people, if they live very long at all, escape this experience. It affects people differently. It may be a cry born in bitterness and resentment, or perhaps in honest wonderment, sometimes in crushed anguish of the soul.

Most of us, as we move along from day to day, give very little thought to the possibility of death stealing away those we love. And I suppose it's a good thing too that we do not dwell continually upon it for these morbid thoughts of the dark visitor of death can cast a shadow over life. But sorrow is a universal experience. Sooner or later it descends upon just about everybody. For all we know there may be some person sitting here this morning listening to what's being said who before we come together again may taste the depths of sorrow and sadness. As you know it comes without warning. Oh to be sure, it may send up some advance signals, yet even with these, when it comes we still need help. The kindness of friends is appreciated. The comfort of our loved ones is a benediction. But in the end, I think, the great issue of death is something that has to be met in the silent sanctuary of the individual soul. There, in that place, it must be resolved. And there, in that place, is where we need the ministry of the divine and the eternal support that comes to us from the word of God.

Does the solution to this problem lie, as the young woman suggested in her letter, in "mere resignation"? Or is there something else we can "go on"? HOW DOES ONE MEET SORROW?

ACCEPT THE REALITY OF DEATH

Perhaps it would be well for us to suggest right here in the beginning of this sermon that if we are to meet sorrow effectively, and by this I mean not allowing it to shatter our lives completely, not allowing it to breed resentment and rebellion, then we must be willing to accept the reality of death. As someone has said, "In the midst of life, we are in death". And yet how many people there are today who cannot accept the reality of death, people who cannot reconcile themselves to it. Perhaps an example will point up even more what I am suggesting.

For instance, take the case of a prosperous mid-western business man. A man of great ability, over the years he built up a business that was valued at close to a million dollars. He was the type of person who was used to having his own way. One day his lovely and talented teen-age daughter was taken from him by death. She was an only child, and had been raised with the utmost of care and privilege. The father was never able to accept the fact of her death. For twenty years the daughter's room in the home was left untouched. Her dresses were left to rot in the closet. The piano on which she practiced was never touched. She was buried in a private family grave-yard near the house. For twenty years the father made a daily pilgrimage to the grave. And then one day his wife died and the same routine was repeated for many more years. The autumn years of his life which ought to have been glorious years turned out to be unhappy years. He had walled himself in. He was unloved by his associates. He was sour and cynical. His money mocked him. His heart was empty for he was a prisoner of his own sorrow.

Now what I would like to say in connection with this simple story is that it seems to me that God never intended for sorrow to do this to us. When sorrow enters into our lives, we must learn to accept it as a part of the very business of living and loving. It's real, mind you, and no philosophy of sweetness and light can blot out that desparate and devastating feeling of loneliness that comes when some one very close to us is taken from us. And no matter how long and how desparately we may wish to hold on to those who have passed away, there comes a time when we must accept the fact that they have departed from this life. To rebel against it, to deny it in one's own mind, to live in the past only invites more grief, more misery and more heartbreak. We needn't be ashamed of our grief for grief is a very real emotional experience and to grieve is a very normal and natural thing. We would be less than human not to show it. But to allow our grief to master us and to shatter our lives completely is unhealthy, unnatural and unnecessary and unbecoming to a child of God.

In other words, God has made death a part of the order of life and the universe. And the man of faith must make it a part of the order of his life and his universe. We would do well to get used to the idea of death. We need to learn to live with it. We need to make it a part of our own thinking, plans and philosophy. A philosophy of life that does not include a philosophy of death is incomplete and inadequate. And yet so many of us refuse to think about it; we prefer not to. We can be objective about it when sorrow comes to others, but when it at last comes our way, we find it so difficult to accept.

We must learn how to accept it. And let me add this for I think it ties in with what I'm saying. Grief is a real emotion. Grieving and mourning, painful though it is, has to be faced if comfort is eventually to follow. Perhaps the simplest way is to keep on going, to keep on living, to keep on working. (Even though it may be the simplest way, it may be the hardest). After all, we do more honor to those who have gone on by faithfully doing our duty than by giving in to our grief. We would do well to keep in mind the words of Job after he had been told of the accidental death of his sons:

"Then Job arose....and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped. And said....the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly"

DRAW UPON THE HIGHER POWER

Having accepted the reality of death, the next step is to draw upon those spiritual resources that are supplied by a trust in God. Turning to God in an attitude of faith and emptying the heart and mind to him through trustful prayer can be a very helpful and steadying experience. Perhaps only those who have experienced this know what a curative comfort it can be. I know I have, and I know some of you have too.

Norman Vincent Peale in his book, The Power of Positive Thinking shares with us an incident that throws light on what we're thinking about here this morning. It seems that four men were sitting in the locker room of a country club following a game of tennis. Talk about the tennis soon drifted into a discussion of personal problems and difficulties. One man was especially despondent. His only son had been buried less than a month. And the other men, his friends, realizing his unhappy state of mind had arranged this game of tennis to get his mind off of his personal situation. They hoped a few hours on the tennis court would bring some relief.

As they sat around after the game, various suggestions were offered to him. Finally one of the men arose to go. He knew about what the man was going through. He had been through it himself. He had found some vital answers to his problems. He stood hesitantly and then put his hand on his friend's shoulder and said: "George....I hope you won't think I'm preaching to you. Really I'm not, but I would like to suggest something to you. It's the way I got through my difficulties. It really works if you work it, and it's this...why not draw upon that Higher Power".

He slapped his friend affectionately on the back and left the group. The other man sat mulling it over. Finally he said, "I know what he means and I know where the Higher Power is. I only wish I knew how to draw upon it. It's what I need all right". In the course of time, we're told, he discovered how to draw upon that Higher Power, and it changed everything for him.

There may be some people here today, discouraged and depressed and filled with heartache and sorrow. It almost goes without saying that they need not be that way. The secret is to draw upon that Higher Power. "He healeth the broken heart and bindeth up their wounds". This is one of the great and enduring messages of the Bible. Earlier in the service we read together those great words of

reassurance from John's Gospel (the 14th chapter). "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. Ye believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you". I remember so well a summer morning ten years ago this coming summer when those particular words spoke directly to me. Words of comfort and consolation that have spoken to the hearts of millions who have tasted the depths of sorrow and pain. Certainly the advice that was given George at the country club is good advice for God, somehow, in all of his mystery and infinite power and love will sustain us in those experiences of sorrow.

SORROW: A MEANS TO
NEW INSIGHT AND POWER

Now before I move on let me just sum up what we have touched upon thus far. First, we need to accept the reality of death, and second, we need to draw upon that higher power. Finally, and I'm not at all sure as to how to express this to you, but perhaps it would be something like this: we can find in our experiences of sorrow a means to a deeper insight of life and a more useful and meaningful life. We can find in our own particular sorrow all of the materials which will enhance the beauty and the power of our lives. Of course this depends on our courage and our faith. The world does not stop just because a loved one dies. Our responsibility is more to the living than it is to the dead. The victorious ones, therefore, are those who in the face of all that life can do, put their faith in God and continue to live.

Perhaps you're familiar with the story of Josephine Butler and her husband, and how they were returning home from a vacation trip. They were looking forward to seeing their little daughter again. As they were approaching their house, the little girl was standing in the balcony waving a childish welcome. In her excitement she leaned over too far and fell to her death. It was a tragic homecoming. And for the time the light went out in that home. Then the mother said that she decided to find a keener sorrow than her own and to minister to it. In a sense she glorified her grief by becoming a friend and a helper to many girls. Her tragedy thus became the source and the secret of one of the most inspiring lives of her time. It was said of her, referring to the words of the psalmist that "she trod the valley of weeping and made it a place of springs". She turned her sorrow into a symphony.

There are some who will claim that all death is the will of God. I find it difficult to accept this popular claim. It is not always true. Some sorrow comes because of ignorance, some because of sin, some because of germs, some because of accidents and carelessness. We cannot blame God for such as these. Nor can we say that God sends death to our loved ones to save us or to teach us a lesson. These I think are crude representations of the way of God with his children. But this is true however, that when sorrow does come it may be used of God to open to us a world of great depth and power. For as Paul said in our scripture lesson this morning: "For we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him".

Modern psychologists are telling us that the differences in the way that people see things are the keys to their personalities. That is, a person is what he sees. The most famous test in this field is known as the Rorschach Test. In it the person tested is asked to look at a series of inkblots in jagged shapes and tell the tester what he sees. Two people, for instance will look at an inkblot. One may see a sunrise. The other will see a storm cloud. Neither is

right, but the personalities thus projected are entirely different. In some such way God tests us all by the ragged shapes and blots of life which sorrow creates. It's in the way that we react that counts. Men of faith see in them not meaningless blots or some frightening act of God, but new shapes and forms with challenges and opportunities to ~~enrich~~ enrich life and glorify God. Sorrow, in the great and good providence of God, has its own ministry. What we see in it makes us what we are.

And so we come to the end of another sermon. I hope that something has been said here this morning that will be of some help to you when you are called on to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Be willing to accept the reality of death, be willing to draw upon that higher power, and try to find in your sorrow that which will enhance and deepen the usefulness and the beauty of your own life.

LET US PRAY

We know, O God, that everything we are and have and everything that we can ever hope to be, ultimately comes from Thee. Keep alive within us that sense of dependence upon thee, and give us the wisdom and the courage to cooperate with thy laws that we may work together with thee in all things to do those things which by ourselves we could never accomplish at all. Amen