

"HOW TO BE YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND"

INTRODUCTION

Helen Keller wrote in her autobiography,

"Literature is my Utopia. Here I am not disfranchised. No barrier of the senses shuts me out from the sweet, gracious discourse of my book friends. They talk to me without embarrassment or awkwardness".

If she, sightless, could write in this fashion; how much more should we, sighted, have some deep appreciation for the "gracious discourse of our book-friends". Again, today, as was the case last Sunday, I want to introduce to you a new "book friend" as the start of a sermon that grows out of that book.

When I first came across the title of this book on the best seller list, "How To Be Your Own Best Friend", my reaction was somewhat negative. I think many of us have grown skeptical of the "How To..." books. They can be scheming and self-serving and would seldom qualify for the kind of literature that Helen Keller had in mind. So this title sounded to me like a prescription for self-centeredness and self-conceit. "How To Be Your Own Best Friend".

DEVELOPMENT

But I kept hearing more about the book, until at length I finally picked up a copy of it over at Gimbels and I think it has some true and important things to say about self-regard. The book is quite short, and it reflects the answers to a series of questions addressed to a husband and wife team, Mildred Newman and Bernard Berkowitz, both of whom have good credentials in the realm of mental health. The tone of this book is very much in the tradition of "I'm O. K. - You're O. K." - though it's not as thoughtful and detailed as that book.

This little volume is not primarily a religious book, but it does have some of its roots in the Bible. For example, it quotes the commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" in support of the author's contention that a healthy self-love is basic to any healthy love of others. And again, calling upon a person to look within himself, it declares, "the kingdom is within you" - which reminds us of Jesus when He said, "The Kingdom of God is within you". More than once, as I read the book, I thought to myself that it's not far removed from what Jesus says. Consider some of the main themes running through the book.

RESPONSIBLE FOR OURSELVES

First, the book beams the message clear and strong that we are responsible for ourselves. Quoting from it,

"To take responsibility for our lives means making a profound change in the way we approach everything. We do everything we can to avoid this change, this responsibility. We would much rather blame someone or something for making us feel unhappy than take the steps to make us feel better."

How true it is. The book points out that some people feel that their parents treated them unfairly or unwisely as children, while others nurse a grievance at some difficult circumstance that hurt them at some stage in life. And this is the response of the authors:

"People feel very justified in their anger.....they may be right... but what they don't see is that they are now cheating themselves as adults. As long as they spend their energies being angry at the people who deprived them once, they won't spend their effort on getting for themselves what they need now!"

There is a comment in Emerson's JOURNAL which is in the same spirit. He wrote,

"Henry Thoreau made, last night, the fine remark that, as long as a man stands in his own way, everything seems to be in his way".

A person, I believe, can be his own worst enemy, and there is a fine sense in which a person needs to learn something about being his own best friend.

There are, at least, three facts that determine individually what we are and what we do with our lives. Heredity. Environment. And a personal response. Heredity is our personal heritage. Environment is our personal set of circumstances for the days of our lives. Personal response is what individually we create with the heritage and circumstances that are ours.

To be sure, heredity and environment are powerful factors in shaping our lives, but they are not the sole factors. If they were, then people with fortunate genes and ideal circumstances would invariably be strong and solid folk, while people with blemished backgrounds and poor circumstances would invariably be weak personal failures. And it's never as clear-cut as that. There is this further element of personal response - in which a person accepts responsibility for himself, his choices and devotes himself, with the grace of God, to making something of worth out of his own life.

The hinge, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, that turns the story from a study in a young man's descent into irresponsible self-destruction ~~from that~~ to a study in a young man's ascent into responsible personhood is one brief phrase in the midst of that parable, "When he came to himself..." That is a great moment, a decisive moment, in any person's life when he stops blaming his parents, or his times, or any set of circumstances and acknowledges responsibility for his choices and the shape of his life.

"It's not what happens to a person; it's the person to whom it happens" so goes an old saying. Well, it's both - but our danger is that we shall take refuge under the cover of what happens to us, without accept responsibility for the response of the person to whom it happens.

I feel this little book is very close to a gospel truth when it declares, "You are free when you accept the responsibility for your choices".

COMPASSION FOR OURSELVES

Second, beyond responsibility for ourselves, we need a measure of compassion for ourselves. To quote:

"Part of the person is pushing himself down, but another part is crying out that that's not where he belongs. It's a question of having some compassion for yourself".

I don't think that I've ever heard it put just that way. Taken by itself, it could be a rather dangerous doctrine....leading to self-pity....but building on a foundation of responsibility for oneself, then "compassion" for oneself makes a certain sense.

"Compassion" is a favorite word in the Christian vocabulary, but we generally use it with reference to others.....compassion for the down-trodden, the suffering,

the sinner. But might there not be a place for a kind of compassion for oneself?
Wrote the questioner in this book,

"I can think of hundreds of times I've wanted to be wise and thoughtful and mature and gracious and all those lovely things and ended up acting like a brat!"

To which the author responds,

"But that's just what everybody does. Why don't you think about the times you were wise and kind? Why remember and dwell on defeats instead of victories?"

A good question. So often we put ourselves down for failures and defeats of the past, as though that were all we ever had been, or ever could be.

One is reminded of that Gospel scene where Jesus first encountered Simon Peter, the big fisherman, and called him to discipleship. Luke records Peter's response as "depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man...." But Jesus refused to depart. And that kind of decisive encounter has happened again and again in the course of the centuries. We are at first shamed by Jesus, because His perfection seems to expose all of our imperfections. But sometimes He gets across to us the message that every person is made in the image of God, that there is something good in us, worth working on, and that with His help there can be more growth and more goodness.

If we had parents whose love was wise, there were times when they corrected us and disciplined us for our follies and our failures, but they also had a way of letting us know of their love and their confidence in us. How much we owe to parents if they could keep us from seeing ourselves simply as "not O. K. persons", but instead could lead us to a glimpse of ourselves as "O. K. persons". Or teachers, or friends.

What our parents or partners or close friends have done for some of us are all a hint of the saving, steadying power of Jesus Christ. He does not gloss over our sins, and indeed insists that we be honest and repentant, but he keeps insisting that there is something much more to us than our faults, that there is also something uniquely good and promising in each of us, and He gives "power to become the children of God".

These words from a recent article by Charles A. Shock in "The Christian Home" support what we are saying in this regard:

"Made in God's image, then, means an outlook of 'I'm OK and you're OK'. It means that we are children of God's universe; we have a right to be here! It means accepting the reality that we are accepted by God, even when we judge ourselves to be unacceptable. It means being set free to love, to hope, to expect delightful surprises, and to celebrate the marvelous, priceless gift of life".

Come to think of it, there is a beautiful way in which a person can have "compassion for oneself".

A FREEDOM THAT COMES WITH PROPER SELF-REGARD

Finally, there is a kind of summary theme to this book. It is that

there is a great freedom that comes with proper self-regard.

For one thing, we are freed to love others. The book puts it very pointedly: "If you don't have it, you can't give it". Which is a commentary on such New Testament verses, as "love your neighbors as yourself", or "We love, because He first loved us". To rightly love others, we must have some sense of respect and affection for ourselves. ~~But~~ when we can lift up our heads as persons whom "God so loved"-- then we are freed to share some love with others.

Again, we are freed to take pleasure in the good things that happen to others. Listen to this quotation:

"If you become more, it doesn't make me less. There is room for many marvelous people in the world and many wonderful achievements. When we really grasp this, we take pleasure in what others are able to do. We do not feel diminished. And we are able to do our own thing without feeling anxious or guilty toward anyone."

What a refreshing viewpoint in a world where a person's rise often seems to depend upon another's fall, and where too often there is a kind of perverse sense of satisfaction in another person's stumbles. I've often stopped to think about those words in Paul's "love" letter, because I have not always measured up to them, "Love does not rejoice at the wrong, but rejoices in the right" - which in a way is what this book is saying, that with the right self-love, we are freed to find pleasure in the good that others do, and in the good news that comes to others.

Christian self-respect is a quality of the spirit that Christ kindles and helps to keep in our lives. It unites humility and assurance in a new combination. You can see the synthesis at work in the Beatitudes read earlier in our service. There Jesus celebrates humility with such statements as "blessed are the meek" - that is, the teachable, the open. "blessed are the poor in spirit". And then He builds from that to such confidence and declares, "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world....let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works...." In the Christian life, humility and assurance can come together in beautiful balance.

CLOSING SECTION

One of the harvests of a ministry of lengthening years is the number of people that a minister is privileged to call "friend". And as I think of the lives that have touched mine in the years of my own ministry, so many of them are personal confirmations of the truth I have been talking about and interpreting today. These people are not-strutting or arrogant, neither are they self-demeaning or servile. They are honest about their limitations and failures, but through faith in Christ, they have been given a certain self-respect that frees them from the burdens of guilt and inferiority.

In the midst of pretty frustrating days, this is still the steady good news of the Gospel - that through the savingsfriendship of Jesus, a person can move from being his own worst enemy to being his own good friend - not in self-conceit, but in self-confidence that becomes a witness to "amazing grace", and a channel of outgoing and ongoing love.

PRAYER

What we have tried to put into words do Thou now by thy spirit put into some receptive life here this hour, we pray, O Thou who so loved the world that you gave Jesus ~~what~~ whoever believed on him should not perish but have life.