

PASTORAL PRAYER: June 9, 1985

ETERNAL SPIRIT.....Thou who hast taught us that in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength, make us to know that Thou art with us...and that with Thee all things are possible.

Touch, Thou, our lives, we pray

That our spirits may grow calm;
That our minds may be disciplined;
That our homes may be holy;
That our pleasures may be pure.

Help us to carry into the everydayness of our lives all that to which we aspire.

When we are discouraged, help us to carry on.
When we are fearful, increase our trust.
When we are wronged, help us to forgive.
When we are sorrowful, bring comfort to our hearts.
When we are successful, keep us humble.

RENEW OUR STRENGTH and our perspective in this time of worship. Help us to see life from higher ground. Send us forth as servants of Christ to do what we can to help others who may be imprisoned by life's experiences.

We pray for the sick.
the tempted.
the lonely.
the bereaved.
the anxious.

Strengthen us in our concern and determination to do what we can to improve conditions in the world, to bring peace in to those places where tension and friction now exist. And finally,

Teach us, good Lord, to serve Thee more faithfully,
To give and not to count the cost;
To fight and not to heed the wounds;
To toil and not to seek for rest;
To labor and not to ask for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do Thy will.

All of this we ask in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

"LOST AND FOUND"

TEXT: "And He said to all....'For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses His life for my sake, he will save it'...."

(Luke 9: 24)

INTRODUCTION

Jesus taught as much in paradox as in parable. Both are devices to make the truth sharp, clear and unforgettable. A parable is a mirror in which we see a reflection of ourselves. A paradox is a riddle - a seeming contradiction in which we see the clash of opposites strike a balance and move to a sharpened point of truth.

The Man from Nazareth was a master of sharp epigram and incisive paradox. He could cut through an ambiguous thought with a sharp thrust of a knife. "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted" - that's a paradox. "The last shall be first, and the first - last". "He that would be greatest, let him be your servant". He gave His followers sharp truths that stick in the mind.

His most widely quoted paradox is this one, "Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for My sake, will save it." He's not playing around here with an inspirational theory. This is one of the great truths about life. He's talking about what we all want - finding life, saving life. And between these two opposites - self-loving and self-losing - is the conflict that's going on inside everyone of us.

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

First, let's consider the Biblical text in light of the problem of self-consciousness.

I remember once reading somewhere that Billy Sunday, in preparation for a city-wide mission, wrote the mayor of the city in advance requesting a list of the people in the city who were in need of special prayer. The mayor responded by sending him a copy of the city Telephone Directory. Now most of us have a battle with shyness, with self-consciousness, with timidity. If you happen to be bothered by it, it may help you to remember that more than half of any given population is on your side.....suffering from the exact same problem.

What a nuisance it is - this feeling of timidity....this lack of self-confidence, oversensitivity to criticism, a fear of what other people may think or say which can drive us into hiding from them and even from ourselves. The essence of self-consciousness is fear - an extreme awareness of self. You try to make a speech and your self gets in the way, crawls up in your throat, tenses your muscles. You go out to meet people and a nervousness paralyzes your response.

The torment of timidity. Some people have lived so long with it that they've come to accept it as normal. Some have even come to think of it as a mark of modesty. But these helpful psychologists keep suggesting that it's really a kind of emotional hang-up.....a tell-tale signal that we're thinking too much of ourselves.

Now the Christian insight here is so obviously elementary that it has become the "common sense-ness" of mankind. We save ourselves by losing ourselves. We can overcome our self-consciousness in some measure by a kind of flank movement in which we turn attention away from ourselves to something or someone else. Re-

member that slang expression - "get lost". It has some psychological soundness to it. If you want to make a speech, "get lost" - lose yourself in the speech. Don't think of yourself, think of it, or think of them...the poor folk who have to listen to it. If you "want to win friends and influence people", "get lost" - get yourself off your mind. Forget the impression you're trying to make. A person never does so poorly for himself as when he is thinking too much about himself. It can hurt rather than help.

It's a bit like driving a car. Directly in front of the driver's seat, as you know, there's a panel of instruments and gauges. They're there for a purpose, namely to keep you informed on what's going on inside the machinery and under the hood. You have to look at them occasionally or the car may break down. But if out on the road you keep your eyes fixed on them constantly, anxious about the inner works, you're going to end up in the ditch or in an accident. In other words, we're not made for too much introspection and every basic wisdom about the human soul coincides with the paradox that people whose thoughts are too much on themselves turn wholly inward.

Feeling every pulsebeat, analyzing every muscular twitch, checking every emotional reaction, they are likely to end up with more inner trouble than by their introspection they had attempted to avoid. Navel-gazing is a name for it.

SELF-CENTEREDNESS Now suppose we dig deeper into this paradox, this word of Jesus and its promise of deliverance - not alone from self-consciousness, but from the deeper moral problem of self-centeredness.

Self-centeredness. It is the clear Christian conviction that self-centeredness is the root cause of man's sin. The root sin, the great grand-daddy of all sin - "original sin", if you like that term - is this biological inclination to put ourselves at the center of life and make everything else revolve around us. We're born self-centered. As infants we are the center of the only interest we have. Everything exists for us. We scream if we don't get what we want. Some never get beyond that point in their emotional development. We carry it into adulthood and fill the world with its consequences: an insidious self-centeredness that corrupts everything we do - as individuals and groups, nations, races, classes. But the New Testament speaks of the death of self, the denial of self, the losing of self to find life. And this paradox is called salvation - the deliverance from self-centeredness. Page 900. (9: 23)

The central problem of every person's life has always been his battle with himself or herself - how to get himself out of the center and put something else there. Some have labeled it "I" trouble. Big "I" and little "u". Here's a jingle that sums it up:

"I do not mind my 'p's' and 'q's' - how careless I must be.
Nor do my actions always suit my neighbors to a 't'.
I think perhaps my greatest fault that I can now recall -
I make my 'I's' a lot too large, and all my 'u's' too small!"

TROUBLE The trouble is we have put ourselves where God should be and the sin of all sins is making ourselves God. The world today is in deep trouble because of this - men putting themselves in the center, exalting themselves as God. The noise we are hearing in our world--the cries of race and clan-- everyone-shouting-"I" and "ME" and "MINE". How do we find peace in our time in a world like that? How do we save ourselves from the sickness of self-centeredness?

So many of the proposed cures turn inward for the answers: self-discovery, self-expression, self-knowledge. Do they provide the final answer. One wonders. I like the approach offered in some words written by the late Arthur Brisbane, who made this pronouncement:

"The psychology of modern times has turn man's mind too much in upon himself. Based on the Greek admonition, 'Know Thyself', it has encouraged and over-emphasized the introspective, know yourself, discover yourself. But men have never done that. They came into the world weeping and go out of it wondering... and never seem to fathom the depths of the self. Perhaps it is no part of the Divine Plan to have men fully know themselves. That knowledge would make them lose interest in their work, the more important creative work which they were put here to do. A far healthier approach than know thyself is the Christian one: Give Thyself. Deny Thyself. Lose Thyself."

This, I feel, is the wisdom we have neglected. This is the approach of the Man from Nazareth. This is the word we need to hear once again. We find our true selves only when we get them out of "dead center" and put God there....when we move from a self-centered life to a God-centered life. Remember John Wesley, and how for such a long time he did his best to save himself. And then came that unforgettable night in May of 1738 in the little chapel on Aldersgate Street when he saw in a flash that his best hope was to "let go" and (as they say) "let God". To forget himself and to put his trust in the mercy and saving love of God.

SELF-PRESERVATION Finally, move in to the deepest place in this paradox: deliverance from self-preservation. There's an old saying that suggests: "Self-preservation is nature's first law". Is it? Is it true that the first law of nature is to protect ourselves and save ourselves? It is, if we remember it's a paradox. "He that loses his life shall save it".

To keep life, to really preserve life, we must be willing to lose it - to spend it, to give it away. On the surface, this may appear to be a contradiction. Yet few principles have been so well demonstrated in human experience. We have to live by the law of expenditure. Everything does. We can't hoard life. We can't say to our memory, "Look, memory....I'll need you in my old age, so I won't use you now. I'll spare you". Or muscles, if we don't use our muscles this year we won't have them next year. This, too, is nature's way of doing things. We end up losing what we do not use. How many fine things do we lose by our overcautious efforts to save them, protect them, preserve them? You have to spend yourself to keep it....lose yourself.. give yourself away.

Some years ago one of our best-known clinical psychologists, who had ignored religion for years, found himself coming back to it by the rediscovery of the paradox that what Jesus had said long ago about finding life by giving it was pretty much what he had been saying to his patients. He said that he had learned in his own professional practice that the "self-sparing" life is self-defeating, and that when people try to protect themselves by withdrawing from the risks and the hurts and demands of life they invariably diminish the self they are trying to protect.

He told of a young woman who came to him asking help in the simple matter of making friends. She complained that her circle of friendship was shrinking into a narrow world of loneliness. Probing back into the pattern of her life, he dis-

that growing up in a comfortable home she had never put herself out to mingle with people unless she got enjoyment out of their company. She had habitually avoided doing anything she disliked. She had joined no church, no community enterprise, nothing that involved responsibility. She didn't want that. When company came to her home - that is, people who didn't appeal to her - simply went off into another room and didn't bother to mix or mingle. And so it happened that, not willing to put herself out for others, she found herself gradually left out by others. How often loneliness is self-inflicted. Not always to be sure, for health factors and the aging process enter in....but people who by choice live to themselves are invariably left to themselves with nothing in their world but themselves.

And nothing is as sure or true as this paradox that the selfish man is the shrinking man; his world grows smaller and smaller until he abides all alone. The giving man, on the other hand, is the living man; his world grows larger with his touch and everything multiplies in his hand. The same holds true for a Church. The church which seeks to save its life by harboring its resources in plant, program and personnel will end up losing its life, dying a slow and agonizing death. The Church, on the other hand, which is willing to open wide its doors all and minister in the name of Christ to all - to lose its life for Christ's sake will find it. To preserve life, we must share it.

Here's a story out of World War II. A young woman who lived with her doctor husband in India saw him die from a sudden illness. The shock of it was so great that she lost all interest in life and didn't care whether she lived or not. On shipboard coming back to America was a little 7 year old boy whose missionary parents had been killed in Burma. "You and I" he said to her are "the only Americans on this ship". Plainly, he wanted to be good friends, but she carefully avoided him. She couldn't forget her sorrow even enough to be friendly to a lonely little boy. But when the ship was torpedoed and sinking in the night, she resisted the impulse to go down into forgetfulness with it when she saw the boy shivering like a terrified little bird. "He came to me" she said, "and clung close. He needed me". Through several days adrift in the South Atlantic, they pulled each other through. All her friends said it would be difficult to say who had saved whom: whether it was the woman who saved the child, or the child who saved the woman. For it is one of the miracles of living what when we save another, we thereby save ourselves.

"Seldom can the heart be lonely,
If it seeks a lonelier still;
Self-forgetting, seeking only
Emptier cups of love to fill."

Jesus summed it all up in the paradox which undergirds this message: "He who would save his life shall lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake, shall find it".

LET US PRAY