

"LEARNING TO LIVE TOGETHER"

INTRODUCTION

A great many of the problems of life come about because people have not learned how to get along with each other. Pick up the newspaper any morning of the week and there it is. As you read it, your first thought might very well be that human beings have an almost infinite capacity for disagreeing with one another. Chinese Nationalists and Chinese Communists; Jews and Arabs in Palestine; East Berliners and West Berliners; Soviet Russia versus the outside world; employers and employees in our own country; Teddie and Eddie in Massachusetts - why you see it everywhere, and at times it can be very depressing.

This dissension, of course, extends into smaller units - business offices, social clubs, churches, families. To live together sweetly, graciously, harmoniously, in spite of prickles of temper and differences of disposition, is not easy. The intimate, day by day, elbow rubbing relationships of life make heavy demands upon us. We don't instinctively like everybody we meet, and we may be sure that there are people who find it difficult to like us. This problem of living together, the failure of all of us in varying degrees to solve that problem runs through every area and level of life, from the difficulties parents have with their children and children with their parents right up to the wide spread dissension and consequent confusion of the international situation today. Why can't we learn to live together?

It seems to me that certain things are needed, certain things ought to be cultivated in our lives if we are going to make any headway at all in this matter of living together. And this morning, in the time that we have together, I should like to suggest five things that are essential, five things that do help.

A SENSE OF HUMOR

To begin with, I think a sense of humor is important. A girl of eighteen told her minister that her parents had not spoken to each other for several years. They communicated with each other, she said, by notes and messages conveyed through the children. Think of the misery and unhappiness produced by such a situation; think of the scars that would be left on the lives of the children. And the origin of the quarrel was whether a certain Mr. and Mrs. Jones should be or should not be invited to dinner. What a humorless, juiceless pair they must have been. Part of their trouble was that they were taking themselves too seriously; they had never learned how to look in the mirror and laugh at themselves.

There is a lot of homely, practical wisdom in the saying of the old Negro preacher: "If you could jist set on the fence and see yourself pass by, you'd die laughing at the sight". To live happily and harmoniously with ourselves we have to learn to know ourselves; we have to try to reason with ourselves; we have to be able to laugh at ourselves. To live happily and harmoniously with others we have to teach ourselves to see the amusing side of a situation; we have to cultivate a sense of humor - gentle, genial - humor that is kindly and cordial and large hearted.

Such humor, for example, as Spurgeon's who said of some difficult people in his congregation: "They must have been sent into the world, not that I might save their souls, but that they might discipline mine"

Such humor as Bishop Creighton's, who with the same sort of persons in mind, once said: "Whenever you have gotten the ape and the tiger out of people there still remains the donkey - a much more stubborn animal". Henry Ward Beecher once received a letter containing the single word, "Fool". He told his congregation about it, but not to rouse their ire or gain their sympathy, for this was what he went on to add, "I have known many an instance of a man writing a letter and forgetting to sign his name, but this is the only instance I have ever known of a man signing his name and forgetting to write the letter".

In each case, you see, an excellent way of facing up to what might have been a difficult situation. No disposition to complain or to invite sympathy but a sense of humor - rich, deep, sunny. To have such humor is indeed a saving grace. For it can take the tension out of life. It can remove irritation and friction. It saves us from egotism and from going about wearing blinkers. One thing is certain. If we are to make headway in the art of living together happily and harmoniously, a sense of humor can save many a situation.

SPIRIT OF TOLERANCE

And with it a spirit of tolerance. There is a story of George Fox and Oliver Cromwell that is worth recalling. There was a great barrier between them in the matter of religion. But one day they met and talked about what Carlyle called the "perennials". When Fox got up to go Cromwell said, "If thou and I were but one hour a day together, we should be nearer to the other. I wish no more harm to thee than to my own soul." That is the kind of spirit we should nourish and foster with those with whom we find ourselves in disagreement. This kind of spirit animated an old man, a devout Methodist, who, when the sound of the church bell was borne on the wind from the Roman Catholic Church in his community, would take off his hat and say, after a moment's silence, "In my Father's house are many mansions". Such a spirit - tolerant, gracious, charitable - offers a basis for a happy and harmonious community life. It is more than a mere amenity. It is more positive than forbearance. It means, as I see it, a respect for the beliefs, practices and habits of others without necessarily sharing or accepting them. It means protecting the liberties and rights of those with whom one differs. It found classical expression in Voltaire's affirmation "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it". Given that spirit, you have not only a basis for happy and harmonious community life, but a bulwark of individual and social liberty.

We need to be reminded from time to time, those of us who live in NYC and who daily rub elbows with people of different religious and racial backgrounds, people who are not all white, Anglo Saxon Protestants - we need to be reminded that it was tolerance of diversity that made the United States possible. It was tolerance of wide differences in religious faith and racial backgrounds and economic interest that enabled this country to absorb and gain enrichment from the hosts of immigrants that came here seeking freedom and opportunity. It was tolerance that lay at the basis of this nation's life and made a harmonious and happy community life possible.

KNOWLEDGE We shall need knowledge as well as tolerance. We know far too little about one another. There are too many iron curtains in the modern world. Nothing breeds misunderstanding and intolerance like ignorance. How one wishes one could really know what is going on inside the minds of the Russians. And how one wishes they could know more of the real truth about us.

Every year a miracle takes place in our own city; it takes place in the International House which is located a few blocks to the north of Riverside Church. Students live there under the same roof who have come to New York from Europe, Asia and South America. The result is a meeting of minds, a sharing of impressions, the free dissemination of knowledge. To see the other person's point of view, to appreciate how he comes to think and feel as he does, to discover what he has been through is to be well on the way to a basis of mutual understanding and to the happiest of community life.

IMAGINATION And we shall need imagination as well as knowledge. By imagination I mean the ability intensively and comprehensively to put oneself in another place and see things from his point of view. "Because I have been athrist" says an Arab proverb, "I will dig a well that others may drink". It was because of their want of imagination that Job lost his patience with his friends, "Will your windy speeches never end?" he asked them. "I could talk as you are talking, if you were in my place" They were healthy and wealthy men who had not suffered enough to have their shallow orthodoxy ruffled. Instead of being able to sympathize with Job they only hurt and irritated him by reeling off their pious platitudes. You won't get far in your relationships with others unless you use your imagination. Would not sickness and sorrow and want be approached with a gentle pity and our whole handling of others be more gracious and generous because we have thought ourselves into their situations and have put a little imagination into the working of the Golden Rule?

The Italians have an excellent proverb: "Clear understanding means long friendships". You can be a true friend only if you look deliberately and set yourself to see things as others see them, to take a look at the world from their point of view.

INTEGRITY A sense of humor - a spirit of tolerance - knowledge - imagination - and finally integrity. Integrity is one of our greatest needs. Integrity has been called the cement of society. When integrity crumbles civilization collapses. And there are signs from time to time that it is crumbling in our society. Our moral sense is at a low ebb. Men and women of strong character and sound principle are still at the top of the list of requirements for America today.

Not long ago I heard of a party of native bearers in Central Africa who suddenly set down their packs and refused to go forward. When asked for a reason, one of them said: "Our bodies have gone too quickly for our souls". This, it seems to me, is what has happened in our own country in the past fifty years. Our spiritual progress has not kept pace with our technical progress. Science is putting more and more power into our hands, but unless there is

an advance in moral character to correspond with the technical advance the results are bound to be calamitous. Unless we have and produce finer citizens we are heading for trouble at home.

We're told that after the fatal battle of Culloden Moor, in Scotland, Bonnie Prince Charlie was a hunted fugitive in the highlands of Scotland. For five months he moved about among the ordinary people, trusting his identify to fishermen and farmers, many of whom had no notion where their next meal was coming from. Any one of them could have had thirty thousand pounds, the price the government had put on his head, by disclosing his hiding place to the nearest English garrison. He was never betrayed. It is that kind of integrity we must have - men in government, on the bench, in business, in all walks of life who can be absolutely depended upon, who will not sell their souls for cash, whose word is their bond, whose sense of responsibility and whose moral sense is sound. There can be no lasting bond of community without integrity.

Where are we to acquire integrity? How are we to learn to live happily and harmoniously with others. There is no psychological technique to compare with the religious discipline. The great master of the art of living is Christ. The real transformer of life is Christ. The power that makes and remakes character is the power of Christ. When men and women come under his influence, daily lifting up their minds and spirits in loyalty to him, getting to know his will and seeking his guidance, they have found the secret - they have found the deepest bond of community.

These then are five things that we would do well to cultivate in our lives - humor, tolerance - knowledge - imagination - integrity. What about your own life. How do you measure up?

LET US PRAY:

Grant, O God, that the words that have been spoken this hour may, through thy grace, be so grafted in our hearts that they may bring forth the fruit of good living, to the honor and praise of Thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen