

LOSING SIGHT OF THE IMPORTANT

INTRODUCTION

This morning, in a great many churches across our land, particular attention is being given to the fact that today is UNIVERSAL BIBLE SUNDAY. I could spend my time with you this morning praising the Bible for its comfort and beauty and guidance, reminding you of the fact that it is still the world's best seller, so far outstripping all other books that there really is no comparison. However instead of talking to you about the Bible, I would much rather let the Bible talk to you and with this in mind I would turn to the New Testament, to the 22nd chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew where we come across these words:

"And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question in order to test him saying 'Teacher'....'Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' And Jesus said to him 'Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and the greatest of all the commandments. The second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the prophets.'"

You've heard these words before. You're familiar with them. And their meaning is not difficult to grasp. Jesus was simply pointing out to them that the heart of real religion has to do with two things - a man's relationship to God, and his relationship to his fellow man. Everything else in religion was secondary to this. Jesus, of course, made his meaning very clear to them both by what he said and did. Let me just recall one or two instances. For instance, remember the time when he warned the pious Jews who were so careful and meticulous in their observance of the Sabbath Day that while this nevertheless was of some importance, it was not the most important thing, the most essential thing. And then too remember the time when he warned the pious Jews who were so deeply concerned with the Laws of Purification that while these laws did have some part to play in a person's religious life, they were not the most important thing, the most essential thing. And then too Jesus even went so far as to suggest to them that the Temple with its great and elaborate services of worship while of some importance was not the most important thing. In other words, time and again he was trying to get them to see that as far as he was concerned the most essential thing in religion had to do with a man's relationship to God and to his neighbor. And that all of these religious practices, beliefs and observances were important only to the degree that they helped a person achieve that right relationship and if that relationship was not right, then all of the religious maneuvers in the world were meaningless and useless. I don't know how you feel about these words of Jesus at this point, but it seems to me that we are dealing with a great text. There's something about his words that speak to me; they seem to clear the air and clean the atmosphere and cut through a great deal of organizational red tape. I think we need to put ourselves under the judgment of these words.

DEVELOPING THE TEXT

Human nature, of course, has not changed a great deal across the centuries. What I mean to suggest to you is that people today are very much like they were back in the time of our Lord in this respect that they so often become so pre-occupied with the parts of a thing that they are apt to miss out on

the thing itself. When we see this happening today, we say that a person cannot see the forest for the trees. He becomes so pre-occupied with the pæres that he is blind to the forest itself. We see this happening from time to time. For instance, we may see it in the field of government when a person becomes so pre-occupied with states' rights that he becomes blind to the meaning of government in the broader sense. Or we may see it in the field of music when an artist, or a musician becomes so pre-occupied with the notes - that everyone should be exactly right and played in the right time, that he becomes blind to the beauty and the sweep of the music itself. Losing sight of the forest for the trees.

Unfortunately this same sort of thing takes place in religion too. It happens occasionally within the church. As a matter of fact, as I observe these things, it seems to me that there is no place where people are more likely to do this than in the church. Church people have an almost fatal tendency to concentrate so intensively on the parts or one particular part of the religious life that they often miss the meaning of religion itself. And one of the great tragedies growing out of all this is that many lives are often seriously upset by these minor frictions, irritations and matters of secondary importance. It isn't that the people aren't good or that they don't mean well, but rather it's that the trees have blinded them to the forest. They have been concentrating so intently on the individual parts that they have missed the glory of the thing itself.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. It may happen in something like the service of Holy Communion - one of the most serious and solemn acts of Christian worship. I use this as an example because I've seen it happen in this area in recent weeks. A person came up to me some time ago visibly upset and deeply concerned because a person kneeling next to her at the altar rail had failed to take her gloves off and had received the bread and grape juice with a gloved hand. And then not long after that another person in our church came to me following another Holy Communion Service also visibly upset and deeply concerned because the congregation had remained seated for the Gloria in Excelsis when it ought to have been standing. I couldn't but feel as I stood there listening to these ladies express to me their deep concern regarding these matters that perhaps they were losing sight of the deeper meaning of the Communion Service which is to draw people together and closer to God. And whether we stand or sit for the Gloria in Excelsis, or whether a person receives the elements with a gloved hand or not is to my way of thinking relatively unimportant in the light of the stupendous reality which takes place whenever we engage in this particular aspect of public worship. Losing sight of the forest for the trees.

This sort of thing can take place in reference to so many things within religion and church life. It may take place in reference to some doctrine of belief to which a person attaches a great deal of importance. For instance it may be the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. I well remember my experiences in the class room a few years ago at Edinburgh University in Scotland. I heard men argue the doctrine of the Virgin Birth with such scorn for their opponents that as they spoke of the birth of Him who is love, I couldn't help but feel that there was little love in their hearts for those who happened to disagree with them. Kipling once remarked in an amusing vein that to his way of thinking there was only one thing more terrible in battle than a regiment of desperadoes, and that was a company of Scotch Presbyterians who rise from their knees and go into action convinced that they are about to do the will of God.

And so I would say this to you - whether it's a matter of disciplinary detail such as whether a Methodist minister smokes or not, or whether a woman wears a hat in side of an Episcopal Church; whether it's a matter of belief such as whether a Christian believes in and practices birth control or not; whether it's a matter of church order and management such as whether a church has bishops or not; whether it's a matter of morals as to whether we permit card-playing and dancing in the church - WHATEVER it may be, the point is this that whenever one of these parts takes the center of a person's Christian life so that everything else begins to revolve around it, he is then in danger of losing the meaning of Christianity itself, for Christianity is greater than any one of its parts and greater than the sum of all of them. This is not peculiar to any one church, or to any one denomination, or to any one type of person. It's a weakness of religious people everywhere and includes both laity and clergy alike. Sometimes we get so caught up with the trees that we lose sight of the forest itself.

GOING BACK TO JESUS

This is, of course what had happened in Jesus' time. This is what he was trying to overcome. The religion of that time had been reduced to a matter of a great many religious laws and ritual observances of these laws. These laws were supposed to lead people into the great experiences of God. They were the expression of the will of God and the people were to obey these laws. In the beginning Jewish Law consisted of only Ten Commandments. But as time went on the Law was expanded in order to take in new situations and circumstances until by Jesus' time there were some 613 laws - of which 365 of them were negative and 248 were positive. We can see how easy it must have been to lose sight of what stood behind these laws and what they were meant to express. They undoubtedly lost the meaning in the machinery and mechanics of the religious life. And it makes me wonder how many Christians in our own time have lost the meaning of it all in the machinery of the modern day American Church.

At the time when Jesus lived, the minor regulations and major laws stood side by side. We find them in the book of Levitus in the OT. Let me read you one or two of these laws takes from the 19th chapter. "YOU SHALL NOT CURSE A DEAF MAN OR TRIP UP A BLIND MAN" Certainly a humane regulation. "YOU SHALL NOT CHEAT: YOU SHALL NOT LIE". That goes down a little deeper. "YOU SHALL NEVER WEAR A ROBE MADE OF TWO DIFFERENT KINDS OF CLOTH. YOU SHALL NOT SHAVE YOUR TEMPLE, NOR CLIP THE EDGES OF YOUR BEARD". And then neatly interwoven into all of this is the line "You shall love your neighbor as yourself". It's all there together....the regulations about a man's bear and the robe that he wears with this great insight that the only way to live is to love your neighbor as yourself.

This man you see who came to Jesus came with a real question. Which is the greatest commandment among all of these 613 commandments? He wanted some sort of compass, and Jesus with great human perception and divine intuition told him that as far as he was concerned there were only two important commandments and that they were both related to each other. Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart soul and mind, and thy neighbor as thyself. This was the heart of the matter, and everything else was of secondary importance.

INTERPRETING THIS TO YOU NOW IN REFERENCE TO LIFE IN THE CHURCH

Coming then to the final section of this sermon and perhaps the most important section, I would like to interpret this text in reference to specific things in the life of our

own church. I recognize that there are some visitors here, some people who are not members of this church. My word to you would be that you think of some of these things in terms of your own church loyalty and church home.

We're members of a church organization. We believe in it and work very hard at it. We are committed to moving in on the mentality and morality and spirit of this part of the city. Many of you are deeply involved in certain aspects of the ministry of this church - finances, music, evangelism, education, Woman's Society, Young Adults. I think we need to be sensitive to the fact that these activities, important though they be and without which the Church as we know it could not function effectively and as we want it to, that these activities are not the most important thing. They are important only as they draw us up into that kind of activity that we call love, and if it should ever come to pass that these lesser activities should blind us to that greater activity, or if they should become an obstacle to the achievement of that activity, or if they should cause friction and controversy among those whom it serves, then that organization is in some danger of being rendered useless and perhaps it ought to be carefully examined by those involved in light of the fundamental purpose of the church, and perhaps there ought to be some inward examination of our own minds in light of the mind of Christ.

There are times when we become so deeply involved in the machinery of the church that we lose sight of the mission of the church. Somehow this clarifying word of Jesus helps us find our way. It helps us to regain our proper perspective. Money - music - social gatherings - these are not the important things, the most essential things. The essential thing is what happens in the lives of those who come to this church and look to it for guidance and strength along the way.....what in their lives is redeemed from dullness and drabness and lifted out of the monotonous and narrowways of selfishness so that they go out of here singing a new song unto the Lord.

I don't know whether you have ever noticed that on Communion Sunday as part of the communion ritual these two great commandments are read to you. It is referred to as the summary of the divine law. Have you ever noticed that immediately following these two commandments there is a beautiful response which the choir sings. Lord Have Mercy Upon Us. It's always one of the high points of the service for me. In a sense we are asking God to forgive for concentrating so exclusively on the trees of religion that we have missed the forest.

I could go on and say a great deal more on this subject. This sermon has only one point and I've tried to express it to you in two or three different ways. The essential point is that Christianity is something like a forest in that it is composed of many separate and important parts. Some people walk around the forest, some live near it, some fly over it and never see it. Others, like ourselves, live right in the thick of it and sometimes we fail to see it because of all the trees.

These two great commandments need further exploration and what I hope to do some time of the first of the year is to take each commandment in turn and try to plumb the depths of it a little further than I have ever done before. What does it mean to love God? How do you Love God? What is involved in loving your neighbor? But this morning I am content to make just this one point: don't let the trees blind you to the forest.

I know how easy it is to get lost in the maze of church discipline and machinery with the result that you miss the real thing. My prayer on this third Sunday of Advent for this church would be something like this:

May this Church, this company of faithful people, be a Church in which men see God more and more clearly through all the shadows and imperfections and differences which are inevitable in a world like ours. And in spite of the dust which so often blinds him from our sight, may this be a place where men can see through those shadows the God who is drawing near to them all the time. And may they learn to love him, as well as to obey him, and may that love so overflow in their lives that the life of the whole community may be enriched and transformed.

Remember this. If we keep our eyes on the forest, the trees will somehow take care of themselves.

LET US PRAY

As we draw near to thee, O God, open our eyes to those things that are essential. Give to each one of us the fine discrimination by which we can distinguish between the important and the unimportant. And then give to us strong hearts to set our minds and spirits on our relationship with Thee and our fellow men so that our lives may be transforming lives in the world. Amen