

## "MOVING FROM THE MANY TO THE ONE"

TEXT: ".....but this one thing I do"

(Philippians 3: 13)

### INTRODUCTION

It was a year ago last January that an article in one of our Methodist publications happened to catch my eye. The author, a minister, was suggesting that the 1970s would be a time for "travelling light". I liked what he said. The following month there appeared in response to his article a letter under the Letters to the Editors section from a woman living in a mid-western state. I should like to share her letter with you as an introduction to the sermon for two reasons. First, to show that people will occasionally find in a message some directives that were not intended. Second, because the sentiment expressed in the letter conveys a mood that most of us have flirted with from time to time. I've found myself flirting with the mood these past few days as I have returned to the city from a wonderful vacation and experienced those problems of "re-entry" into the life of the city.

"Dear Sir:

We are taking your advice - "choose life and travel light" as it appeared in the recent issue of "Together".

We are selling our house and furniture and moving into a camper, so all our possessions will be contained in that. And we're moving - we intend to see the country. Our mail will be sent to general delivery in the next small town. We shall be members of no particular church, club or organization. No more meetings, no more committees - we've had it up to here!

We've both been active in the local church and conference, but we've found that they can get along very well without us. You're only needed when you produce the way the man in charge wants you to. Any ideas of yours are nil.

Your advice came as a fresh drink of water. Run away - who doesn't? Everyone runs from something. The young people hate possessions, but they have their hot little hands out for our money and help.

So, if you see one trailer more on the road - it's us!"

Who - among us - has not longed to pull up stakes and take to the open road. Who - among us - has not chafed under the demands of whatever system it is that puts clothing on our back and food on our table? Who - among us - has not yearned to shuck those close-fitting responsibilities and buy a camper and get away from it all?

### DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

The honesty and sincerity of the writer of the letter cannot be passed over lightly. One senses a feeling of regret between the lines. A wish, perhaps, that things hadn't gone that way. She had given it a good try. Perhaps the woman was tired. Nothing looks good to us when we're exhausted - even the work of God.

Let those of us who lead causes - whether within or without the church - take

warning from this incident, not to exploit the willing. It is possible to burn good people out before their time. The violin string always taut will soon lose its resonance.

But back to the woman who sent this letter. She had decided that she would now go in for generalized living as opposed to particularized living. Nature over people. Travel over roots. Campfires over committees. It sounds tempting, and I suppose that right at our elbow all the time is this temptation to live extensively instead of intensively. Sure - we'd like to climb every mountain, sail every sea, drive every road, fly every plane, sip every wine, taste every delicacy, visit every country, see every play, read every book, watch every athlete, hear every joke, catch every movie.

To this hankering at a deeper level speaks Edmond Cahn in his book, The Moral Decision, and he speaks with some psychiatric insight: (Dr. Hull - amen)

"None of us is wholly content with the casual confinements of a single career, a single sex, a single lifetime and concatenation of scenery. Each desires to live out all kinds of lives, to exert all powers and receive all adulations, to suffer and enjoy every sort of passion, to possess all the women that ever yielded or refused to yield - in short to play the Faust in an endless metempsychosis of exploits and (adventure) triumphs. The compulsive lusts drive the self out beyond the boundaries of its own body and sent it to enact comedies, tragedies, tableaux, and epics elsewhere."

At times we all want to move away from our problems and set up shop somewhere else. I use to enjoy doing crossword puzzles. I don't know what your strategy is, but I use to begin in the upper left section until I messed it up. Then I would move to the upper right hand corner and then drop down to the lower right hand corner. Then across the bottom to the lower left and up. I guess I was living with the illusion that when I got stuck somewhere I could move on and start over indefinitely. Always - however - one is forced to face the fact eventually that the puzzle is all one piece. So it is with life. To keep moving away from life's difficult situation only postpones payday. It doesn't cancel it. ~~And many in moving take the problems right along with them - problem of self.~~

#### REASON FOR SOURING

I think that people who sour on living responsible lives usually suffer from more than fatigue. Chances are they expected too much and thus became disappointed. General aspirations are seldom fully realized in particular situations. We mistakenly expect our concrete relationships to embody the best features of a dozen similar relationships that we have known or heard about. We sometimes pursue a composite image that is out of touch with reality. We fantasize impossible combinations out of the best that we have known and then expect one particular home or job or church to produce it all. When it doesn't, we show signs of souring.

The rule suggests itself that when we pass from the many to the one, that is, when we move from broad generalities to specific life situations -- when we pass from the many to the one, we cannot expect that one to possess all the best features of the many. Let me illustrate it in three areas, for you.

#### MARRIAGE AND THE HOME

First, marriage and the home. As a man matures he comes to know a variety of women - his mother, his nurse, his sisters, cousins, teachers, neighbors and so on. If he is a fairly normal young man he will, as we say, "play the field" in his dating. But it is all together

critical that when he passes from the many to the one, he not expect his bride to combine the finest features of all the other women he has known. He can't have Mary's looks and Helen's charm; Martha's tenderness and Laura's figure; Betty's brains and Pam's parents. And - of course, it works the other way around for the expectations of the bride for her husband. In our service of marriage, the question is put to the man: "Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife and forsaking all other - keep thee only unto her?"

This is the crisis moment - when the man passes from the many to the one. His concern is no longer with feminity, or womanhood at large - but with this one particular female, this woman, this person. Some men remain bachelors all their days rather than face the trauma of moving from the many to the one. This is why - half in jest - the late Theodore Reik said:

"Beware of bachelors who have an idealistic view of noble chaste womanhood. Young women should prefer the company of declared woman-haters. They always marry".

Passing from the many to the one; this is how we grow. Our best efforts are not directed toward children in general, but these children - ours. Not toward the management of homes in general, but this home. Love beamed not toward women in general, but toward this woman (or this man) and in this place.

WORK Or consider it as it relates to work. There's an enormous amount of vocational unrest in society today. So many people want out of where they are. It's even infected the ministry in recent years. Ministers are wanting out of the churches they serve - for one reason or another. An add in the NY Times in July (you may have seen it) carried a reminder of this: (here it is)

The young have a way of generalizing about vocations. It was no trick at all for me at the age of 14 to hold in one small mind the possibilities of being a baseball player, a radio announcer, a doctor, an attorney, a teacher. This is the time to generalize. This is what youth is for - to fantasize about one, two or three possible careers. Eventually, as life moves on we must pass from the many to the one - unless we are afflicted with the "grad student syndrome" which keeps one uncommitted far too long.

When we finally get down to one vocation, expressed in one particular place, we tend to invoke the myth of the composite and thus become unduly restless with what we have. We would like to have the expense account of a sales man, the glamour of an actress, the prestige of a president, the income of a doctor, the hours of a plumber, the independence of a judge, the vacation of a teacher or preacher.

And what we sometimes fail to consider is how long the doctor studied to get where he is. What we fail to remember is how the plumber longs for high social status, or how the judge totes home a briefcase on the Long Island Railroad every night, or the hours of rehearsal that the actress grinds out day after day, or the long hours, busy days and no weekends of the preacher.

We should stop thinking mythologically and extensively here and think more realistically and intensively - asking God to put a little spire on our work. If only we could see what we do where we are as a crucial ministry for Him!

"Forenoon - and afternoon - and night!

The empty song repeats itself. No more!

Yea - that is life: make this forenoon sublime,

This afternoon a psalm, this night a prayer,  
And time is conquered, and thy crown is won"

FAITH Marriage and the home. Work. Let's consider it in terms of faith. A man can appear awfully devout as a religious generalist. And when we're young I suppose we should be to some extent religious generalists. We should read books on other religions, visit other churches, listen to other traditions - compare, weigh, seek, think, decide. But all of this will add up to relatively nothing unless at some point - we pass from the many to the one.

A. E. Taylor in his book, The Faith of a Moralists, offers this thought:

"There is nothing heroic about keeping the mind open on all questions simply because we are too indolent to give ourselves the trouble of shutting a door. Nor is it well to leave all doors indiscriminately open, for, though the door often provides an avenue for the entrance of much that is welcome, it also, as we too often forget, affords an exit through which what we can least afford to lose may disappear. The important thing is to judge which doors should be left open and which should be shut!"

It is possible for us to offer God the incense of our admiration while withholding the obedience of our hearts. John Masefield, the poet, was getting at this in the "Everlasting Mercy" when he said:

"But trained men's minds are spread so thin,  
They let all sorts of darkness in;  
Whatever light man finds they doubt it,  
They love, not light - but talk about it".

Perhaps this helps to explain the fantastic growth in the belief in astrology in our time. Why not? The stars offer us guidance without demanding obedience or a commitment. What's more - we can study a horoscope without having to be thrown into association or communion with other people.

*CADWELL*

Taylor Cadell has reminded us in "Great Lion of God" that what made St. Paul the stellar Christian that he was, was the fact that after having been a religiously active man in many ways for many years, he submitted one day to the singular claims of the living Christ. "This one thing I do" said Paul - no longer a generalist, a mere inquirer. Once self-directed, now he is God-directed - "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, pressing toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus".

How sad, some might say, that a man who might have been more extensive in his knowledge had he given his ripened years to continuing investigation should suddenly stop with Jesus! But shed no tears for him. Mastery is always achieved through resolved limitation. The man to be pitied is the man who believes in everything just a little bit, the miscellaneous man who has never brought the tattered fragments of his life under the command of a single voice, or gathered his abilities around a single passion. Paul's magnificent obsession with Christ threw him into a new succession that involved him with particular people in particular places. I'm sure that had campers been available in Paul's time, he might have checked the prices and looked over the ads in his lower moments. For he had his troubles, too. It would have been much easier for him to leave Corinth, for example, than to try to communicate the Gospel to those busy, unresponsive people.

Ministers are guilty of playing around with the myth of the composite. Many discouraged clerics whom I know have a picture in their minds of the best of all

the churches they ever served or visited. They like the air-conditioners of one, the choir of another, the organ of still another, or the folkiness of yet still another, or the name of another, or the salary and study leave of still yet another.

And on the members' side there are people in every parish who finger this myth of the composite. We can't have PAMC and the rural intimacy of a little church somewhere in the quiet hamlet of an Ohio village, or the evangelical fervor of a church in the backwoods of Kentucky, or a splendid educational wing of a large church in Texas or Oklahoma. There are things that one church can do that other church can't. And instead of trying to realize what is impossible, is it not the better part of wisdom to move from the many to the one wherever we might happen to be, accepting the mix of assets and liabilities, the pluses and the minuses, and there to serve our Lord with as much passion and vitality as we can possibly muster.

CONCLUSION And so let me tie it all up here in one more minute. We cannot expect the one to possess all the best features of the many. It belongs to our maturity as human beings - not to mention our maturity as Christians - to move from the many to the one. And unless the good lady who wrote the letter with which I started all of this is of retirement age - she is regressing, moving back from the one to the many.

For - what is love if not locally expressed? What is vocation if not something done in a specific place. What is faith if its object is not singular - if it does not tie us to a given fellowship, a given body of Christ.

God's love is the model - a love that came down to earth, a love that got all tangled up in the particularities of human history. .... in a man, a cross, an empty tomb. He did not choose to save us by writing something up in the sky. So go on from here - trust your sample of life. You haven't got it all, but no one has. Run not some imagined, ideal race, but as the writer of Hebrews put it: "The race that is set before you".....helps, hindrances and all. Another season now moves into focus - filled with new hope, new opportunity. And let us in our own particular life situation - move into it with a singleness of purpose, a singleness of devotion, of commitment - always remembering that the power behind us is far greater than any task that may be before us.

PRAYER O Thou who didst not disdain to set thy love and do thy work in the midst of man and our human condition, keep us ever faithful to the Gospel where we are; lest in dreaming of times and of places more ideal, we should fail to see the glory of the present moment and the challenge of the particular. As thou hast loved us, so may we love, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen