

## "ON LOSING A SENSE OF DIRECTION"

INTRODUCTION This is the second part of a two part sermon built around the observation that we seem to have lost our sense of direction. The signs are up that we're drifting - politically and economically, socially and personally. Those old landmarks that used to help us position ourselves are fading or they're under attack. We're uncertain about which way to go; we're apprehensive about what's ahead.

The text for both sermons is the same. "And Thomas said to Him, 'How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life'".

DEVELOPMENT In order to regain a sense of direction, we have to begin with the individual. We have to start down on the grassroots level - where we are and with what we are. It begins with people - with you and with me. It involves a spiritual recrudescence, a revolution of the heart; it must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh. C. P. Snow speaks to me of the urgency that is involved:

"The danger is we have been brought up to think as though we had all the time in the world. We have very little time...so little that I dare not guess it."

RECAPITULATION Last Sunday's sermon, for the most part, was emphasizing that in order to recover this sense of direction in our lives, we must have a self that we can live with, a self that we can believe in. There must be integrity at the core of our being. Good intentions are not enough. They can never be the substitute for good judgement, wise decisions, right choices.

We talked about some of the excuses that all of us at times are tempted to use to avoid fulfilling our own human potential. There's much in our world that makes it difficult for us to be the persons we should be. We touched upon peer pressures and group pressures...."I know it's wrong, and I don't like doing it... but everybody's doing it...and if you can't lick 'em, you might as well join 'em". We went on to speak of the "I was forced by my parents to go to Sunday School" syndrome. We've all been tempted at one time or another to place the blame for our mistakes and loss of direction on our parents, rather than on ourselves, afraid to take responsibility for ourselves. We also talked about those inner feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy that can lock us up in little rooms of self-doubt and despair, forgetting that such rooms do have open doors, that Resources and people are available to us.

Yes, it's true that there's much out there in our world that makes it tough for us to be the persons we should be. We give in and begin to lose our sense of direction, our integrity. Last Sunday's sermon closed with an appeal for some self-evaluation and with a challenge to make changes and adjustments in our lives - our thinking, our habits - before it's too late, before the rope snaps.

"To every man there openeth a way, and ways, and a way.  
And the high soul climbs the high way, the low soul gropes the  
low,  
In between - on the misty flats - the rest drift to and fro.  
But - to every man there openeth a high way and a low,  
And every man decideth the way his soul shall go!"

We begin with ourselves to regain this sense of direction, remembering what Jesus

said to Thomas, "I am the way, the truth and the life".

REDISCOVERY OF GOD

Another thing that will help us is the rediscovery of who God is and what He demands of us. Here we move to a deeper level...different level.

Now this may sound like the worst form of pietism, and I don't mean for it to be that. I'm not saying, "Just have faith and everything will come out all right". Rather I am saying that God has direction to give us if we can use it. The trouble with us is, as someone has put it, "God wants to give us something, but we can't take it because our hands are full".

Our hands are full. We're busy people and we have left very little place for God in our world. Just look at us. We are a people who eat and drink without regard for seed time or harvest. We keep warm and cool by creating our own climates, no matter what the season may be doing. We turn night into day with the switch of a button. People who live like that can scarcely be expected to feel the kind of dependency upon the universe which was the basis for piety in times past.

We know we are mortal, but we try to deny it by exalting our power. We do not believe that we shall ever die, and we put aside the discussion of death as morbid and speculation about God, about immortality, about evil and sin have lost their sense of urgency in our lives. We fight hard to hold to what measure of faith we still have in God. And if we have a God we really aren't sure how to fit him into this scientific universe or into the busy lives we lead.

Theodore Parker Ferris who from the mid-forties to the time of his death two years ago was minister of Trinity Church in Copley Square in Boston once remarked that if we think of life as a large department store, God would be thought of as the clerk of the small religious articles department near the back of the ninth floor, rather than the owner of all the stores there are. And - on the whole - I think that this is the way that most of us handle God. We give lip service to being loyal to Him, but in our actions we have become practical atheists.

I was reading the first chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans this week and here Paul is speaking to people who are not very different from ourselves. They were educated, sophisticated, cultured city types who had so little experience of God in their lives that they even doubted His existence. Paul writes:

"For what can be known about God is plain to them because He has showed it to them. So they are without excuse, for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God".

What he is saying is not, "Let me give you all of the arguments for God's existence". Instead he flatly says that the materials for knowing God are already available, and that if we don't know Him, it is because we don't want to know Him. I believe he is right.

I think it's true that we tend to put God aside or at the very edges of life because we don't want to be beholden to Him in any way. We don't want to have to do the things we would have to do if we are to take Him seriously as the God He insists on being. If we can just keep him manageable - available for symbolic occasions like baptisms and weddings and funerals, then we will be all right. But, if we are really to accept Him as the God He is, we will have to accept His radical demands upon our lives.

David Woodyard has put it this way,

"If we were to say YES to the 'shockingly indiscriminate' love of God laid bare in the person of Jesus, we would have to say NO to our inclination to reject those who do not please us; if we were to say YES to the message of forgiveness which breaks loose from the cross, we would have to say NO to the impulse to hurt those who have hurt us. If we were to say YES to the claim that God has given us life and holds us responsible for the way we spend it, we would have to say NO to the trivia and the waste in which we are engaged; if we were to say YES to the message that our neighbor is the one through whom we express our love or our hate toward God, we would have to say NO to the pettishness, the indifference, the hostility, the prejudice which comes to us no naturally."

One of the hardest lessons we have to learn is that God is not going to be God on our terms, but to the degree that we can allow Him to be what He is. He has no respect for our evasions, illusions and excuses. And we cannot say that we don't know what He wants. To me, that's a cop out. For God is making Himself known to us all the time...in the mystery of His creation, in the lives of people around us, in the movements to make life more human, in the process of the moral law ("we reap what we sow"), and supremely in the words and the ways of Jesus of Nazareth whose life continues to challenge us all. It was Mark Twain who once remarked about the Scriptures:

"Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they don't understand, but for me I have always noticed that the passages that bother me are those I do understand!"

What is required of us is that we reach out to Him, accept Him on His terms, and join Him in what He is doing. It's a plain path He is calling you to walk.

A WORLD THAT NEEDS TO BE SAVED

First, a self that you can believe in and respect. Second, a God you can count on, whom you can trust, whose way and word is fixed, dependable. And finally, a world that needs to be saved.

It's a tough world out there, the world in which you and I live. There seem to be so many things going wrong, falling apart, that trouble us and cause us despair. A friend in Washington told me Friday of a bumper sticker he saw earlier this week, "The Meek Don't Want It" is the way it read. This "crisis of the spirit" is tempting some to withdraw and to be inactive. I heard about a young lady recently who accidentally vacuumed up her canary. He survived the ordeal. "He doesn't sing much any more" she reported, "mostly he just sits and stares".....all of which reminded me of some contemporary Christians. It's so easy to stop singing, to sit and stare at the problems we face. I urge you not to stand by and do nothing. Do what you can to help us recover this sense of direction in our society. Let the words of Edward Everett Hale put some iron in your blood:

"I am only one, but still I am one.  
I cannot do everything, but still I can do something;  
And because I cannot do everything,  
I will not refuse to do the something I can do!"

Most of us are familiar with the phrase, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness". Leonard Griffith has amplified it in this way:

"The Christian does exactly that! In the darkness of duplicity, he lights a candle of tolerance. In the darkness of luxury, he lights a candle of modesty. In the darkness of suffering, he lights a candle of courage".

There is some place where you can put your life - time, talents, energies - to help remold and remake life around you. You can be a center of hope, bringing the light of tolerance, modesty and courage into the bloodstream of society.

In the critical days of World War II, England faced a desperate need for increased coal production. The Prime Minister called a meeting of labor leaders to give them the facts and to enlist their support. He closed his presentation by picturing in their minds a parade which would surely be held in Piccadilly Circus after the war. There would come the men of the Royal Navy whom everyone would know had kept the vital sea lanes open. There would come the men of the Army who had come home from Dunkirk and then gone on to defeat Romell in Afrida and who had fought with Montgomery in Europe. There would come the men of the RAF whom all knew had driven the Luftwaffe from the skies over London and then beaten the enemy at its own game over Berlin. Then, he said, last of all, there would come a great host of sweat-stained, soot-streaked men in miner's caps. Someone would cry from the crowd "Where were you?" And from ten-thousand throats would come the answer, "We were deep in the earth with our faces against the coal".

The English are known for their reserve, but those hard-bitten, worldly-wise men got the point and they wept and cheered as Churchill sat down. The man at the top had shown he needed the men at the bottom. It remains true to this day. All of us have a part in recapturing our nation's sense of direction.

There is a city out there...a world out there...that desperately needs what you have to give it. I urge you not to be paralyzed into inaction and fretfulness by things you do not know and find difficult to understand. Act on the best you know and the part you do understand. Do not fret about a future that is filled with uncertainties. Put the past behind and do the best you can with the day at hand. And let the spirit of these helpful lines from Washington Gladdin go with you:

"In the bitter waves of woe, beaten and tossed about -  
By the sullen winds that blow, from the desolate shores of  
doubt,

While the anchors faith had cast, are dragging in the gale,  
I am quietly holding fast to the things that cannot fail.

I know that right is right, that it is not good to lie,  
That love is better than spite, and a neighbor than a spy.

I know that passion needs the leash of a sober mind,  
I know that generous deeds some sure reward will find.

In the darkest night of the years, when the stars have all gone  
out,  
That courage is better than fear, and faith is truer than doubt".

PRAYER

As we go on from here with the winds often blowing against us, help us,

O God, to trust and to believe in the best we know, to do the best we can with each day, and to be the best we are.

Help us to remember that there are some things that are wrong, and that the responsibility for what we do ultimately rests upon ourselves. Save us from cheap and easy explanations, lead us more into the deep understanding of the truth that rests in Christ Jesus. Make us willing to serve our time in His spirit. In His name we pray. Amen

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TEXT: "And Thomas said to Him, 'How can we know the way?'  
Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and  
the life'".

(John 14: 5 and 6)

INTRODUCTION Whenever a Biblical text is announced at the beginning of a sermon, I'm always reminded of some advice offered to us by a professor of homiletics in the classroom in seminary. Said he, "Men....always announce a text at the beginning of your sermon. It will give the people something to think about while you're preaching." So....here it is again.

I would like to begin what is part one of a two part sermon with a verbatim transcript of a counseling interview that Dr. Howard Rusk conducted with a twelve year old blind boy named Don. Under the gentle prodding of this skillful counselor, this is what this blind boy said:

"I walked down the path toward the woods by the school and all of a sudden a dog and another boy rushed by. They threw a branch of a tree in front of me. I was startled and I jumped back and fell into some bushes. When I untangled myself I couldn't tell which direction was which. I couldn't hear any telltale sounds as a guide.

I called. Nobody answered. I was surrounded by silence and confusion. Then after a lot of trying and a lot of scratches and bumps, I heard the chimes of the old church which is north of the school. I knew then where I was, and I got back all right. But that awful feeling of not knowing where I was, which way to turn, which way to go...It was a terrible feeling.

And suddenly I thought of Campy (Roy Campanella, former Brooklyn Dodger catcher). All of a sudden he finds himself paralyzed. All his life suddenly has to change. He can't turn around anymore; he can't even walk.

I asked myself would I rather be blind like I am or would I rather be flat on my back paralyzed like Campy. I thought about it for a long, long time. I thought of how I felt when I was in the bushes, and couldn't tell where I was. I thought of the panicky fear when I didn't know which way to turn. I always said there wasn't anything worse than being blind. Then I thought of Campy again.

He had been a great ball player. One of the greatest, and now all of a sudden that was over. What was he thinking about now? Probably wondering which way he would turn. I decided that the worst thing that can happen to a person isn't being blind or being paralyzed. The worst thing is to lose all sense of direction in your life and feel that you haven't got any place to go".

DEVELOPMENT It seems to me that one of the basic problems in our world right now, and a problem that we face in our lives, is summed up in that interview. We have lost a sense of direction in our lives and we don't know where to go.

There are reasons for it. Many of the old landmarks that used to help us position ourselves have disappeared or are under attack. Like the twelve year old blind boy, we aren't hearing sounds to guide us. Silence and confusion surround us. There's a lot of trying and scratching and bumping around.

Look at what is happening in our political life. However you feel about our former president and our present president, the fact is that each of them has acted unilaterally and in so doing circumvented the due process of the law. We are beginning to be uneasy about whether it may be true that there is no equal justice under the law. And however you feel about our former Governor, the fact remains that it would be hard for any of us to be completely objective about a person who provides us with large gifts. Good intentions should never be a substitute for good judgement...a tough rule to learn and follow.

Look at what is happening to our economic life. This spiraling cost of living and the wide-spread unemployment have raised some serious questions about our economic system. Our economy is behaving in ways that were not even remotely predicted by our keenest prognosticators. The uncertainty and strain have reached into every home and business. We wonder what's ahead. Is it going to get worse? And more and more we're hearing the warnings of great famines for our earth. There are too many people on our planet to feed them all. How will we deal with this threat to our survival? Who has the right to determine who lives?

Marriage used to be one of the most venerable of society's institutions. But like everything else, it too seems to be taking a beating. People are trying new life styles which cause many others to shake their heads and wonder what the world is coming to. The deeper problem is how you find meaning in a relationship. There is something to be said for freedom and experimentation; there is also something to be said for continuity which provides the base for meaning and value in life. ..and relationships.

At times we feel like "strangers in a strange world". We're not quite sure what is happening, but every now and then we have an uneasiness and a feeling of discomfort regarding the future. Those things that used to provide us with security and stability seem to be fading. What's behind it all? Who's to blame? Where does it come from? We fight to hold on to a sense of a believable and a meaningful future, knowing that life is not really worth living if there is no hope of things getting better. We fight to keep what measure of faith we have.

Professor Luccock of Yale once noted what happened to a town which was scheduled to be flooded by waters rising behind a new dam. It began to die at once. New construction stopped and so did improvement and repairs. Why fix a leak if everything is going to be lost anyhow? Or why paint a house if it's going to be submerged in six months or a year? And so, week by week, the town went to seed, with everything looking more and more unkempt and bedraggled.

Whether something is worth doing depends on whether it has a future that can be counted on. When despair outdistances a sense of hope and improvement then our society is edging toward trouble.

TRANSITION      Losing a sense of direction. This is our concern today and again next Sunday. I want you to think about the future - the future that is your future. I want to suggest a number of things that I feel will help all of us find a greater sense of meaning and of value in our lives, that will provide us with some direction, some security and stability .

If you feel that you're losing your sense of direction, I would challenge you

to look at yourself, to evaluate your own meanings and values. This may sound somewhat harsh, but the truth is that if there are to be values and meanings, they must be meanings for us. I think there is much in our world that makes it difficult for us to be the persons we should be. At the same time we have the temptation to let those very pressures become the excuse for not fulfilling our own human potential. Thus we lose out, lose our sense of direction. Let me illustrate by pointing up three excuses that I frequently encounter...listening to people.

GROUP PRESSURE "I'll tell you.....I really don't like what I'm doing....but everybody's doing it.....and I figure if you can beat 'em, then join 'em". You've heard it before. This is the philosophy of the person who is willing to go through life taking his identity from other people...being like everybody in the hope that it will help to make him somebody.

It's the old idea of the thermometer versus the thermostat. One registers the environment, the other determines it.

Look around you. There are persons who want to be liked so much that they'll do anything to gain the least show of affection. There are persons who want to be accepted so much that they will violate their own standards and codes and sell out their values in order to become "one of the crowd". There are persons with such pressures to win or to make money that they would literally sell their own souls if the price were right. Is it any wonder they end up lost and not sure where they're going?

WHAT WAS DONE TO THEM Then there's another dodge that some people use to avoid taking responsibility for themselves. I think of it as the "I was forced to go to Sunday School as a kid" syndrome. It works this way. We feel we were forced by our parents into certain patterns, and we can only rebel against them now. "Look what was done to me" cries the victim. "Really....how can I be expected to handle my life responsibly and victoriously when this has been done to me...."

Dr. Edgar at Central Presbyterian Church down the street at Park and 64th has done a great deal the last four years in developing TA groups in his church. TA - Transactional Analysis. However you feel about TA, it has done us a service in calling to our attention that most of us were "scripted" by our parents - conditioned, that is, toward certain goals and values. TA points out that in some cases, the script is programmed for failure. But, and this is the most helpful insight of all, the average person is really more free than he knows to write his own script. He or she can say,

"This is what my parents wanted....but I don't have to act it out.....I am free to write my own script from here on".

I sometimes feel that many people who hide behind what was done to them do so because they're afraid of taking responsibility for themselves. I wonder...does this speak to you. Have you lost your sense of direction because of such a reason.

WORTHLESSNESS A third set of dodges has to do with a sense of worthlessness that blocks all our other feelings.

Think of it for a moment in terms of the prisoner. He is sentenced and taken away from society and locked in a cell. He learns to trust no one. He comes to despise the society that has put him there. Lonely, empty and with little left in the way of self esteem, he comes to believe he is worthless, stripped of dignity.

There is no program that will bring him back now unless he can begin to think of himself in a new way. He must come to see and to say, "I am a person. I am worthy of more than this. I am entitled to respect, to understanding, to forgiveness". Until he can say this - in some way - there is no hope, no possibility of a future filled with meaning and with value.

I think the same sort of thing is true with people who are not prisoners in a physical sense, but who have made themselves into prisoners just as surely as if they had been sentenced to go to jail. Their jailers may be fear, discouragement, anxiety, lack of confidence. They feel they are not worthy of love and concern and affection, while they literally die for lack of it. They're quick to blame the world around them - society, others, on everybody but themselves.

Have you lost your sense of direction because you've locked yourself into a little room that has open doors?

Remember that we are never without resources, never so unworthy that we cannot be forgiven, never incapable of the fresh start, the new beginning. Remember that we are the persons to whom Christ came bringing fullness of life. We have value and worth - not because of who we are or where we live or what we have achieved - we are of value because we are human beings, children of God, loved by Him.

So hear again and take heart from those wonderful words of Paul:

"Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mold....  
but let God....let God remold your minds from within,  
so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God  
for you is good....meets all his demands and moves  
toward the goal of true maturity".

CONCLUSION      The goal of true maturity. In order to recover and regain the sense of direction toward that goal, you must have a self that you can live with, believe in. Maybe there are some things that need to be changed. Some of us change only when change is forced upon us.

There's a monastery in the East where access to the inside is gained only by being brought up the steep and treacherous side of a mountain in a basket fastened to a rope. It's told that a person was descending and one was waiting at the foot of the mountain to go back up in the basket. "How often do you change the rope?" asked the man at the bottom as the other man stepped out of the basket. Back came the brief reply, "Only when it breaks".

Let's not wait until it's too late to make those changes. Recovering a sense of direction in our lives....we begin now - where we are, with what we are - and try to build a self that we can live with and believe in, remembering always what Jesus said to Thomas: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life".

PRAYER      The words of our Lord echo down to us across the centuries of time. His way has met the test of time, His words provide us with a light for the future. Help us to keep our perspective in these days of stress, strain, uncertainty and change. In His name and spirit, we pray. Amen