

MAN'S SENSE OF PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE

And yet....no man readily surrenders his sense of personal significance. Something there is in him that instinctively rebels against any attempt to exploit him. He feels that he ought to count for something. Put Emerson's Essay on Self Reliance in his hands and when he has read it watch him lift his head and brace his shoulders. "Trust thyself - every heart vibrates to that iron string" "Who so would be a man must be a non-conformist". Put a Bible in his hands and, if you can get him to read it, it inspires the sense of God-given dignity and worth. It reminds him that he is made in the image and likeness of God. It insists that he has something of value to contribute to life - something that he, only he, he alone - can contribute. He says with Edward Everett Hale:

"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do".

On the other hand, if a man gets it into his head that he is unimportant, of no consequence, counting for nothing, influencing nobody, needed by nobody - he is on the way to committing spiritual suicide. It is dangerous to lose this sense of personal significance. It can lead to self-neglect, to the loss of self-esteem. It may lead to the lack of concern for proper character, conduct, and even appearance. It opens the door to low temptations. Why be moral? Why not do as one pleases? Nobody cares for me. Why should I bother about anybody?

HOW CAN PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE BE RESTORED

How can personal significance be restored. How can we overcome personal insignificance? I think there is something inside all of us that reminds us from time to time that we have been made for much more. We are constituted that we are always searching for meaning and purpose in the life of the world and especially in our own personal lives. Freud says man needs most of all to be loved. Jung says man needs most of all to be secure. (He is secure when he is loved). Adler says man needs most of all to be significant. (He knows that he is significant when he is loved).

Love is certainly a factor in overcoming personal insignificance. Where there is love there is no feeling of personal insignificance. When a man and woman are in love they don't talk about the meaningless of existence. They tell each other that it was for this they were born. And what crushes the sense of identity and personal value. Lovelessness. The feeling that no one cares. When a person loves and is loved, there is no doubt about identity and personal worth.

There is something here for all of us. There's something that we as a group of concerned Christians meeting in this place need to consider. Part of our calling in a city like this is to share with others this measure of Christian love and concern. This feeling that people are important, that they do care. The world suffers not from a lack of light, but from a lack of love and warmth. Let me share with you a line that came to my desk this past week in response to a letter I had written. "The loneliness of a large city" said the woman, "can only be overcome by the assurance that there are brothers and sisters who do care". "I'm grateful that the people of your church care". Each year I remind the members of our Membership & Evangelism Commission, "Keep your eyes on individuals. Nothing in the long run matters in this church save what happens to them".

Then there is another type of individual in whom the sense of personal significance is strong. It is the dedicated individual. The dedication may take many forms - dedication to God, to church, country, family duty. Whatever the form it takes there is one common characteristic - a human being from whom life has purpose and meaning because he has a task to perform, is devoted to something bigger than himself, is committed to

the service of some worthy cause. This is what active membership in the church means for many. This is what the Peace Corps means for many. They have a sense of mission. They have a part to play in lifting the level of life; they put the stubborn ounces of their weight behind it and by their efforts inch it forward.

When the Queen Mary was being launched on the banks of the Clyde, a workman, his chest thrown out, was heard to say, "I put rivets into her". I thought of that riveter this summer when we saw Mr. and Mrs. Stribling off to Europe on the Queen Mary. "I put rivets into her". He had a proper sense of personal significance.

And it was something of this sort of thing that T. S. Eliot sought to convey in his play, "The Cocktail Party". One of the characters, Celia Copplestone, goes to a psychologist at the end of her rope, oppressed by the trivialities and emptiness of her life. She says about her friends and acquaintances:

"They make noises, and think they are talking to each other.
They make faces and think they understand each other.
I'm sure they don't".

About her "affair" with a married man, she says:

"Oh, I thought I was giving him so much.
And he to me - and the giving and the taking
Seemed so right.....and then I found we were only strangers
And that there had been neither giving nor taking
But that we had merely made use of each other - each for his
purpose".

The psychologist sets before her two alternatives. She can run along with life, take her characters from the company she keeps, conform to the prevailing situation in which people.....

"Maintain themselves by the common routine,
Learn to avoid excessive expectation
Become tolerant of themselves and others,
Giving and taking, in the usual actions
What there is to take..."

Or, is it the other alternative - she can achieve personal significance by becoming a dedicated person, by giving herself single hearted to something bigger than herself. And this she does, and discovers a whole, new exciting dimension of existence.

WHAT JESUS HAD TO SAY In one of its aspects Eliot's play was a commentary on the words of Jesus: "Whosoever would save his life will lose it, and whosoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it". To be sure, it is the language of paradox, but experience keeps on verifying it as true. Life, you see, finds its real meaning, reaches its loftiest levels, not in protecting the self, shielding, coddling, gratifying it - but in commitment, involvement, self-denial, and in the fullness of personal relationships. Jesus found that. Jesus taught that - that in service and sacrifice we discover our true life, that the individual who lives for himself, to himself, thinking only of himself, eventually destroys himself by committing spiritual suicide - becomes blase, brittle and empty at the core of his being, whereas the individual who spends himself on people, interests, causes, and does it gladly and gaily finds life full of zest, and deep satisfaction.

Jesus taught that. And the thing not to lose sight of when we are thinking about overcoming this sense of personal insignificance is the basic conviction that undergirded all his teaching. No one ever emphasized as He did the value of each in-

dividual. It was a value that originated with and was derived from the individual's relationship to God. He taught that we are the children of one God, by nature akin to Him, the object of his loving care. Everything for Jesus was rooted in the Fatherhood of God and time and time again in the Gospels you find him saying in so many words: "You care. You matter. You matter to God".

We live in a day when this particular part of the Christian's belief is being severely tested. A new concept of a radically different nature has taken hold today which refuses to allow human nature any such supernatural basis. It is ruling out belief in a personal God. It is trying to interpret man in terms of his biological necessities and sees his life as motivated by the incessant drives of hunger, sex, and power. The material element in him is regarded as primary and essential. Poles apart from this is the Christian conviction that man is made by God and for God and that with such a high origin, divine nature and final destiny, he has sacred significance and certain inalienable rights.

Remember "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" - the book, the movie - how when applying for a job he was given a sheet of paper with seven words on it, "The most important thing about me is....." He was asked to complete the sentence. How would you complete it. How do you think of yourself. As the product of natural forces, your necessities in the main biological. Or as a child of God - in nature and of it, subject to its laws, yet more than a piece of nature, transcending it, belonging to a higher order of thing, a citizen of two worlds, never content with merely a physiological existence, always spiritually susceptible, made that you cannot live by bread alone. A child of God? If this you consider to be the most significant thing about yourself, then you cannot hold yourself cheap. And you cannot hold cheap any of God's children - anywhere - no matter what their condition, their class, their color or race.

LET US PRAY

Our Father, we know that we are thy children, and in thy sight, our lives are priceless. Remind us, once again, of the personal significance of each life in this hour, in this day, when life seems to be impersonal life and human life of little importance. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus from whose lips there came that great utterance, 'Our Father'. Amen