

## "ON MAKING A DIFFERENCE"

INTRODUCTION Howard Thurman, Dean Emeritus of the Chapel at Boston University, tells of a visit he had from his friend, Dr. Cabot. The men were visiting when a student knocked on the door. Dr. Thurman excused himself and talked to the student for a few minutes and then the young man departed. They resumed their conversation, but the telephone rang. Then it was the door again. At last Dr. Cabot said to Dr. Thurman, "Would you do me a favor, Howard? Just for ten minutes lock the door and tell the young lady who buzzes you not to buzz. I want to tell you something". And then in the quiet of the next few moments he explained that human needs were infinite and that "if a man were to work twenty-four hours a day for a thousand years, human needs would still be infinite". At last Dr. Cabot said:

"A wise man discovers that he cannot make a quantitative impression on infinity - the only thing to do is to try to make a qualitative impression on it".

DEVELOPMENT It seems to me that there is a significant lesson here for all of us and one which I invite you to spend some time on with me today. I would suggest two simple sentences with which one can make a difference on life around him, or as Dr. Cabot put it, make a qualitative impression on the infinity of personal needs that confront us every day.

FIRST: I CARE The first sentence then that makes a qualitative difference to people is "I care".

We're living in a time when people are talking past each other, when communication is increasingly difficult, when people no longer take time to listen and to hear and understand each other. And eventually they find themselves shut off from the world because they cannot believe others want to listen to them.

A case in point is Andrew Crocker-Harris in the play, *The Browning Version*. A brilliant man and a likeable man, he somewhere began the habit of shutting himself off from being touched by other people. The play suggests it began as a defense from boys who did not want to learn and who gave him a hard time. Eventually he lost contact with his wife, his colleagues, and with his real self, as well. But he is not past the point of being touched, and when a student brings him a gift, a book with an inscription that shows fondness and genuine liking for his teacher, Crocker-Harris' barricades crumble and he is open to looking his life in the face again. What makes the big difference is to have someone say to us simply, "I care".

I sometimes feel that the worst things that happen to us are not the tragedies, either big or little, which come our way, but the feeling that so often accompanies them that there is no one who really cares.

Illness is never a pleasant experience. But loneliness, when it accompanies illness, can make illness far more difficult than it really is. No matter how down we are, if we can only have someone near us who really cares - it can make all the difference in how we're willing to battle to survive.

Bereavement can be a tragic experience, but it can be handled if we have the sense of support of others who know, who care, who can communicate their willingness to stand there with us in our lonely moments. Guilt, too, is a crushing experience in one's life and sometimes it seems more than we can bear alone. Again, to have someone let us know he cares can make all the difference. It doesn't take the pain

away, nor should it. But that pain can be tolerated if we have someone who can enter into the experience and share it. What so many people need is to have someone say, "I know what you're going through. I care!"

A ministerial friend told me recently about a man whose daughter was a patient in the children's ward of a large city hospital. In the same room was a little boy who wasn't making any fuss but who was plainly sad and lonely. There were people all around him, but none relating to him. He felt abandoned, and all alone in a strange place. His parents weren't able to be with him.

The girl's father walked over to his bed and tried to befriend him. "I know how you must feel" he said to him, trying to communicate his understanding. "You probably feel there's no one looking out for you. ~~Your parents had to leave you here.~~" And sensing that the man did understand what was bothering him, the boy let loose the flood of tears he'd been choking back and he cried bitterly into his pillow.

This was enough to alert the already overworked nurse who wasn't really eager to deal with a child who didn't want to settle down and go to sleep. "Now look what you've done" she said impatiently to the father. "Why don't you leave him alone". Turning to the youngster, she said, "Now you know your mother can't be here right now, but that she said she'd be back tomorrow night. All this crying won't bring her back, so stop it right now. You're keeping the other children awake. Lie down and go to sleep."

As the nurse left the room, the father followed and caught up to her. "You can't leave him that way" he said. "He's terribly lonely. He feels cut off, and he'll harbor it for a long time. Why don't you go back and tell him that you care. Say something gentle". The nurse resented his involvement and was very abrupt, "I can't" she said, "Look, I have other duties, and other patients". But the father persisted, "Tell him at least that you'd like to stay, but that you have other duties to attend to. Tell him you'll be back after you finish and will look in on him".

She turned back after hesitating for a moment and enter the child's room. This time she spoke softly and with understanding. "I'm sorry your mother isn't here with you now when you need her and want her." "I have to give some medicine to other children, but then I'll be back to visit for a few moments with you". The child smiled faintly, revealing a peace that had not been evident before, and pretty soon he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

~~Such loneliness is not confined to children.~~ People in positions of leadership and responsibility understand it as they make hard decisions that affect the lives of others. In the pressure of their public lives they need the personal support of those who care and who understand the burdens of leadership. ~~One thinks of Abraham Lincoln this weekend and remembers the loneliness that he experienced in the White House as he carried the tremendous burdens of leadership in a time of great crisis.~~ The elderly understand it as they find fewer and fewer people who know them and understand what their lives have meant. Their complaints about change often stem from a sense of loneliness and a desire to go back to a time when they were known and cared about and loved. But the young feel it, too. They have the feeling, too, that nobody really understand them or cares enough to try.

Everyone of us wants to be cared for - to be sustained by the watchful and thoughtful attention of others. And one of the things that each of us can do for other people is to give them this sense of well being that comes from being cared about. ~~Different ways that one can do this.~~

As I see it, the Christian is compelled to care about others because he understands that God cares about him. This, after all, is the meaning of the Incarnation. It reminds me of a Christmas card we got this year from a teenager. She had made the card herself. It was beautifully done. She had simply lettered, "Christmas. God cared enough to send the very best!" That says it as clearly as that line from the Gospel of John, "God so loved the world that...." As God cares about us, we too are asked to care about others. By learning to say more often than we do, "I care" we can make a qualitative impression on those around us. And there are so many ways by which one can say, "I care".

I LOVE YOU The second line that I commend to your attention which can also help to change the quality of life around us is the sentence, "I love you". It sounds so trite, but it is so profound. It's probably the most under used sentence I know and people are dying for the lack of hearing it. It's a line we ought to say more than one day of the year, too. Someone has remarked that if we knew that the world was going to end in one hour, the switchboards of the world would be jammed with people trying to say, "I love you"! to each other. What a shame that we wait until our backs are to the wall. One is reminded of that beautiful prayer, "Help us to love each other more because the days of our loving are so short".

Why is it that we so often withhold expression of love from each other as much as we do? Is it a matter of self-protectiveness, or perhaps a kind of false pride - are these at the bottom of it.

One of the classic examples is to be found in the show, "The Boys in the Band". It's the story, in the event you haven't read the book or seen the play or movie, of a group of homosexuals who gather to celebrate a birthday of one of the group. They play a self-destructive parlor game which becomes the means for both self-revelation and self-torture. The idea is that each of them is to call the one person he feels he has truly loved and tell him so. One by one the men try to do this and one by one they are devastated and humiliated by the attempt. The point which the play makes is that it is always humiliating to tell someone else that you love him because he then has the power to hurt and reject you. Don't show your feelings. Don't let yourself be vulnerable. If love is not returned, then you will always be hurt and defeated. Don't show anyone you care about them that much.

This is one view of love, but certainly it is not the Christian view. In Christ we have a glimpse of a kind of love that does not change with the circumstances, nor is it lessened when love is not returned or responded to. In Him, we see the person who is able to say "I love you" to people who are hating him, rejecting him, who are totally unlovely. This is a love that does not depend on how it is treated. It doesn't take its cue from anything outside, but from its own nature. The men who put Jesus on a cross and sealed Him away in a tomb thought that they were done with Him once and for all. But you do not dispose of love or extinguish love that way and he came surging back, stronger than ever and more free than ever and more available than ever, saying that his love was impossible to put out.

I don't know about you, but right now as I look at the world, I need very much to believe that this kind of self-sacrificing love is the real thing about our world - yes, that it's stronger than death, that this is the future for mankind. There are those low and dark moments of the soul when I think I can see no place in the world where there is any love left. What I see is hatred, anger, violence, infidelity, resentment, aggression, indifference and they seem to be winning the day.

And then I look again at our world and in some very strange and unpredictable places I see amazing things. I see, for instance, a person who is suffering physically - never a day without pain, simply beaten down by the suffering, and yet the reality of that person's life is not the pain, but the love that she radiates to those who come in touch with her - the love, the vitality of a great affection. One is reminded that love can overcome pain.

I look again and see a man frustrated by his work, pressured by a family situation thrust on him which he has not deserved, and tempted every day to let go and let the bitterness pour out. But he is not bitter. He is loving in the way he goes about the things he does, which are the things that give real meaning to his life. One is reminded that love is stronger than bitterness.

I think of a home that has been struck by death where again and again the question, "Why has this happened to us" has been on the lips of the family. But they have risen to the conviction that this loss does not violate the faith that they have and the deep trust that is the rock foundation of their living. And in this family's style, affirming life with all of its being, one is reminded that love is stronger than even death.

Such glimpses of love in action remind us that there is more love in our world than we are aware of. It is love that, as Paul put it long ago, is patient, kind, not always insisting on having it own way. It is good for us to identify love when it is present. Doing this can help to make the world warmer and richer and better. We can learn to be open about our feelings so that people know when we really care about them. We can learn to look for love in situations where it seems that none can exist, trusting that even there love is still present in some form.

Some time ago our family was gathered on a Sunday night in front of the television set watching the movie of Tom Sawyer. You may recall the scene where Tom has left Aunt Polly home and comes back to get his clothes and seeing the old woman sleeping, he leaves her a token under the pillow that he is still alive and that he has been there, and then very tenderly kisses her and leaves. At that point our daughter Catherine said with tears running down her cheeks, "It's so sad. He loves her and she doesn't know it".

There is nothing more sad in this world than to be loved and not to know that you are. Each of us can make a qualitative difference in the world around us by learning simply to say in so many ways, "I care about you. I love you".

CLOSING I share with you one of the loveliest parables outside the Bible that I know. A boy in his late teens was riding on a train and fell into conversation with the man sitting next to him who happened to be a minister. The boy was upset, eager to talk to someone. He said to the man next to him, "Are you acquainted with a little town called Springvale?"

Replied the minister, "Well, not exactly. I know of it. It's the next stop, isn't it?"

"Yes" said the boy. "We'll soon be there. I use to live there. My father and mother still live there, just a mile this side of town. Three years ago I had a serious quarrel with my father. I left telling him 'You'll never see me again'. Three years ago, and they've been three tough years for me. From time to time I've written my mother. I wrote her last week and told her I would be on this train passing through. I told her I would like to come home and asked her if it would be

all right to stop. I suggested if it is, then to hang something white outside the house so that I would know that dad had agreed to let me stop. I told her not to do it unless he wanted it". The boy looked out the window and turned quietly back to the man in the seat next to him. "Look, sir, my house is just around the bend, beyond the hill. Would you look for me and see if there is anything white? I can't stand to look".

As the train made the slow curve, the man sitting next to him kept his eyes on the round of the hill and then he fairly shouted, "Look, son, look" - for there was a little farmhouse all but obscured under a blanket of white. The parents of that boy had taken every sheet, every pillow case, every tablecloth, every towel and handkerchief they could put their hands on and hung them out on every bush and tree around the house.

The boy was out of the coach and up the hill before the train had really come to a stop. Not only should we take time to let people know of our love, and our care for them - but also some of us need to be reminded that the white sheets are always out on the eternal hills of God!

PRAYER      O God, Our Father, now help us to put into practice the things we have been thinking about here in these moments. Help us, in the days that are before us to show our care, our concern, our love and affection to those who surround our lives - at home, at work, wherever we may be. As we do this, may we be mindful, too, of the love and the care that thou hast shown us in the life of Him whom we call thy Son, and in whose name we pray. Amen