

(LET)

"ON TELLING THE CHILDREN"

TEXT: "I am reminded of your sincere faith - a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you".

(II Timothy 1: 5)

INTRODUCTION

I dare say that at first reading the Biblical text for today's sermon would be rated "ordinary" by most of us. Nothing stellar here. No dazzling miracle reported here like last Sunday's "Feeding of the Five Thousand". No big names - just some "second-stringers" like Timothy, Eunice and Lois. But, on second and third readings, the importance of what is written here quietly begins to shine through.

oft-neglected

For here is the under-rated wonder of religious nurture at its near best. Three generations old and still going strong - Lois, Eunice and Timothy.

DEVELOPMENT

We live in a world of colossal problems: arms control, hunger, inflation, pollution, poverty, unemployment, racism - just to name a few.

And in such a world it's most tempting for Christian people to fogget the home front and to plunge into one action group after another. In my work hardly a week goes by but what some cause with good credentials is seeking to enlist my time and support. And the same is true, I'm sure, with you. Come to our meeting. Please listen to us. Help us. Do this. Do that. And in its place, this is good. But the home front is of even greater importance - transmitting the faith and reproducing after our kind spiritually. Regain the importance - perspective

Paul knew the tremendous value of Christian nurture. There he was in "death row", rather certain that his flame would soon be snuffed out. And as he reflected back over the years, he became conscious of the great good that God had wrought for him through Timothy, a young man on whom his mantel would soon fall. He thanked God day and night for Timothy's great faith, remembering that that faith had belonged in turn to Lois and Eunice. Paul was grateful for a mother who told her daughter, and for a daughter who told her son. Three generations.

It so happened that Timothy came from a small town called Lystra. On one occasion when Paul and Barnabas were there they managed to heal a man who was a cripple. The crowd surged forward and wished to make them Gods. They wanted Barnabas to be called Zeus and Paul, Hermes. Presently, some of Paul's enemies infiltrated Lystra and turned the crowd against them. Paul was actually stoned, dragged from the city and left for dead. That must have made a tremendous impression on young Timothy. Yet, Paul did not presume that that incident, however dramatic, had brought this young man to faith in Jesus Christ. The faith that he found in Timothy dwelt first in his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice. He did not claim Timothy for himself. Rather Paul gave credit to the nurture offered in that Christian home.

WHO WILL TELL THE CHILDREN

"Who will tell the children?" This is my question to you on this day when our Sunday School comes together once again. Who will tell the children? We have a variety of interests as Christians vis-a-vis the faith. Some of us are seeking to express it. Some are seeking to apply it and relate it. Some are seeking to define it and study it. Some are seeking to sing about it. Some are seeking to structure it. Some

are playing hide and seek with it - leaving it now and then, but never for too long.

And yet, while all of this goes on, the concern presses with real urgency: who will tell the children? While you're busy re-structuring, while you're busy reading a book on the Incarnation, while you're exploring new frontiers on your personal pilgrimage, while you're playing hide and seek, who will tell the children? God needs to make a new church every twenty years. To what point do we discuss theology and structure and social action if we neglect the young lives in our charge? All we need to do is miss one generation and there won't be much of a need to apply, or express or re-structure. There won't be a church.

Who will tell the children? They won't become Christian automatically. There's no such thing in America as an osmotic Christian. And if we ever believed in the myth of the Christian state, we can hardly believe so any longer. One can easily find his or her place in our society without ever finding God, through Jesus Christ.

The schools? Hardly. Public or private. If I were a teacher, I would worry about the inflated expectations society has of me. How many wrongs can our teachers be expected to right?

Or should we adopt the strategy of benign neglect? Just allow our children to come and go as they will. Sitting back, more or less, to see what will happen. If you tried that with a backyard, refusing to plant any seeds at all, you would soon be looking out upon an indiscriminate collection of weeds.

THE CHURCH No - the Church will tell the children in conjunction with the home. That's the way it should work. The Church does it in conjunction with the home. And this responsibility deserves the highest possible priority in the life of a Church. We are trying to do it here. We salute those of you who are teachers in our Sunday School. Most of those who are teachers are not present down here on a Sunday morning because they are busy upstairs telling the children. And there are some who are doing it many, many Sundays across the year. It is a labor of love.

Whether we now have children of our own in the Sunday School, I do feel we owe something to those who in years past and in other places took the time to transmit to us the joy and challenge and understanding of the Christian faith. It is not enough for any one of us to simply appropriate the faith. We must be concerned to transmit the faith as well.

But if the Church is to be successful in telling the children about the story of faith, it must have the support of the home. We cannot do much without the help and cooperation of the home.

At times we may think we have it rather hard here in NYC, not too much "out there" that would inspire belief...to put it mildly. But did you know that in that little town of Lystra where Timothy grew up there wasn't even a synagogue. On the other hand, there was a monstrous pagan Temple. What chance did a mother have to bring up a child there in any tradition worthy of Yahweh God. Yet, even in Lystra, where the odds were against them, a mother told a daughter. A daughter told a son. And Timothy's faith resulted. Never forget that!

Home is where our preferences and our priorities are revealed. I doubt very much whether there is a church school anywhere in the nation that can offset the damage of a crassly irreligious home. I could be wrong. I know this. I know we have a way of farming out our children...thinking that they will learn to dance at dancing school, become literate at school, perhaps even have a bit of religion rub off on them at Sunday School. We send them out into a variety of activities with the home as the hub from which they depart and to which they return. But that hub has a tone and a character all of its own which is most decisive. I think it greatly influences what happens when the youngsters go out and return.

A number of years ago, Bob Gibson, who then was the leading pitcher in the National League, was asked by the press if he didn't feel that he had a responsibility to the children of America to set a good example. Gibson replied saying that he felt no responsibility at all. He said it was up to the fathers to set a good example for their own sons. With that I agree. John Calvin put it this way in his rather robust language asserting that,

"Domestic examples are powerful excitements to urge us forward."

#### WHY TELL THE CHILDREN

Why do we tell the children? Certainly not to coerce them or brainwash them.

A child psychologist awhile back gave an interesting expression to the public. He spoke of the "pampered, neglected child". This is the child whose every wish is so anticipated by parents that the child develops no "ego" of his own. It works like this. The mother says, "Put your coat on, I'm cold". Or, "eat all of your supper, I'm hungry". Or, with regard to religion, "Believe in God, I'm afraid". That's not the reason we tell the children.

We tell the children because we want them to be able to speak their own "yes" or "no" - that's all. We want them to be familiar with the memories, the hopes, the symbols, the wisdom that belongs to this family of God that we call the Church - the Christian Church. We want them to feel a personal relationship with God through the life of Jesus Christ as it rises up to speak to us from the pages of the New Testament, believing that in that life we have the highest hope and the deepest meaning of life. that mankind has been given.

You know how it is in a human family. We practice a kind of short-hand there. Around the supper table someone says, "Remember that old '56 Chrysler?" - and all the members of the family begin to woolgather and recall. Their thoughts turn to trips in the Summer, a trip to the Dairy Queen, or eating McDonald's hamburgers along the road, or a trip through Greenwich Village and a young man running out from the crowd, saying 'Hey, Mister....I'll give you a \$1,000 for that old antique car". All one needs to say in my family if '56 Chrysler and the recollections spill over and help to keep a family together and even the youngest adds her contribution, "you mean the old grey bomb, daddy?" "Yes, Caroline... it was a good car...I wish I still had it". The symbols, the short-hand, the signs, the gestures, the code-words - all help to keep families together.

As Christians, we have a body of literature, a cast of characters, a set of assumptions, a long history of music and liturgy. What we desire for the children is that they become familiar with these things...have a working knowledge of them.

PROPERTIES / PLACES / MOODS

There are certain properties in the Bible that every youngster ought to know about: Noah's ark, Jacob's ladder, Solomon's Temple, Joseph's coat, Elijah's mantle, Job's ash pit, Judas' 30 pieces of silver, Pilate's ~~ash~~ basin, Jesus' cross, Paul's thorn. All are highly symbolic. hand

There are places: the River Jordan, the Garden of Eden, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Upper Room, the Damascus Road, the Emmaus Road, Mars Hill, the Isle of Patmos. And there are certain moods that our youngsters ought to know about. David dancing before the ark, Solomon humble at the dedication of the Temple, Jeremiah hesitant about taking on the work of a prophet, Peter's cocksureness, Thomas in his doubt, Gideon with his courage, Moses with his anger at the idolatry of the golden calf, Jonah with his defiance, "I won't go and tell those people anything".

CLOSING

I have always been impressed by the great pains to which our Hebrew friends go to transmit their Biblical heritage to their children. Some of them put us to shame. This is a part of their history. In the earliest centuries the transmission was oral. Mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers had to sit down and literally recount the works of God.

"I am reminded of your sincere faith" said Paul. "a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother, Lois, and your mother, Eunice, and now, I am sure dwells in you". What was it the Psalmist once said, "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations". This is more than a wish. It is a distinct possibility. What we have received can and must be transmitted. It is not enough to fight the wolves. We must feed the sheep as well. Who will tell the Trust, we children? We will, and together we shall do it gladly, with the help and support of each of you plus the help of God, our Father.

PRAYER

Standing as we do, O God, between generations past and generations still to come - we ask for fidelity and commitment to both.

Help us to number our priorities well in this Church, to spend our time and strength on those concerns that really matter the most.

If we are called on to share time and energy teaching in the Sunday School, make our response be a "simple yes" - backed up by concern.

In the name and spirit of Christ who believed in children. Amen.

If you take the first letter of those three names: Lois, Eunice, Timothy. put them together: LET reverse the order: Timothy Eunice, Lois... mother in the middle: TEL.....stretch the imagination now and remember... it as LET'S TELL....tell the story of our faith.