

"ONE PERSON CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE"

INTRODUCTION

Household hints are not my speciality, but I'd like to share one with you today nonetheless. "Never throw out a newspaper or a magazine until at least two or three days have gone by since you read it". This unsolicited counsel is based on the fact that one never knows when something he discarded yesterday may be sorely needed today. The price for premature disposal often comes very high.

DEVELOPMENT

To come directly then to the point of this sermon - it is my belief that ^{in recent years} ~~over the past ten years~~ we have been too quick to dismiss the importance of the individual. ~~The decade in question~~ has called for massive responses to massive social, economic and political problems. We've almost worn out the alphabet naming action-minded organizations that have sprung up to help fight discrimination, poverty, pollution, war. And the end is not in sight.

But this same decade, by virtue of its great concentration on large scale movements, has seen us all but lose one of the Bible's most helpful and oft repeated lessons: namely, that one man of faith - in any situation, in any place, at any time - came make a tremendous difference.

Look where you will in the Bible: Abraham in Canaan, Joseph in prison, Moses in Pharaoh's court, Samson in Gaza, Elijah on Mount Carmel, Ruth in Moab, Paul and Silas in a Philippian jail, Dorcas in Joppa, Titus on Crete, John on Patmos. History can act on faith alright, but faith, mind you, can also act on history.

But all of those illustrations, you're apt to say to yourself, belong to another day. We can admire those stalwarts of faith whose exploits are recorded in the Scriptures, but the haze of distance and the gloss of legend tend to make them a little larger than life, a little unreal, perhaps. Then let me give you a heartening illustration from the present.

ERNEST GORDON

Some of you are familiar with the name of Dr. Ernest Gordon, the Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University. Here's a man who had a life-changing experience as a prisoner of war during World War II in the Chungkai Camp in Thailand. What he experienced is written up in a very fascinating book some of you may have read entitled, Through the Valley of the Kwai.

Ernest Gordon is a Scot. He graduated from the University of St. Andrew's, and in the process gave up the Christian faith in which he had been reared. He joined the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and became a captain. Eventually he was captured by the Japanese and found himself a prisoner in a camp along the River Kwai. His health broke. He was afflicted with malaria, dysentery, beri-beri, and a very serious blood infection. His once robust frame was reduced to a skeleton.

By this time he writes the camp had become like the jungle that surrounded it. Each man was looking out for Number One. There was stealing - even from the dead. There was holding back of rations, blackmarket and all the rest.

The turning point for Ernest Gordon came when two men whom he did not know to start with, paid attention to him. One was a man by the name of Dusty Miller who radiated, even in that horrible camp, a sense of pleasure that he was alive. This man after working a full shift would come to Gordon's sick bed and wash his body, sores and all, thus inspiring hope and confidence and rousing the will to live.

The other man was Dennis Moore, a Christian who gave the camp a new look. He gathered up the few books that were scattered around and started a small library. He began a small orchestra. He taught others the art of massage so that the wounded men could feel their body tone coming back. And with the help of some other men he turned out artificial limbs so that amputees might sense that all was not lost.

Ernest Gordon is the Dean of the Chapel at Princeton today because of these two men. He comments on them in his book in this way:

"For the first time I understood. Dusty was a Methodist and Dinty a Roman Catholic. Yet - in each it was their faith that lent a special grace to their personalities; through them faith expressed a power, a presence, greater than themselves."

These men could not control their circumstances - true! But what they could control they did: their response to the circumstances. By responding as they did they turned the shadows of death and darkness into the brightness of day for the men in that prisoner of war camp.

The point is that the man of faith - in any situation, in any place, at any time - can make a difference. This is the brunt of what I wish to drive home today. But - if the person of faith is to make this difference then there are some things he must keep centrally in mind. Let me suggest three of them to you.

NUMBERS ARE NOT DECISIVE

First, he must remember that numbers are not decisive. True faith - real faith - in God is apt to be something of a minority experience. More and more, even in America, it seems that it is a minority experience. ~~And for those in this city, it's even more so. It reminds me of a remark made by the man who plays the role of the minister in Purlee. I remember seeing him accept a Tony Award last spring for his performance, and his response at the microphone upon receiving the award, was "I thank the Lord I still believe in Him after four years in New York City". I wonder what he'll say after fourteen years.~~

Some of us fight hard for what faith we have. It doesn't come easily. And so whether we live in so-called Christendom, or in the midst of a hostile culture, true faith in the living God is always a minority experience. The Hebrews in the Psalm read earlier in the service were raising the same question, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" But a strange land is the only kind of land that faith has ever had in which to sing.

However, remember this that the mathematics of the Kingdom are different from the mathematics of the world. One plus God makes a majority is the way that we had it on the bulletin board earlier this week. Remember that. In the arithmetic of faith, one can chase a thousand, and two can put ten-thousand to flight. We may have forgotten this, or tend to overlook it, and when we have, then let us learn it again as Elijah's servant learned it from his master. "Fear not" said Elijah, "for those who are with us are more than those who are with them".

Remember that individuals countering or discounting numbers have made stunning changes in the history of the world. They have radically altered many an environment. One nurse on a hospital floor, one tenant in a building, one player on a team, one stewardess on a delayed flight, one typist in an office, one clerk in a store, one teacher in a school, one member of a committee - each can lift the level of life for countless souls around them.

Individuals who have not forgotten that they matter have frequently altered the course of human events. It was one vote that elected Thomas Jefferson president. It was one vote that authorized the Erie Canal. It was one vote that admitted Texas, California, Washington and Oregon to statehood. It was one vote that be-headed Charles I of England. One vote made France a republic in 1875 and ended it in 1940. One vote saved the Selective Service Act in 1941. The person of faith must learn right at the onset that numbers are not decisive.

What was it that Robert Kennedy said back in 1964 when he was being interviewed on television during the campaign when he was running for the Senate from this State. Gabe Pressman, I think it was, who said to him, Mr. Kennedy, have your experiences in recent years in Washington taught you any one thing. Smiling, with that wistful look on his face, he quietly replied, "yes, I've learned the difference that one life can make". Quotation.

SYSTEMS ARE NOT THE ONLY FOCUS

Then, moving on, the man of faith must also keep in mind that systems are not his only focus.

Overconcentration on changing the system can turn the theater of our daily life into a wasteland. This is so because in reformist periods of history, men tend to be brutal and mean and uncaring toward one another. Let us hold to the vision of a better world, for without vision the people perish. But in the meantime, let us not fail to raise life where we are through personal initiative, sacrifice and person-to-person ministries.

Why is it that those who are bent on working out long range answers sometimes tend to disdain short term acts of kindness. A year ago last Fall the famous restaurateur Vincent Sardi died at the age of 83. At this funeral Alfred Drake noted that Mr. Sardi would be remembered for his generosity to beginners in the theater. Does that seem like too small a contribution for you?

Sometime ago I cut out of the papers a short letter that was written by a rural mail carrier in Maine upon his retirement. That he had the presence of mind to write at all says something about him, and what he wrote says even more. To each family on his route, he sent this message:

"Dear Patron,

It has been a wonderful experience to serve such a fine and loyal group of people.

I have rejoiced with many of you when you received letters from loved ones away from hom. I have sorrowed when some receives letters of bad news. I have anticipated with you that long awaited letter that never came.

When I made mistakes your understanding carried me on. Now may the years ahead bring you and your families much joy and peace."

Sincerely,

The point is that if we make the system our only focus we are quite likely to depend exclusively on the system to alter life and perhaps fail to make our own personal contribution. For instance, when we see litter on the streets the first impulse for most of us is to ask, "Who do we call?" Why don't we pause and pick it up. Why don't we stop assuming that help must always come down from some official

office or bureau. What about our own contribution?

It has been wisely noted by many that the permanent unchanging power in human history is the power of human personality. I was at a meeting recently where some one made reference to the book, The Greening of America, by Charles Reich. This is a book that is being talked about, and one of the main ideas presented by the author, and important to the Christian Church, is the confidence he projects that as individual consciousness changes, American life will change. It sounds to me like this Yale man has stolen a page from the church; he must have gone through our waste paper basket and stolen an idea that we've been promoting for some time: that changed people can make a changed society. ~~"What's happening to me" is not really a proper question for the man of faith because it suggests a note of passivity. Rather, his question should be, whatever the system: "what's happening through me in this particular situation, at this time, in this place".~~

GOD IS AT WORK AMONG US

Numbers then are not decisive. Secondly, systems ought not to be our only focus. The third thought I wish to stress is tied up in the spiritual truth that God is at work in some of this, at work among us. Our influence and our action in this world may seem about as significant at times as a whiff of perfume in a gale. But - what if God is working with us, among us, and through us - then it takes on a different feeling.

One does not lead in worship in this church easily. There's always some feeling of tension on a Sunday morning in terms of this responsibility. Your ministers feel it as we robe and join the choir downstairs for a brief prayer before coming up. Indeed, when the time comes that we no longer feel the tension or the excitement we should retire gracefully. I remember one Sunday morning, several years ago, as we were standing in the narthex before processing, one of the ushers came up to me, put his hand on my arm, and said, "let it happen, preacher". For a moment I didn't know what he meant. "let it happen, preacher". The usher was from Texas and always called me preacher. Anyway, it came to me a few minutes later, after we were up here in the chancel. What a marvellous insight - not just for that Sunday, but for all of life. My friend was suggesting that the initiative for getting a service off and moving does not just lie with us. He was saying, in so many words, that God's energizing presence is already here - at work. And what we have to do is to stand back and "let it happen". There's a prior power already at work, our own efforts are only a small part of that story.

I was telling a couple of our people on Tuesday night the story of a man whose wife had a cat that he could not stand. It bothered him that when he came home hungry and tired out at the end of the day that his wife would use the can opener to open food for the cat before she used it to open something for him. She was more attentive to the needs of the cat at meal time than to his needs. And, moreover, each time he wore his blue suit and sat down on the sofa, he would pick up an embarrassing amount of cat hair. To put an end to his problem, he took the cat one night while his wife was out, put the cat in a bag, went over to the East River, and dropped the cat in, thus drowning it. A bad way to solve a problem. His wife was inconsolable; she cried so - all through the night and the next day. He hadn't told her what he had done, just that the cat had run away. Finally, out of desperation and realizing he had to do something for his wife, he said, "Darling, I'm going to post a \$500 reward for our cat. It's the least I can do". He told one of his friends at work about the \$500 reward and the friend replied, "isn't that a lot of money for a cat?" The man replied, "When you know what you know, you can afford to take risks".

"When you know what you know, you can afford to take risks". Think about it. We know, as Christians, that there's meaning to life after all, that God is at work in the world. By faith, we know this. We know that God is working His purposes out and His purposes will prevail, and that we are co-workers with Him. We know this. We know that God's nature is love. We know that faith can act on history. We know all of this: then why can't we take greater risks in the expenditure of ourselves?

If God has made a difference in you, you can make a difference in the world. You may say you're holding back, that the time will come, and you say this with a touch of modesty. But I wonder, is it modesty - or is it something else: laziness, perhaps, a bit of procrastination. I wonder..

CLOSING Some years ago I enjoyed reading the novel, Stowaway. Toward the end of this story which unfolds on the high seas on a ship called the Liberty Belle, a man by the name of O'Hara, the first mate, determines to make something of his remaining years.

He shares his resolve with a fellow seaman who puts him down with a cynical, "What's the use" attitude. "No man's life counts for much!" At this point, O'Hara's face flushed, a blood vessel in his temple throbbed. "You're wrong, mister". He said, "The whole world may not be mine. But the space of it I'm in - my part of it - is! It may not be for sure, or for much, or for long. But whil I'm in it - it'll know me!"

That's what we mean. And so may it be with all of us, as we go now from this place of worship - back into the world....remembering - one person ~~can make~~ of faith can make a difference.

PRAYER O God, we aren't much, but we're all we have.

Take us with our assorted weaknesses, limitations, and few talents, and b the power at work within us, make us channels of thy grace - agents of reconciliation and bearers of light and hope - wherever we may be, in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen