

"SO LONG AS THERE ARE HOMES"

#### INTRODUCTION

Earlier this week I received a clipping and a note from our good friend and colleague, Dr. Metzner, who lives in Grafton, West Virginia. The clipping was from the Daily Sentinel, a West Virginia newspaper, and it brought the front page news that Dr. Metzner had been selected to deliver the annual Mother's Day Address at the International Mother's Day Shrine in Grafton. The article went on to say that it was in this little West Virginia town where Mother's Day was first celebrated in the year 1908 in the Andrews Methodist Episcopal Church. Six years later, in 1914, President Wilson proclaimed the Second Sunday in May as Mother's Day. For fifty-seven years we have paused on this Sunday to pay affectionate tribute to the mothers of our land. It is fitting that we do this. In the note that came with the clipping, Dr. Metzner said this to me:

"This clipping speaks for itself. It might say to some that I am showing my approaching senility for taking on such an assignment. And this may be true. For I'm not sure what to say. It would be easier to preach six sermons, I think! Best wishes to you, Bill and the rest of the staff as you face up to the problem of preaching on Mother's Day".

It was that last phrase - "the problem of preaching on Mother's Day" - that caught my attention. At first it caught me off base for I hadn't thought of preaching on Mother's Day as something of a "problem". But the more I let that line move around in my thoughts, the more I began to feel what may have prompted him to suggest it. For one thing, one certainly would feel keenly the responsibility of a Mother's Day address in the town where it all began. Then, too, perhaps we're wrong in letting Mother's Day become a sentimental, irrelevant island in the midst of a sea of turmoil. There have been those years when Mother's Day has been wrapped in lavender and old lace. I'm not so sure that this is one of those years to do this. I think that this is what Dr. Metzner was driving at in his comment - "the problem of preaching on mother's Day".

#### DEVELOPMENT

Then, living as we do in the time of a feminist revolution, the time of woman's liberation, I thought that I might come up with some fresh inspiration for a sermon today from Germaine Greer's book, The Female Eunuch. Some lines in a recent review of this latest import from England in the Times two weeks ago prompted me to look in that direction, for the reviewer said,

"It is certainly true that this is a bad hour for men, that the masculine notions of justice and courage and the value of work are being called into question in the most radical ways. Ours may be the first moment in history when it is better to be a woman than a man, if only because women are to a great degree disengaged from the distortions of reality that come from the compulsive exercise of control over the external world. It would be arrogant to assume that women can save the world, that woman can bring men back to reality. But we have our struggle, and they are beginning to lose control".

I stopped in at the Marboro book store one afternoon recently and looked around for a copy of the Female Eunuch. I looked it through and found some interesting passages, but little that might blend into a Mother's Day sermon. And so I saved my wife's \$6.95 and returned to the church to give further thought to how one might "face up to the problem of preaching on Mother's Day".

FOCUS ON THE HOME

In the days that followed, my thoughts moved more and more in the direction of the home, thinking that this might be a good time to focus some thinking on our homes, acknowledging that the home is the basic institutions in society, and that with the strength of our homes, so goes the strength of a nation and a world. Who was it who said, "The hand that rocks the cradle shapes the world"? The chances are that Germaine Greer wouldn't be wildly enthusiastic over these lines of Grace Noll Crowell from which I have taken the title and theme for this sermon:

"So long as there are homes to which men turn  
At close of day;  
So long as there are homes where children are,  
Where women stay -  
If love and loyalty and faith be found  
Across those sills -  
A stricken nation can recover from  
Its gravest ills.  
  
So long as there are homes where fires burn  
And there is bread;  
So long as there are homes where lamps are lit  
And prayers are said;  
Although people falter through the dark -  
And nations grope -  
With God himself back of these little homes -  
We have sure hope"

HOPELESS OUT OF THE HOMELESS

Begin with the discouraging aspect of our truth - simply that so much that is hope-less on the horizon today comes out of the homelessness in our country.

There's a pathetic recollection that Dick Gregory relates from his childhood. In his class at school, they announced that on a given day each child would report how much his father would contribute to the Community Chest. And young, fatherless Richard Gregory decided that he would not be out-done by his peers, that he would bring some money that he had saved from shining shoes and selling papers and report it as the contribution of his father. The day came, and each child responded as his or her name was called, but the teacher passed over the name of Richard Gregory. The boy, however, kept raising his hand and interrupting, insisting that he had his gift in the name of his father. Finally the irritated teacher exclaimed, "We are collecting this money for you and your kind, Richard Gregory.... and further more, we know you don't have a daddy!" Can you imagine what such public branding and private brooding would do to a child!

There are too many people growing up or grown up who know the sad meaning of that line from the old spiritual, "Sometimes I feel like a mother-less child"...or a fatherless child.

I read a statistic somewhere recently to the effect that between twenty and twenty-five divorces are granted each year for every one hundred couples married in the preceding year. Incredible. It's true that some marriages do become sick and die and probably should be terminated, but many more marriages could be saved if two people would devote the same concern for healing a sick marriage that either would devote to healing a sick body. "To love and to cherish as long as you both shall live" - it's a sacred contract and we ought to give long thought to what's involved.

I think of equal concern is this current fad to disparage the institution of marriage altogether. So some people simply live together, in temporary liaisons of convenience, even bringing children into the world and then setting them adrift without any semblance of the security of a real home. One wonder - can stable, responsible persons grow up with that kind of rootlessness? "So long as there are homes....we have sure hope" - but without homes "where love and loyalty and faith be found" - then we're in trouble.

Another kind of homelessness can ensue even when two people ostensibly keep their marriage vows, and yet for one reason or another never truly transform a house into a home. Perhaps this touches some present. We can become so busy, so taken up with doing our thing out there in the world that we have little time left to devote to our homes. We become enamored with the notion that in giving our children things, we have met their needs. Or we exhort our children in one direction and give them an example in another direction. Part of the present harvest of homelessness goes back to that kind of trouble at home.

John Ruskin was writing about the downfall of Venice when he wrote:

"The decline of her political prosperity was exactly coincident with that of domestic and individual religion".

In other words, there is no reason to suppose that the health of a nation will ever be much greater than the moral and spiritual health of its homes. It's a warning to every nation, including this land that most of us call home.

HOPEFULNESS OUT OF STRENGTH OF OUR HOMES

"So long as there are homes.....we have sure hope" - but surely there is a more positive aspect to our truth and the other side of the coin is that some hopefulnes on the horizon comes out of the home strength that does exist in our land.

Several months ago I received a letter from a young friend who is now coming to the end of his third year of college. When he was in high school, he was something of a quiet rebel, questioning many things his parents, his teachers and his preacher had to say. Now, he was writing to say that he was still somewhat unsure about the church as an institution and some of its creeds, but he penned a sentence to this effect: "You can't grow up in a family like mine, without coming around to some strong, humanitarian ideals". And I thought to myself as I read that line: what a beautiful tribute to that family - his father and mother - and what a simple acknowledgement of the power and influence of a home.

I still make the claim that the greatest single influence upon children is the influence of their parents and their homes. True - young people have freedom of choice to make decisions for themselves and about themselves, but long before they come to the age of decision, they are shaped and moulded by the attitudes, the actions, the values, the priorities of the two people responsible for giving them life. Nothing in this world equals the influence of the home.

And so in the turbulence of these times, when youth are asking questions, and pleading to be heard, I do not see how we can detach ourselves from the scene in objective criticism. Whether the picture is hopeless or hopeful, parents are reflected in that picture, for the homes have contributed a great deal to it. And that beautiful line out of my friend's letter to me keeps ringing through my mind as a hymn of hope: "You can't grow up in a family like mine, without coming around to some strong humanitarian ideals!"

I think this is what John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, was saying in an address recently,

"There is much to irritate and disturb the older generation. But I submit that we have let ourselves be distracted by the colorful fringes to the point where we miss the central meanings of today's youthful protest. I am convinced that not only is there tremendous vitality here, but there is also great potential for good if we can only understand and respond positively".

Let it be underlined that the colorful fringe is dangerous and disturbing. What sense does it make to burn and loot and engage in destructive violence at home in order to protest violence abroad? How then can the pot call the kettle black? What sense does it make to shout down a speaker with whom youth does not agree, and then demand the right themselves to be heard? What sense does it make to escape in drugs, depend on that crutch, and because of it commit crimes, and then expect to be accepted as responsible members of a community? There is that lunatic fringe in the youth movement, just as I suppose there is the lunatic fringe in every group, that stains the image of the whole group.

But I must bear witness to my conviction that the great body of modern youth is honest, compassionate, idealistic, committed - and that in these respects they are reflecting their version of the ideals that the home and the church have held before them.

We taught them brotherhood - and they have taken us seriously, insisting that the color of a man's skin shall not be the criterion for the grade of justice or education or opportunity that he receives. We taught them respect for truth - and they have taken us seriously, chafing at hypocrisy, and insisting that truth shall not be twisted or withheld whether by communist or capitalist. We taught them compassion - and they have taken us seriously, moving into the ghettos and Appalachia and prisons and hospitals to "bind up the wounds" of their fellow man. We taught them the sanctity of human life - and they have taken us seriously protesting that wars must be stopped before we reach the point of no return in the race to nuclear oblivion. We taught them the primacy of Jesus Christ - and great numbers continue to find him still to be "The Way, the Truth, and the Life".

#### WHAT HAS THIS TO DO WITH MOTHER'S DAY

What all of this has to do with Mother's Day is reflected in a conversation I recently overheard in an elevator over at Doctor's Hospital. Allie McGraw, the actress, had just given birth and she was in a room at the end of the hall on one floor. I was on my way to see one of my friends from Inwood who had given birth a couple of days before. I was on the elevator going up to the 10th floor. A couple of doctors were chatting. Said one to the other, "Do you have any VIP's on your floor?" "No" said the other, "nobody out of the ordinary on my floor". Whereupon a youngster who was also a passenger on the elevator spoke up defensively, "Hey, don't say that....my mother's on your floor". And he was right. His mother was a VIP - a very important person!

Just as all mothers and father, grandmothers and grandfathers, are the most important persons in the world in helping children and young people to find what is truth, what is honesty, what is freedom, what is justice, what is faith, what is love. And nothing that we do is finally much more important than the climate and the character of our homes, which one day bring a youth to say - "you can't grow up in a family like mine, without....." "So long as there are homes.....we have sure hope." "Now abide faith and hope and love.....and the greatest of these is love".

PRAYER: For every home represented here this day, we pray.

For strong homes, for troubled homes, for homes soon to be established, and for homes in recent days touched by sorrow. Lead us, we pray thee, to grow in those qualities of honesty, thoughtfulness, of love and of faith. Be thou the head of our homes, and grant us the grace and the guidance in what Thou hast meant to us in the life of Christ. In His name, we pray. Amen

Said Richard Gregory, "I walked out of school that day, and for a long time I didn't go back very often. There was shame there"