

THE COMINGS AND GOINGS OF LIFE

INTRODUCTION This morning I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes about one of the basic principles of life. It's the principle of withdrawal and return. Some of you I know are familiar with it. This, in a nut-shell, is the principle: that you can't go on indefinitely doing the same things, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, whether it's work or whether it's play. You must withdraw from it, rest, and then return to it. For instance, you can't go on indefinitely working day after day. You must withdraw from your work no matter how important it is, no matter how urgent some of those matters may be that are pressing in on you. You must withdraw for a while, rest, and then return. For instance, you cannot go on indefinitely using your brain in mental activity. You must stop and divert your brain, play a while, and then return to whatever it is that you're doing. In other words, the current of life is a kind of alternating current, and this is true not only as it relates to human activity, but also as it relates to activity of the entire universe, and as we think of some examples of it in the universe, it lifts this theme into a majestic realm - the sun rises and sets, the moon waxes and wanes, the tides ebb and flow, man works and rests, withdraws and returns!

JESUS UNDERSTOOD THIS PRINCIPLE.. This morning I'd like to have you think of this principle as it relates to our own lives. To begin with, we find that Jesus understood this principle and practiced it constantly. Remember how after his baptismal experience - an experience which stirred his emotions and aroused his intellectual capacities - he found it necessary to withdraw into the wilderness in order to think things through. In so doing he was practicing this principle of withdrawal and return. After several weeks in the wilderness, he returned, as the Bible says, "in the power of the spirit into Galilee" and began his ministry. And then on another occasion after healing scores of sick people which always took from him so much of that amazing vitality which was his, he found it necessary to withdraw again into the wilderness, in order to be alone, and to pray to his Father in secret. Yes, Jesus understood this principle and practiced regularly.

The sermon today, like so many of the sermons I've been preaching recently doesn't have a text in the formal sense of the word, but if you'd like a line of scripture to think about while I'm preaching let me suggest to you this line from St. Mark's Gospel: "And Jesus withdrew himself into the wilderness in order to pray". For his life, you see, was a kind of alternating current, withdrawing and returning, like the rising and the setting of the sun.

WE UNDERSTAND IT BUT... This principle isn't difficult to understand, and I'm sure that most of you have followed me so far, and in so doing you may have said to yourself, "why yes... that's true. That certainly corresponds with my experience". But I think our trouble is this: that while we understand this principle, we fail to practice it, except in those cases when we do so under compulsion. Most of us keep going, driving ourselves until we drop, and then we're forced to rest. I don't think I'm exaggerating the situation. Most of us do not deliberately cultivate and practice this principle of withdrawal and return.

I suppose there are different reasons involved as to why we fail to practice this principle. To begin with, I think that all of us have been brought upon the theory that the busier we are the better we are. We can hear our parents and our grandparents saying to us in the early days of our youth: "Keep at it. If at first you don't succeed, then try again. Be up and doing. Remember it's the early bird that catches the worm". And so we're up early and we stay up late doing those things which we feel just have to be done. We're suspicious of idle chatter, and idle hands. No siestas for Americans. No closing of the shops and the banks from twelve to two in order to allow people to eat a leisurely meal and give their nervous systems a chance to relax and unwind. Nothing like that for the Americans. No time to lose. No minutes to be wasted.

In all of this the machinery of life has been speeded up so that if you don't keep up, you can sometimes lose out. For instance, the doctor who takes a day off, and practices this principle and uses his intelligence and common sense, is likely to lose out to the doctor who doesn't take a day off, and so it goes, right on down the line in almost all of the areas of life. The pattern of our society is such that people often hesitate to take time to withdraw for fear that they'll be left behind.

As I said a minute or two ago, there are different reasons involved as to why we fail to practice intelligently this principle of withdrawal and return, some relatively good reasons, and some poor reasons. I'm not going to take time to go into all of the reasons, but I would like to say this that the results of our failure to practice it are never good. About one hundred years ago, Theodore Parker, the New England unitarian preacher and reformer wrote this line in a letter to a friend:

"We are the most restless of all people. Not satisfied with bustling about all day, when night comes, we cannot sit still, but alone of all the nations in the world, we have now added rockers to our chairs."

And of course since that time, we have added wheels and wings to our carriages with the result that we're no longer able to sit still and rock when nighttime comes. It may sound amusing to some of you as we observe it here academically this morning, but when you see the results of it, when you see people who are victims of it then it takes on a definite note of tragedy and sadness. The fact is that the faster we go the less time we sometimes have. You see it ever time you attend a public event - the theater, a concert, a church service. People arrive late, and leave early. They don't have the time to get there at the beginning of whatever it is that's going to take place, and then they sit on the edges of their seats during the last fifteen minutes so they can be the first ones up and out of there to hurry on to some other engagement. To be sure, there are times when all of us have legitimate reasons for being late or having to leave early, and these make us appear restless, but most of the time I think it's just a case of crowding too much into our day, and we leave little time for taking in those things upon which we are attentive.

As a result we're straining most of the time, sometimes even to the breaking point. All you have to do is glance around at the faces of the people riding in the subways and you'll see what I mean. You

seldom see a person who appears as if he's enjoying the journey, and anticipating his destination. And this too, if you deal at all with people, you come to realize that many times they're on the breaking point; perhaps not breaking completely in a nervous breakdown, but their dispositions are breaking, their tempers are breaking, and their whole framework of life is cracking and crashing. Those who do not break are the ones who have learned how to withdraw and return. These are the ones who have a contentment with life that's unusual, one that we admire and wish we had. All of this reminds me of a woman I know who spent fifteen years of her life caring for her aging, invalid mother. It wasn't easy. It was a long, difficult assignment for her, and she herself wasn't a very strong person physically. People often wondered how she managed to do it. She was able to do it because in the very beginning she made up her mind that at regular intervals she would withdraw herself completely from the situation. In spite of the protests from her mother, and in spite of her own emotional temptation to keep on going, and not withdraw, she would withdraw, remove herself completely from the situation for a few days, and then would come back - refreshed, renewed, relaxed and rested - all ready to carry on.

THERE ARE SIGNS.... There are signs, I'm happy to say, that people are rediscovering this most principle of withdrawal and return. For example, a few years ago, Ann Lindbergh wrote a book entitled, "Gift From the Sea". Some of you may have read it. It's about beaches, and islands, and shells, but in a deeper sense it's about this idea of withdrawing and returning. For this woman learned that a woman is a mother of a large family, and the wife of a famous husband has to withdraw from time to time from the pressures of the world and go to a place where she can be in touch with those large invisible forces that surround all of us and through which she can renew her own inner life. It's interesting to note that the publishers when the book was first published, had a difficult time supplying the great demand that existed for this book. They had not anticipated such a great demand for a book that had to do with beaches, and shells and island. All of this indicates that people are aware of this need in themselves, and finding someone who expressed it so clearly as she does, they turned to her book.

Another place where you see signs of this taking place is on the college campus. In the past ten years, the idea of spiritual life retreats has taken hold with great strength in many of the colleges and universities in our land. Essentially what it is is this, that students take a weekend and withdraw from all of their activities, and pleasures, studies and athletic events, and go off to a rustic and rural retreat center, and there they experience a change of pace by chopping wood and mending fences, and coming together for discussions late in the day related to the realm of their own spiritual life. Apart from this, I was interested to read recently where Princeton University Chapel is open during the examination period at night. The men withdraw to the shelter and quietness of the walls. There they sit....quietly, some of them doing nothing, some of them reading, some of them reading the Bible. In doing so, they're withdrawing from the noise and confusion of the outside world in order to return to it with greater strength and vitality.

SUGGESTIONS Perhaps some of you are saying, "Well that's all right for people who live in college communities. That's all right for people like Ann Lindbergh who have unusual resources and

opportunities, but what about us.....ordinary people like ourselves, what can we do?" It's hard to give specific advice from the pulpit to people, and nothing I say is going to cover everyone, but let me make a few suggestions.....

First of all let me speak to the women. If you're a woman leading a busy life, having to go out to work five or six days a week, or if you're a woman with children, a husband, a house to keep ----- (and I know that some of you are all these things) - you can do this, you can go into your room for fifteen minutes a day, close the door, turn the radio off, take the telephone off the hook and sit there. If you say you can't because of the children, then do it after the children have gone to bed. If you say you can't do it then because your husband is home, then take your husband along with you and do it together. If you want to do more than just sit, then you can read. Read anything that will help your inner life. Say your prayers. How a woman can ever hope to cope with the confusion of life in our time and carry the responsibilities of wife, mother, citizen, working woman, without spending at least fifteen minutes a day by herself is beyond me, and yet there are scores of women trying to do just that, and then they began to wonder what's happened when their husbands begin to lose interest, and why life becomes such an everlasting burden. And another thing I'd suggest for the women is that they begin to thin out their garden of activities. Most women today are doing things that don't have to be done. Most of them are engaged in activities that could be left out. Remember this, that if you don't do them, someone will. It's better to do a few things quietly and have some serenity and calmness when nighttime comes than to try to do too much and end up doing a poor job at just about everything. These two things then I'd suggest to the women - fifteen minutes a day in their rooms by themselves, and a thinning out of their garden of activity.

And now the men - what can they do. To begin with they can withdraw from their activity at least one full day each week and spend it at home with their families. I know of no one today who by the laws of employment is not given one full day off each week, and yet I met a young man recently (from another town) who mentioned to me that he's caught up in a troublesome domestic situation, and when I asked him about his wife and his family and how much time he gets to spend with them, he mentioned, "None....I just don't have time to be with them" Mind you, there's no great virtue in that. And let no one delude himself or herself in thinking that by keeping everlastingly at it, and denying himself or herself the right to the rest that he must have, not only for his own sake but also for the sake of the family, that he's doing anything but harm to himself and those he loves. Work can be an escape mechanism as well as play.

Another suggestion I would make to the men here this morning is that they take ten or fifteen minutes each day to go into some church, Catholic or Protestant, and just sit there. If you cannot pray, then sit there and read some of the free literature, or browse through the hymn book. Silence as you know can be powerful and can do much to restore the ravages of the day's confusion. Such a discipline ought to be done regularly, and not just once or twice a week.

In closing I would just say that for many of you this may not be a matter of self-indulgence, but a matter of self preservation. I get worried about some of you. Some of you, I feel, may be trying to do too much. Some of you are working too many hours a week, and then trying to go to school three or four nights a week in addition. Some of you

move at a pretty rapid pace, never slowing down. Others of you seldom take a day off from your work. If you don't go to the office, you carry that work home with you. I don't know if anything I've said here this morning is going to cause you to slow down. I hope so. Someone once made the remark that:

"All of the great nations of the earth have been prepared in privacy and in secret. They have been composed far away from all distraction"

How much more true that is of the great souls we have known. They have been prepared in privacy, composed far away from all the distractions of the world. And if your conscience, that blessed little thing that all of us have, if it needles you to keep on going and to try to keep getting more done preventing you from withdrawing from the world, just remember Jesus - how with a world to save, with thousands of people to heal and help, with things to do that stagger our imaginations, remember how "He withdrew into the wilderness to pray". My hope and prayer is that some of you will do the same.....

LET US PRAY:

Teach us O God how to withdraw from the pressures of life, not in self interest or self indulgence, but to find the quietness and the strength that we need in order to handle life more effectively. Help us always to remember the example of Jesus, and how in his withdrawing and returning, he made his life rich and great for all people. Amen.