

"THE IMPORTANCE OF CARING"

INTRODUCTION

On Monday of this past week, I attended the Annual Luncheon given by Interfaith Neighbors for the members of the Clergy from our Eastside Community and for the friends from the sponsoring churches and synagogues. The Luncheon was held at Christ Church at Park Avenue and 60th Street. Some of you were there and shared in the inspiration and fellowship of that occasion.

Interfaith Neighbors, as some of you know, is an Eastside Organization started several years ago by two concerned women - one a Methodist, the other a member of the Jewish faith and a member of Temple Emmanuel. Their concern was for the boys and girls of our city streets, of our own Yorkville Community. Interfaith Neighbors, now ten years old, and now supported by a good number of Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches and Jewish Synagogues, shares its concern, its care, and in a wonderful way through its program of street workers offers help, guidance and friendship to the young people of our community.

I thought to myself, as I sat there listening to the various speakers, that in spite of our different religious backgrounds and traditions and ecclesiastical divisions - that in spite of these, there is something that all of us share in common, something that has brought us together and enabled us to work together effectively. It is a concern for human lives that is born out of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

THE SPEAKERS

One of the speakers, the Rev. George Pera, from Central Presbyterian, commending the organization for their concern shared with us an incident that is worth repeating. He mentioned how several weeks ago, he had sent in a contribution to his college alumni fund and received an immediate letter back asking him that in the future to refer to his unit number 0007421 for purposes of identification and accurate recording of his gift. Enclosed was a little card bearing the unit number assigned to him - 0007421. He went on to say that it was not very reassuring to be classified as a unit number...that he preferred to be thought of as a human being. His point, of course, was that Interfaith Neighbors looks upon the boys and girls of our streets as human beings - not as unit-numbers, not as delinquents - but as human beings who need help, guidance and support.

Rabbi Bamberger was also inspiring; I don't know which synagogue he is connected with. One thing he said that is worth passing on to you: "A prophet" he said, "is one who feels a deep sense of responsibility for people around him". He issued, in closing, a challenge that we continue to serve as "Sons and daughters of prophets".

IT STARTED ME THINKING

All of this started my mind going around,* and this is unusual for me - on a Monday morning, that is. Usually my mind doesn't begin to focus on a sermon until Tuesday or Wednesday, and here it was Monday. I left Christ Church physically and spiritually nourished and walked down

* it set the wheels of thought turning.

Park Avenue heading for Korvettes to buy one or two birthday presents for my son, David. I selected several things having to do with baseball (some of you will think I got them for myself; this was my wife's reaction. She said to me when I showed her what I had gotten, "And what did you buy for David?"). I took the things I had selected over to the counter and a young man came up to me to wait on me and said, "How are you, Mr. Clarke?" I was so surprised I almost dropped everything. It's the first time I have ever had any one wait on me in NYC that I knew. It was Butch Misenheim. Butch was one of the boys in our club 86 program that we ran with the YMCA four or five years ago. He and his brother Hank were regular attenders; they were difficult boys at times to get through to, difficult to handle. We had a nice visit. He seems to have turned out quite well. He said he went into the Marine Corps for three years; perhaps that helped. But we had a nice visit and he referred to some of the young adults who were active in the church at that time who cared enough to spend a Friday night each week involving themselves in the life of those boys and girls.

CARING IS EVERYTHING

All of this reminded me of those words of Baron Von Hugel, who at the end of his life put the matter quite plainly and emphatically when he said: "Caring is everything; nothing matters but caring". Care - that deep concern of one person for another persons, that amazing composite of a cultivated imagination and an insatiable desire to be a part of life and to be of use, that capacity to get outside of oneself and to care about people who do not deserve to be cared about, to care not only about people but about life because of a deeply seeded belief that life ultimately is good, that life in spite of contradictions and inconsistencies and dark moments, does make sense. Care - all of us, I'm sure, would put it near the top of our list of so-called virtues.

Actually, when you come right down to it, I suppose you could divide the people of the world roughly into two groups, those who care and those who don't care. I realize that it may be dangerous to make such cut and dried divisions as that, that people are too much of a mixture of things to do that, that there are times when a person might fall on one side and then on the other. But it clarifies the picture for us if we make this generalization.

I thought of this in reference to Napoleon. I remember ten years ago this month visiting the tomb of Napoleon in Paris. Napoleon is not one of my heroes, but I have always been interested in that strange man who kept Europe in such a state of alarm for over 20 years. I went to his tomb, to that place where every year thousands of visitors and tourists go, and I remember stooping down and looking at the remains of that strange, little man (if I may refer to him that way) surrounded by so much splendor, the possessor of so much ability, some would say genius, and I thought to myself at that time - this is the man who when his army occupied Syria ordered that 1200 prisoners of war be shot at once because they were an encumbrance. This is the man who wrote one time to Prince Matternich, "A man like me doesn't care a damn for a million lives". There is one who did not care.

I remember visiting Westminster Abbey, too - several weeks later. It was on a Sunday afternoon after Evensong and there were not too many people around, not too many tourists moving about that historic Abbey. I went up the central aisle in the Nave and stood still to look at something. Then I looked down at my feet and, much to my amazement and wonderment, I found I was standing over the remains of David Livingstone. I stepped back and took out a pencil and three by five card that I always carried with me. This is what it said on the simple slab, in the floor of the main aisle of the Abbey: "David Livingstone, 1813 - 1873. For thirty years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelize native races, to explore the undiscovered secrets, to abolish the desolating slave trade of central Africa." Then this quotation from Livingstone himself: "All I can say in my solitude is may heaven's rich blessing come down on every one - America, English, or Turk - who will help heal this open sore of the world". There is one who did care.

Those who care and those who do not care are not all great, distinguished persons that you find in the history books, and they are not by any means all buried in Westminster Abbey. Some of them are very much alive. You find them everywhere. You find them in churches. You find some of them sitting in this congregation. You find some of them outside of the church. Sooner or later, every man and every woman has to decide where he wants to stand, in which group he would like to live his life. He has to make the basic and fundamental decision - a commitment of himself - as to which side he will throw the weight of his spirit, the weight of his support and personal influence. To care, or not to care: that is the question?

WHAT HAS THIS TO DO WITH CHRISTIANITY?

Some of you, however, may have another question in regard to all this. You may say: what has this to do with Christianity. After all, hardly a word has been said about the church or the Bible. We haven't mentioned God; nor have we thus far referred to Jesus. We haven't talked about salvation. And some of you who have followed the preaching of this pulpit the last two Sundays which has touched upon human rights and the Christian concern at this point, may be growing impatient and feel it's time we got back to preaching the Gospel...

What then has all this to do with Christianity. My answer is that it has everything to do with Christianity. Indeed, this is Christianity. Not all of it to be sure, but it is such a large part of Christianity that I, for one, can say that it is Christianity.

The importance of caring. Christian people believe that God cares about the world, else He would not have made it, and He cares so much about it that at one time he became a human in order to save the world from its folly and madness of its way. That human life was the life of Jesus and Jesus cared. Oh - how he cared. He talked constantly about care - the father who cared about the wayward son, the shepherd who cared about that lost sheep, the Samaritan who cared deeply about the man who had been stripped and left for dead, the God who cares about his children. He cared for the people nobody else cared for, for the outcasts, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the excluded. Oh - how he cared. He gave his followers

only one test for following him and that was that they care about their fellow human beings in trouble. Remember this: he died because he cared so much, and he lives on now in the hearts and minds of those who care for him. A Christian can well be defined as one who is committed to the importance of caring, and as a man grows spiritually, he grows in the direction of greater caring.

Our president was quoted this past week in one of our national magazines as saying: "Every night when I go to bed, I ask myself: what did we do today that we can point to for generations to come, to say that we laid the foundation for a more peaceful and prosperous world for all men". There it is - the importance of caring. If you have never thought about it before, think about it now as you come forward to share in this Holy Sacrament. Try to see where you stand in life - with those who care and care deeply, or with those who, like Napoleon are apt to say, "I couldn't care less".

LET US PRAY

God our Father - take that impulse that is buried in all of us to care, and make it grow until we care more and more about more and more people.

We ask this in the name of Him who cared so deeply about human beings that he was even willing to go to the cross in their behalf....

We ask this in his name.