

## "THE INFLUENCE OF OTHERS ON OUR LIVES"

TEXT: "And Jesus said, 'Who touched me?'"

(Luke 8:45)

### INTRODUCTION

Jesus was always being interrupted. One could almost write a Life of Christ in terms of the interruptions he experienced. People were forever breaking in on his rest, on his teaching, on his program. His daily ministry was filled with things not on his scheduled agenda. For instance, he started out one day to teach the people who thronged around him, and as usual he was interrupted. A man clutched his arm and with quiet desperation told him of his little girl who was sick, at the point of death. Would he come? He went. The crowd tagged along, followed him through the narrow streets, and then another interruption - a woman, sick, timid and trembling, reached out her hand to touch the fringe of his garment, drew back and disappeared in the crowd. But Jesus, always sensitive to the pressure of human need, stopped, turned and said: "Who touched me?"

### WHO TOUCHED ME?

We have here one of those numerous stories which carry the idea that was quite common in the ancient world that there is healing in the touch of a person. Blind men would often stand for hours on the roadside waiting to touch the garment of a holy man. One of the most inspirational books of our time, *The Robe*, by Lloyd Douglas, was written around that old, old idea that the robe of a holy man had magic power to heal or to harm.

While the idea itself in the mind of the woman who pressed through the crowd to touch Him was at least half superstition (though mixed, as he said, with faith), it also suggests to us a fact that is not superstition. And that is this: all of us have been helped or hurt or healed by a touch. And on a Sunday, when both custom and the calendar turn our thoughts toward home life - the ministry of motherhood, the unity of the family, the gentle influence of the home - let us ask the question that Jesus asked in a crowd long, long ago: "Who touched me?"

### MANY INFLUENCES

It is a question that reaches far. All of us have grown to maturity in a crowd, and many, many are the influences that have touched our lives. Some of these influences are so remote, so obscure, so far back in the past that we can't even trace them. Someone has said, "Every person is an omnibus in which all his ancestors are riding". Figure it out sometime. Each of us inherited something from our parents. Their lives touched our lives. And each of our parents had two parents: that's four. They each had two: that's eight. Go back to the 10th generation, and each of us had a thousand and twenty-four parent people. Who touched me? They touched me, a thousand far-off ancestors touched me. And they were not all saints back there.

Heredity is the time-binder - the touch of the past on the present that links us to the future. It is a something in the blood, in the bone, in the mind; no one can tell what may show up. A child may skip two generations and come up with a reassortment of great-grandfather and Aunt Matilda. Heredity is red hair in a great-grandchild. It's a mole on the cheek. It's the lack of hair on the head. It's a way of laughing or walking or talking. It may be an unexpected spark of genius out of yesterday, or an ear for music, or an eye for beauty, or some realignment out of the remote past that we can't trace anywhere.

Who touched me? The people who have lived before me in what they were, in what they said, in what they did, in the institutions they built, in the inventions they created. All that is past is in me today. It includes all of yesterday. Out of the great crowd of the past has come a touch on all of our lives.

FORCES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

Subtle, too, and closer (yet still beyond the range of conscious memory and ability to trace) are the molding forces of early childhood. The science of psychology has confirmed what wise parents have always intuitively known: most adult behavior is child-conditioned. In that lengthened period of infancy (a longer period of helplessness in the human animal than in any other), in those early years the child grows faster and learns more than in any comparable period of its lifetime. How? By this touch of influence, for the most part unconscious influence in the invisible atmosphere of the home. Whether it be for good or evil, the education of a child is principally derived from its observation of the actions, words and voices and looks of those with whom it lives.

Thornton Wilder was asked how parents could best pass on to their children the proper attitude toward responsibility. He replied by citing Dr. Albert Schweitzer, who said: "There are three ways - (1) Example. (2) Example. (3) Example.

One of the most interesting confirmations of psychology is the permanence of life's pattern - the child continued in the man; that is, once an impression has been made, it never lets go, particularly if it is accompanied by an emotional experience of high voltage. It may be put down deep into the mind and be buried there where by normal ways we can't reach or recall it into consciousness, but it is there - some hurt put in there by the touch of a dominating father or a neglectful mother, some injustice keenly felt, some feeling of not being loved or wanted, some unwholesome fear of sex instilled there. When in later life these twists become a problem, the therapy is to unravel the pattern patiently, then go back step by step and often into early childhood, even infancy, to find a frightful experience that the conscious mind has forgotten but the deep mind has remembered all too well.

Much of our crime comes out of that and much of our mental and emotional illness. The twists in adult life are child conditioned. Who touched me? In those years of early childhood, who touched me? This is so important. The Jesuits say "Give us a child until he is six and he will be ours for life". The science of psychology is pointing out to us that in those first six years the pattern of personality is pretty well shaped.

THE MOTHERS ARE IMPORTANT

This is why mothers are such important persons. "God could not be everywhere, so He made mothers". He put down in every little home a touch of his hand, someone who, by her own pain, has created and therefore loves with a love like his, a love that surpasses all other affection. Who touched John Wesley? His mother touched him - Susanna Wesley. Who touched Abraham Lincoln? His mother, Nancy Hanks touched him. Who touched Saint Augustine? Monica, his mother. Her biography said, "She laid her mind upon his mind until he believed in her belief". Those first six years - if only we parents could learn that soon enough.

Sometimes mothers come to a minister with a teen-age problem. He would like to help and sometimes he can; but God made mothers, mind you, long before he made ministers, and there isn't much a minister can do if a mother hasn't or doesn't. Those early years. The touch of God through parents in early childhood. It is superfluous to counsel parents to teach their children because they do it consciously and unconsciously - every minute of the day. When they speak gently, they are teaching. When they speak harshly, they are teaching. When they don't speak at all, they are teaching.

INFLUENCE

Last Sunday's Herald Tribune magazine section had a short, humorous article entitled, "Infant Dictionary". It gave us some definitions of things in our adult world offered by thinking six and seven year olds. Some were quite revealing. "Housewife - a mother who doesn't have a job". "Wedding - when a girl gets married to a boy and has fun". Here's one that hurt. "Minister - a man who talks about money in church". How about this one. "Democrat - a person who uses the money of others in a certain kind of way". Yes - we need to remember that our children are constantly influenced by our words, our thoughts, our actions. Someone has said, "We must strive to be what we want our children to become".

Jim Ellender, that fine leader of men in the YMCA, said that one cold night in winter he saw his father come out of the bedroom where there was no heat, into the living room and kneel by a chair to say his prayers. And, he said, of all the sermons he ever heard on prayer, he was convinced more by that one simple and natural gesture of his father, who wasn't aware that he was touching anyone.

Education. We think it is something formal and chronological (and it is). We think it is a school, class room, desk and books and a teacher writing something on the blackboard. It is that, but it is infinitely more. Henry Adams wrote a book, The Education of Henry Adams. He knew that he couldn't explain himself without traveling back through the years, through his memory peopled with a host of men and women, a great crowd of people who turned his footsteps this way or that - something seen in a face, something said that set him thinking. We catch cowardice or courage from people as easily as we catch a cold and often don't know where we caught it.

I came across an interesting story about a judge who was teased by a friend for always assuming a lenient and even benevolent attitude toward any defendant who happened to be a Filipino. At first the judge denied that it was true; at least, he said, he certainly was not aware of it. But as he turned the matter over in his mind, he realized that he did have a warm feeling for Filipinos. He recalled that once when he was a boy he had lost an envelope of money his father had entrusted him to carry to the bank. That night a Filipino workman, dark and dirty, brought the addressed envelope to his home. He had found it in the street. The boy's gratitude toward the dark skinned man for that unexpected delivery from disgrace had put within him a disposition of appreciation which unconsciously had colored his attitude toward every Filipino for the rest of his life. Who touched me. Where do we get prejudice. Someone touched us. Where do we get faith. Someone touched us. We ought never to forget that someone is always backing his wagon up to your door to get some furniture for his life's house.

A PRINCIPLE

Now we have come far enough in this to set down a principle. If education in the school of life is mostly contagion - more caught, as we say, than taught - if we have come to where we are and what we are mostly by the invisible touch of other lives upon our own, is it not clear then that this is the divine plan for life?

God works by indirection through the invisible forces of influence. He works through the human network, and sets the solitary in families, that is, He sets every person down in a network of relationships where he must be some kind of link between the generations and whether he knows it or not leaves his particular touch on the lives of those around him.

Who can measure a touch - the touch of one person in a circle - in a church - in a business. And isn't that what all of us are here for? - to lay our hands on something and make a difference in it? To come into the fellowship of a church, for

instance, and make a difference; to come into a church board or a Sunday School class or a church choir or an ushers' group - and by our touch leave it a little higher than when we found it. Remember - Jesus of Nazareth depended almost wholly on this method. There were no large scale mass media at his disposal - no radio, no television networks. He used the human network - picked a few men, depended on them in the interweaving of the years and the interlacing of the generations, the touch of one life upon another. Even now, if you ask the question of a person: "why are you a Christian" "Who brought you into the fellowship of a church" in nearly ever life the answer will be - it was a personal influence. A mother. A father. A Sunday School teacher. A friend.

This is what we are here to do. We don't have to push people - or preach to them - or pressure them in any way. A young man stood in Grand Central Station here in the city and saw a blind veteran come in from a train with a heavy suitcase. The man went up to him and offered to carry his suitcase. The veteran shrugged him off. He would carry his own suitcase. "Can I help you in some way - take your somewhere - get a cab for you" asked the man. "Yes" said the blind veteran. "I would like to get over to the information desk". The man took his arm and rather firmly started off, but the blind veteran said to him, "Don't push me, pal. All I need is the touch of your hand on my shoulder".

Few there are in the crowd ~~among~~ with whom we associate who want to be pushed, or preached to, or possessed. But many there are in it who need the touch of your hand on their shoulder. Many there are who need your example and the touch of your influence.

LET US PRAY Let us ever be mindful, O God, of the influence we have in the lives of others. Give us understanding hearts, eternal vigilance against selfishness and irritation, and the love that envieth not, vaunteth not itself, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, and never fails. We ask this in the spirit of Christ. Amen