

"THE LIFE THAT DOES NOT WITHER"

INTRODUCTION

The sermon today is about a man. This man is introduced to us in the first Psalm where it is said of him: "His delight is in the Law of the Lord, and in his Law doth he meditate day and night". We gather immediately from this brief description that he was a zealous student of the Jewish Law, and that he made every effort to do the will of God as it was set forth in the Law.

The psalmist, poet that he is, goes on to compare this man to a tree, and in so doing, he says this about him: "And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doth shall prosper". In other words, he is introducing us to a righteous man - a man with a constant source of refreshment and consequent regular and dependable fruitage.

Have you ever known a man like this? I'm sure you have. We all have. And we admire such persons. This morning I should like to tell you about a man I have known for some time, a man who seems to compare favorably to the man the psalmist had in his mind when he wrote these lines, a man about whom we might say - his life has not withered away.

A DESCRIPTION

Each summer when we vacation in the state of Maine, we have opportunity to see this man and to talk with him. He is a gracious, elderly gentleman. He is in his seventies. His sight is not as good as it once was. He tires more easily than he once did. His memory sometimes fails him, and this upsets him a little, but he soon recovers it. He doesn't travel around the country the way he once did. But his life, his leaf, shall we say, has not withered. There is no dryness to be found anywhere in him...only freshness. His interests are lively and extensive, and include both secular and sacred things. The passing of time does not tear him apart the way it does some of us as we see it taking away the people and the things that are dear to us. He seems to be beyond that. The weather doesn't bother him the way it does some of us; whether it is good or bad, he goes right on his way, apparently disregarding it. He has many wonderful memories behind him, but he doesn't live in them because he lives in the present and in the future. People seek him out, all sorts of people, people of all ages; especially people who are floundering because they recognize that he seems to be anchored to something that is not drifting.

I should like to hold this man up before you this morning to remind you that while it is true that all of us must eventually wither and die, we need not wither away while we are still alive; that there are people whose leaves are green, no matter how old or how fragile or how impaired their bodies may be, no matter how dry their days may be, no matter what the wind and the weather may do to them. There are these magnificent individuals who have within themselves a life that never withers.

SEARCH YOUR OWN LIFE

I ask you now to search your own life as honestly as you can and ask yourself some questions: are my leaves withering or are they still green? Is my relish for life increasing or diminishing? Is my interest growing or is it fading? This is not an easy question to ask yourself, nor is it an easy one to answer. But I think it is good for us once in a while to direct these questions to our own lives. Most of us, I think, as we do it, will see some signs of fading unless we have become completely unrealistic about ourselves. We perhaps will see some signs of withering in our lives, and we will want to know the secret of the man whose life does not wither.

The chances are that the man would never tell us; he is the kind of man who would perish at the thought of anybody's thinking that he had this kind of life. He is too modest for that. Perhaps we shall never know what the secret is, for it is a mysterious composition of heredity, environment, chemicals, constitution, character, and many other things which are beyond our understanding. The best we can do is to observe certain things about this man. I chose him because I know him that well, but there are others I know who are like him. (There are several in this congregation who remind me of him.) The best we can do is to observe certain things about him, and then see whether there are any general conclusions that we can draw from them, any pointers that might possibly help us in our search for the life that does not wither.

INTEREST IN EVERYTHING

The first thing that I would put down as an observation about this man is that he is vitally interested in everything that is going on around him, and that he has in no way withdrawn from the world. Whatever the life that he has is, it is not the life of the cloister, the life of the hermit, the life of the ivory tower. It is not a life that draws him away from the normal activity of other men and women.

There are two places where you can always find him. One is where good people are working together for the good of others. There you will inevitably find him. You are apt to find him serving as chairman of the community red cross campaign, or chaperoning a dance for teen-age young people in the community's recreation hall. You are apt to find him serving on the community's library committee, or his church's Board of Trustees. And the other place where you will find him, strangely enough, is where good people are having a good time - not a frivolous time, not an uproarious time, but a good time. He loves good food, he loves good talk, he loves good fun, he enjoys good company. Whenever you see two or three people having a good time, he is likely to be in the midst of them - enjoying it all.

From this observation of the worldliness of his life, we can conclude that the life that does not wither is first of all a life lived right in the center of life's activities. It is not a life of withdrawal, but rather a life that has some degree of involvement with others - in the community, in the church.

HIS DEVOTIONS

Another thing is this. He speaks, at least to his friends of his "devotions" quite often and completely naturally. He refers to them as naturally as he does to his meals; he does not describe them in any great detail, but you realize that here at the heart of a man's life there are periods carefully set aside when he walks among the timeless and eternal things. My guess is that in his case it is early in the morning. I know it is mostly meditation, thinking on the things of God.

We might say here, parenthetically, for our own benefit that the life that does not wither will not grow without this kind of exercise. And I would venture to say that nine out of ten Americans are attempting to do just that, attempting to live without any regular spiritual exercise. We who are clergy of the church are even tempted to do it ourselves because we are pressed by many activities which can easily push aside this essential activity. It cannot be done.

Many things have been written about Dag Hammarskjold since his tragic death a year ago last Fall, but to my mind one of the most revealing and charming articles about him was the one that appeared in the New Yorker shortly after his death in which a friend said of him: He ruled out social time-wasting. Instead he did things that refreshed him. Like walking in the woods in his country place or along Jones Beach in the winter"

What I am saying to you is that if you want this kind of life you cannot have it apart from this sort of activity. I do not say how you will do it, or under what circumstances, but it will include solitude, meditation and walking among the timeless things of eternity. This is the breath of the life that does not wither.

One day as we were talking together last summer, he said to me that he was more afraid than he once had been. I confess that this startled me. I thought to myself - what in the world is he afraid of. I think he sensed that I was taken back by this for he went on to say something like this: "O, I'm not afraid of anything that will happen to me either here on earth or after I die, but I am more afraid than I used to be that I may not have been all that I might have been". His words reflect a seriousness of life that sometimes we do not have in our lives. It introduces into this sort of life, a somber note - a note not often sounded in the light-hearted, superficial music that is being made in so many lives in America today. And I would add this as a general observation that the only people I know who have real gaiety of spirit are the people who underneath have this kind of sobriety.

HIS CHURCH

The third and the last thing that I have observed about him is that he always goes to church. He goes regularly. He always has; he always can, for he is always at home. He has not been caught up in the pattern of modern American weekends, but I am sure that if he had been he would have found a church where he was in which to worship on a Sunday.

Is this merely a matter of habit? Is this simply because it has been done through the years, because it was taught him by his parents, and he has been doing it all of his life. Is it a matter of habit, or is it a matter of obligation or of discipline?

I would imagine that both of these play some part in his life, but neither fully explains why he is there in church Sunday after Sunday. It goes deeper than that. He goes to church because Christ is the center of his life; the church he recognizes to be the body of Christ on earth, sometimes seriously limited and full of imperfections but on occasion capable of rising to great heights and communicating in glorious terms the spirit of the living Christ. From the church he inherited the faith that sustains his life; down through the ages it was passed from father to son, mother to daughter, from one generation to another. To church he owes the framework of his thought; his whole approach to life; what he believes about the basic constitution of the universe; what he thinks about man's behavior and his relationship with his fellow man. All this he owes to the church. With the church he works and prays for a better world. He has all of his life and he will continue to do so. And in the church, he finds in ways that are strange perhaps to people who are not at home in the church - the way, the truth and the life. And to this shrine, to this place, he returns weekly to refill the wells of his spiritual life, to give thanks and to ask God to show him the way.

CONCLUSION We come now to the conclusion of this message. There is a difference between the man introduced to us in the psalm and the man I have been telling you about. I wonder if any of you noticed the difference.

The man in the psalm had the life that did not wither because he was good. He did not sit in the seat of the scornful, or stand in the way of sinners, and his delighted was in the law of the Lord. Therefore, he was like a tree - fourishing, laden with fruit. His leaf did not wither because he was good. On the other hand, the man I have introduced you to was good because he had the life that does not wither. Do you see the difference. It is the difference, you might say, between the Old Testament and the New Testament, the difference between a life hammered out on an anvil, a life of discipline which can eventually become lean and empty, and a life that is loved into being by Someone radiantly good and thus it bears fruit accordingly.

This latter life is the life which we at our best want to enter, and into which we can enter. This is the life that Sunday after Sunday we put before people and encourage them to enter in to, encourage them to accept - a life lived in Christ.

"For though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction which is but a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.