

"THE POWER OF RESTRAINT"

INTRODUCTION

I came across a poem in recent months, and in this poem is the seed of today's sermon. Let me share it with you. It's called "The Wisdom of Restraint".

"It took me far too long to learn
With cuttings clipped from roses,
That roots to be, or not to be,
Are as the twig disposes.

The buried branch will start new growth
Of its own shy invention,
But not if it is dug each day
To question its intention.

And so it is with many things
That cause us sore complaint.
It takes the heart so long to learn
The wisdom of restraint!

When not to touch is good to know
As God in truth discloses.
It works with all our fondest dreams,
It works with friends and roses".

For some of us, these lines perhaps recall the impatience of childhood, the impulsive attempts to speed up and spy on the invisible unhurried processes of nature. Maybe it was not digging up a rose clipping to see if it had taken root. More probably, it was digging up a seed or a bulb to see whether it had sprouted - or disturbing a bird's nest to see whether an egg had hatched - or picking a bud or an apple before it was ready to be picked. And in our intrusion, we delayed and sometimes defeated the very goal we were trying to hasten. There is that characteristic impatience of the very young.

So - says the poet - as we grow up, there are many ways and places where we need to learn and practice the "wisdom of restraint". "When not to touch is good to know as God in truth discloses". The lines of this poem sent me to read again a sentence from one of Dr. Sockman's books which I recalled having on my bookshelf. Back in the 1940's, he wrote this line:

"Power held in restraint is power at its highest, for then is shown not only the possession of strength, but the possession of the power to control the strength one possesses".

DEVELOPMENT

"The power of restraint". Think about it. We don't hear much about that kind of power in our time; the accent is on other kinds of power. The power of money. The power of knowledge. The power of the press. The power of influence. The power of force. The power of speed. If a person or a nation achieves power, it's generally assumed that the power will be displayed and used - efficiently, effectively, immediately. We're not accustomed to that bit of philosophy in those lines:

"Power held in restraint is power at its highest, for then

is shown not only the possession of strength but the possession of the power to control the strength one possesses".

The only thing is that when Christians look at Jesus they vaguely understand that there might be something to this "power of restraint". At any rate, he thought so...and lived so...and died so. Those temptations in the wilderness, really, were a time of decision about the use of power that was his. And there he determined that he would not use that power for mere material benefits or for spectacular demonstrations or political power. He opted for the power of restraint.

So it was in the journey that followed. When the disciples, for instance, lost their tempers in the face of an unfriendly reception and wanted Jesus to call down fire from heaven to destroy the village, he restrained them.

Another time. When he told the story about a son who left home to find his freedom, he pictured a father who loved the boy deeply - so deeply - that he did not run after the boy to force his return, but waited and waited at home for that son to come again again. One day he did.

And when Jesus went up a hill to face a cross and might have spoken and acted to overpower the opposition, he was silent. Submissive. Nobody thought very much of this strange concept of power. Pilate didn't. The crowd didn't. Even the disciples were disillusioned. But the miracle is that the power of Pilate and the power of Rome faded, and the power of Jesus grew and grew and continues to grow. One of the New Testament writers kept returning to that scene and kept turning over in his mind this emerging miracle, putting it into words:

"When he was reviled, He did not revile in return. When He suffered, He did not threaten. But He trusted to Him who judged justly."

The power of restraint. So, restraint can be a Christian virtue. To be sure, it has many impostors. Laziness. Indifference. Cowardice. Weakness. Chronic postponing. All are counterfeits that sometimes try to pass under the guise of restraint. Yet, there is also the genuine article, and you do not take Jesus very seriously without being impressed that there is a certain gentleness of greatness - "the power to control the strength that one possesses".

APPLYING IT TO OUR LIVES

Think about it, in the first place, as it might apply to our lives.

There is a certain power of restraint involved in trusting our moods. I believe there are times when we should not act upon the impulse of the moment. One of my boyhood memories is a picture of my parents, composing a strong letter of protest about some injustice that they felt had been done them. But they left the letter unsealed, and one of them commented, "I guess we'd better sleep on that". And my recollection is that the letter was revised before it was dispatched.

This is what Christopher Morley was getting at in his lines:

"Never write up your diary on the day itself. It takes longer than that to know what happened....."

There are so many moods and so many moments when we need to exercise the power of restraint in order to gain a broader perspective, to better know what has happened.

For example, never trust the way that worries and woes loom large in the midst of a wakeful night. Things have a way of coming into quite a different perspective in the daylight after a good night's sleep. Never trust your mood of weariness or loneliness in the first week or first month of a new position or new residence. How many times have people cemented their initial sense of hopelessness into a permanent fixture of unhappiness because they lacked the power of restraint. Or, never trust the mood of utter desolation that you may feel in the immediacy of grief or some great disappointment. People cannot help but feel overwhelmed in some moment when darkness descends upon them. Learn to trust that there is some light at the end of the tunnel.

"Never write up your diary on the day itself. It takes longer than that to know what happened."

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

But our truth this morning takes on another dimension when we think about the power of restraint in human relationships. In the home - first and foremost. Just as the poem at the start reminded us - "as with roses, so with people" - there are times when one shouldn't nag and prod and poke. You wait. And how difficult this is for parents. Especially during those agonizing years from eight to eighteen, we are so concerned about the way our children are growing, that sometimes we are like over-anxious gardeners, constantly digging up the rose cutting to look for signs of progress.

We need to be reminded that restraint is an ingredient of love. It does not preclude care and concern and correction, but it does sometimes mean patient waiting, without the quick expression of every fear or annoyance or frustration or anger. I couldn't help but think as the Scripture was read this morning that the first in Paul's catalogue of the qualities of love is patience. "Love" he wrote, "is patient". How well do we score in this test of our love for those nearest and dearest to us? Life partners - each toward the other; parents and children - each toward the other. The strongest family relationships generally bear some evidence of the power of restraint.

And beyond our homes - into all the relationships of life. That was what so impressed the New Testament writers about Jesus - "who though He was reviled, He did not revile in return". To be sure, there's a human tendency - and we all know it - to strike back - to get even, to have the last word. And yet the really big people that we have known have revealed a certain gentleness of gianthood. They have been kind when they might have been caustic; patient when they might have been peevish; large-spirited where they might have been little-spirited; understanding where they might have been judgemental.

No study of the stature of Lincoln is complete without this element of restraint. Remember how Edwin M. Stanton criticized Lincoln, ridiculed him, and insulted him. But Lincoln, well-knowing all this, still thought Stanton the best qualified man for a cabinet position and so named him Secretary of War. Until in the end, so the story goes, when Lincoln lay dead, Stanton stood there above the body, with tears streaming down his face, and saying, "There lies the greatest ruler of men that this world has ever known."

Is there any one of us, who, in his daily relationships, does not need more of this quality of magnanimity? "Life" Disraeli once commented, "is too short to be little" - and one of the components of any genuine bigness of spirit is this power of restraint.

IT EXTENDS BEYOND.. The implications of our subject extend beyond individuals to groups and to nations. How much of the hope of our world rests now in the power of restraint exercised by the nucleargiants among the nations. There must be that power to control power, or there is no world future really worth having.

I believe that any full scale rendition of the Christian Gospel must reveal this note of restraint. It is not the only note. We know that. And Jesus made that clear. There were times when he acted with righteous indignation. There were times when he spoke clearly, forcefully, firmly. But there were also those times when He held it in...silently waited, and being reviled - reviled not in return.

Finally, and above all - Jesus still makes it clear that the roots of restraint are basically spiritual. For still He lifts us from the view of the moment to the view of the Eternal. He helps us to see life from higher ground. He introduces us to resources of patience and love which draw from the infinite patience and the love of God, Himself. He reminds us that we are relieved of the necessity of saying the last word, because we have been given the confidence that God has the last word. He imparts a certain perspective and power - one aspect of which is the power of restraint.

Just as that poem had it at the beginning:

"It takes a heart so long
To learn the wisdom of restraint".

But at least...the Christian should be in the process of learning!

PRAYER O Thou, who art infinitely patient with us, teach us through Christ, Your Son, when to speak and when to keep silent, when to act and when to wait, when to be patient and when to be impatient. For we ask in in the name of spirit of Jesus, whose life was in such perfect balance. Amen.