

## THE WAY OF JESUS

### "II. With His Friends"

INTRODUCTION The sermons during Lent are exploring the way of Jesus not only in meeting difficult life situations, but also in dealing with people. Last Sunday we considered the way of Jesus in times of decision. Today we turn to examine the way of Jesus with His friends.

DEVELOPMENT Somewhere recently I read that Sinclair Lewis had two marriages, a world famous name, and an income that was more than adequate for a life of comfort. Yet, an author reviewing his life said that he died "a pauper in comradeship". As it's been said, "a man without a friend is indeed the poorest of mortals".

A passage in Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" illustrates some of the emotional tragedy of our time. Charlotta finds an impenetrable wall around the heart of the man she loves. Confused and bewildered, she cries,

"I am so lonely...always so lonely; no one belongs to me and.....who I am, what I exist for - nobody knows!"

This is the pleading voice of many lonely people in our large cities. "I am so lonely. Nobody belongs to me". Lonely of heart and starved for companionship, they know that physical nearness to others does not necessarily satisfy the deep spiritual hunger for friendship.

MEANT FOR FELLOWSHIP Isolation. Alienation. These are enemies of mankind. Back in the first book of the Bible there is the suggestion that it is not good for man to be alone. This is not referring to privacy, which as we saw last Sunday is on occasions healthy and good for people in times of crucial decision. Rather it is saying that if man is to become a complete human being he must have fellowship, affection and acceptance from those whose approval is important to him. Without fellowship with others, one is in danger of becoming emotionally disturbed.

Back in 1932, before his inauguration, an attempt was made on the life of Franklin Roosevelt. This would-be assassin, having fired his shots which killed a man next to the President, was quickly taken into custody. In an effort to find out if he represented any organized hostility, he was asked if he belonged to any group. "No" he answered, "I belong only to myself". Oswald, they say, was something of a "loner" - a man without close friends. When a person belongs only to himself, he's a potential trouble maker.

Friendship is one of the oldest experiences in the world. Jesus endowed it with a deeper meaning, a deeper feeling, a finer spirit. ~~He walked the way you and I must walk. He had friends and offered friendship to many.~~

INCLUSIVE The first thing that's apparent as we consider His way in friendship was that He took an "inclusive" approach when it came to this matter of making friends. Inclusive.

He took in people from all walks of life, all backgrounds, all ages. I think our inclination at times is to draw our friends from our own age group, from our own economic, social, cultural, racial backg. His approach was different. He associated with all types - ~~sinners, outcasts~~, the "ins" and the "outs". Instead

of judging, He helped people. His positive, out-reaching, searching love for people was expressed with warmth. We need to remember that in a time when the traditionalists had no dealing with Samaritans and as few as possible with the Gentiles, He numbered both among His circle of friends.

Children....saw in Him a friend. On one occasion Jesus-is said to have remarked, "Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones....it were better for him that a millstone were hanged around his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea".

Women. The "women-libbers" would have cheered Him for He was departing from the old idea of women's subordination. He treated them as persons in their own right. He was their champion in a time when womanhood needed a champion. Fosdick of Riverside Church, writing in one of his books forty years ago, said:

"They were drawn to Him alike by their need, and by His masterful personality and message. They came for healing, for forgiveness, for power to lead a new life, and for His benediction on their children".

I believe there is great enrichment to be gained from a circle of friends that is inclusive. I always enjoy gathering where there is a mix of people. To me this is one of the exciting things about a city like New York. I wonder... do we pass by many interesting people in life because "they're different". Do we exclude people simply because they may have a different shade to their skin, or because we're fearful of what some might say if we invite them into our homes?

A newspaper once offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. The reward went to a boy who penned this line: "A friend is a fellow who knows all about you and likes you just the same".

SELF-GIVING Another thing to consider in terms of Jesus and friendship is that there was always an element of "self-giving" involved. Freely, He shared His life, His energies with others. On one occasion He even said to His disciples,

"Love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends".

He believed it. He practiced what He preached.

I may be wrong on this, but often I have the feeling that too many of our friendships in life are formed from the point of view of "what can this person do for me". In other words, so many friendships are calculating and self-seeking. Too often we are interested in others for only what we can get out of them. We want to get to know that person because we figure he may be able to help us in business. I've seen friendships formed in the church on that basis. A young woman in conversation with her pastor remarked to him,

"You know we have so much entertaining we have to do in connection with my husband's business that I never feel free to make new friends. It's essential to his career that we mix with them socially...."

I'm not suggesting that we be insensitive to business and moral obligations, but I am saying that when career, social position and preferment cause us to use people as objects and things for our own advantage, then we have sadly missed one of life's deepest rewards.

I like this simple prayer voiced by Georgia Harkness:

"Give me, O God, the understanding heart,  
The quick discernment of the soul to see,  
Another's inner wish, the hidden part  
of him that, wordless, speaks for sympathy"

DEMANDING Inclusive. Self-giving. Thirdly, we find that Jesus made certain demands on those whom He called friend. Remember those words of His, "Ye are my friends - if....ye do whatsoever I command you".

Surfacewise, it may sound a bit severe, a bit unlike Him. However, this line must be read and understood within its context. Jesus was not a dreamy sentimentalist when it came to human nature. He knew that many are called and that few respond. He was intent on leading a chosen few beyond casual acquaintance into a relationship of deep commitment and steadfast loyalty. And He was making it clear to them along the way that it would be costly to be His friend.

When the Sons of Zebedee came to Him asking for a place of position, a place of prominence in His Kingdom, He asked, "Are ye able - able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of?"

He was seeking the complete allegiance of His disciples. There were to be no "ifs", no "ands", no "buts". His commitment to them was without reservation. He was not holding back, and He expected this same quality, this same response from them. Again quoting Fosdick,

"He braided them into friendship with Himself and with each other, so close that the community did what no isolated believer could ever have done - it survived...it survived the shock of the crucifixion, the agony of sustained persecution, the frailties of its members, and the discouragement of its campaign. On that group of friends, the Master counted for His work."

In all of this Jesus was laying the foundation stones for the church which is bound to Him so closely that we call it "the body of Christ". And if we believe at all in Him, in His ways, His teaching, then we cannot be lukewarm or halfway in our response. He demands of us a relationship that is total, that is complete. Inclusive. Self-giving. Demanding.

OUT OF THIS He never lost heart in nourishing this small group of deeply committed friends upon whom the future depended. It was out of this unique fellowship that eventually emerged the Church. The church is KOINONIA - that is, it is a place where you know as you are known. It is an encounter - an encounter where you meet the Eternal in your friend. It is a fellowship where you can remove the mask and come as you are.

The fellowship of the church as "the body of Christ" implies mutual dependence and responsibility.

Let's think of this in terms of this church. There ought to be in our church far more of a mutual concern for each other's life and growth than there is. I think we ought to pray for one another more than we do. We ought to appreciate, accept, love, comfort and restore more than we are now doing. I believe that this ought not to be left to one who by ordination assumes this as his life's work. You are the Church. You are the body of Christ. "Bear one another's burdens" said Paul in writing to the Galatians. If our faith is to be nourished into real strength, we must have the upbuilding of each other in the framework of the Christian fellowship.

Some time ago the papers told the story of a woman who was found dead, entangled in a fence she had electrified to keep boys out of her garden. She had endangered the lives of children to keep them out of her flowers and then stepped into the fatal trap herself. If we wall out other people, we wall ourselves in and eventually die of spiritual starvation.

#### A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

~~In all of this there emerges a challenge not only for us as individuals, but also for the church.~~

The church must strive to reflect in its life those qualities which are descriptive of the way of Jesus in friendship. It must strive to be inclusive. The world knows that Christianity teaches the unity of mankind, but at times the world wonders whether the church takes seriously its own pronouncements in this regard. It must offer the spirit of friendship in the name of Christ to all - ~~rich and poor, the least and the lost, the affluent and the alcoholic.~~ An unknown author forcefully expresses a great truth in these lines:

"I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see.  
I sought my God, but my God eluded me.  
I sought my brother, and I found all three!"

The church must strive to be self-giving. It must be willing to lose its life. It must never hold itself aloof from human need. It must resist the temptation to become a walled-off, comfortable group of people out of touch with the struggles taking place in the world today. Let us never forget that the church that seeks to save its life by harboring its resources in plant, in program, in personnel will lose it. And the church which is willing to be open, to lose its life for Christ's sake will surely find it.

And finally, the church must also make demands on its members and its friends. This is done in the name of Christ. We ought never to permit our people to be "half-hearted" and "luke-warm" in their commitment. This has been the trouble with the church. It has been afraid to make demands on its people. We don't want to upset folk, we don't want to rock the boat. ~~And look where it's gotten us.~~ I am becoming more and more convinced that the churches that are "high demand" churches are the churches that will be around in the next decade.

There was a cartoon in the Wall Street Journal some time back that showed a ruddy, round faced little priest, sitting comfortably behind a large desk in a plush office. In front of the desk there stood a lean, eager young priest, apparently just starting out in the ministry. The older priest was saying to the younger one:

"The trick is to deliver a sincere, frank, honest sermon which makes them feel it applies to others, but not to them".

Think of these things in terms of your own life. This man Christ is calling to each of us in these moments. We bear His name. He calls us friend. Inclusive, self-giving and demanding - this is the way it was with Jesus and His friends back then. How is it with you?

PRAYER O God, our Father, as we stand and look at the person of Christ, trying to understand His ways better than we now do and trying to enter into a closer association with Him, help us always to stand loyal to Him - remembering how he included all among His circle of friends, how He gave of Himself to others, and how, in turn, He made high demands on those whom He called friend.

Amen.