

"THE WAY OF JESUS"  
III. "With His Friends"

INTRODUCTION The sermons during Lent this year are examining the way of Jesus in dealing with people and in meeting difficult life situations. Today's sermon is the third one cast in this general form, and it considers the way of Jesus with his friends.

DEVELOPMENT There's a saying that goes something like this - "a man without a friend is indeed the poorest of mortals". I read recently 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". There's something wistfully pathetic in that phrase.

A passage in Anton Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard illustrates some of the emotional tragedy of our generation. 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 thousands of 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 other persons does not necessarily satisfy the deep spiritual hunger for friendship.

MAN - MEANT FOR FELLOWSHIP Isolation and alienation - these are the enemies of mankind. In the creation story there is the suggestion that it is not good for man to be alone. This is not referring to privacy, which as we saw two weeks ago is on occasion healthy and good for people in times of great decision. Rather it is saying that if man is to become a complete human being he must have fellowship, affection, acceptance from those whose approval is important to him. Without this fellowship he becomes emotionally disturbed.

Our generation has now witnessed the tragedy of a presidential assassination. The reports have indicated to us that Lee Oswald was something of a "loner", that he did not have close friends. Back in 1932, before his inauguration, an attempt was made on the life of President Roosevelt. The would-be assassin, having fired his shots which killed a man next to the President, was quickly taken into custody by the police. In an effort to find out if he represented any organized hostility, he was asked if he belonged to any group. He answered: "No, I belong only to myself". When a person belongs only to himself, he is in deep trouble.

We can learn much about interpersonal relationships through a study of the life of Jesus. Friendship is one of the oldest experiences in the world, but Jesus endowed it with a deeper feeling and a finer spirit. He walked the way you and I must walk, and He had friends and offered friendships to many. Suppose we consider his way in friendship.

INCLUSIVE The first thing that is apparent is that his was 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 is to draw our friends from our own age group, from our own economic, social, racial and cultural level. His approach was different. ~~Traditional Judaism reflected this in that it had a law that you did not associate with the sinner and the outcast. People soon saw in Jesus a new phenomenon - a religious leader who was not interested so much in judging them as in helping them.~~ His positive, out reaching, searching love for sinners was expressed with great warmth. We need to remember that in a day when traditionalists had no dealing with Samaritans and as few as possible with Gentiles, that Jesus numbered both among his 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". And we recall, too, that when the disciples tried to push the children away from him, he rebuked them and gave them instructions to let the children come to him.

And then, too, Jesus departed 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 has written, "They were drawn to him alike by their needs, 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". Women waited faithfully at the cross; women prepared his body for burial.

We're aware that unworthy friendships can corrupt and destroy. We cannot be impervious to the influence of those with whom we associate. Friends must be carefully chosen. Yet, there is great enrichment to be gained from a circle of friends that is inclusive. Do we pass by many interesting people simply because they are different? I fear we do. Do we exclude people simply because they may have a different color skin or because we fear what people may say if we invite them into our home? I fear we do. A newspaper once offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. The reward went to a boy who wrote this line: "A friend is a fellow who knows all about you and likes you just the same".

SELF-GIVING In the second place, the friendship of Jesus was always self-giving. Freely, he shared his life and his energies with others. Why on one occasion He even said to his disciples: "Love one another, as I have loved one. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." And, as we saw last Sunday in considering his way as a teacher, he practiced what he preached. His own teachings and his own life were one.

I may be wrong on this, but I often have the feeling that far too many of our friendships in life are made 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 he may be able to help us in business. Even friendships within the church are sometimes made on that basis. A young woman in an upper-middle class suburb in conversation with her pastor said 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. Most of these people I don't feel close to, and yet it is essential to my husband's career that we mix with them socially".

Now I am 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 the deepest reward in life. I like this 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 And then in the third place, we find that Jesus made certain demands on those whom we called friend. He said, "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you". On the surface this may sound a bit severe, a bit unlike Him. However this verse must be read in its context. Jesus was not a sentimentalist

Do you look upon the church as a sanctuary for saints, or a school for sinners? Should those who are fighting a losing battle with life be required to win their struggles outside the fellowship of a church? How would you feel if some Sunday morning a man whose name had been prominently displayed in the papers for violating a public trust were to come in and sit down next to you? Would you resent it or would you welcome it as an indication of his desire for spiritual renewal? How do you feel when you see the church becoming more and more mixed racially and culturally? Does this upset you, does it become emotionally threatening to you? We need to face up to the hard fact that if the church is to be true to the spirit of its founder, if it is to practice what it preaches, it must regain some of its inclusiveness. It must offer the spirit of friendship to all men - the lost, the least, the affluent, the alcoholic, the rich, the poor. 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"

SELF-GIVING And the church, if it is to be like its founder, must also be self-giving. It must be willing to lose its life. It must never hold itself aloof from human need; it must resist the tendency to become a walled-off, comfortable group of people who are pathetically out of touch with the struggles taking place in the life of the world for Christian values. Let us never forget that the church that seeks to save its life by harboring its resources in plant, personnel, and program will lose it. And the church which is willing to lose its life for Christ's sake will surely find it.

DEMANDS And finally the church must also make demands on its friends - in the name of Christ. We ought never to permit our people to be half-hearted, luke-warm in their commitment. This has been the trouble with the church. This is part of the reason why it is weak in so many areas today. It has been afraid to make demands of its members. We don't want to upset anybody. We don't want to press people. Look where it has gotten us. I am becoming more and more convinced that the church must become more demanding of its members if it is to be around in the next decade.

There was a cartoon in the Wall Street Journal a week ago Friday that caught my attention. It showed a ruddy, round faced little priest, presumably a bishop of the church, sitting comfortably behind a large desk in a plush office. In front of the desk that stood a lean, eager, attentive young priest apparently just starting out his 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".

This was not the approach of Jesus. He was open, frank and demanded the best efforts of people in terms of their commitment. This must be our approach. A few of you, I feel, are doing your utmost for the Christian cause. The majority of you could be doing far more than you are. Your personal influence in the affairs of the world could, I feel, be much stronger than it is on your friends, your colleagues in the business world. This man Christ calls each of us to deepen our commitment to his way; he demands steadfast loyalty and enduring allegiance of those who bear his name and whom he calls, friend.

PRAYER God, Our Father, as we stand and look at the person of Christ, trying to understand his ways better than we now do, trying to enter into a closer association with him, help us to stand loyal to Him at all times, remembering how he included all men as his friends, how he gave of himself, and how he made high demands of those who followed Him. We ask this in his spirit. Amen

about 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. He was making it clear to them that it would be costly to be his friend. When the sons of Zebedee came asking for a place of prominence in the Kingdom, he asked: "Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of?"

Jesus was seeking the complete allegiance of his disciples. He envisioned a relationship that knew no barriers. His commitment to them was without reservation. He was not holding anything back. And He expected this same quality of devotion from them. The reason for this is described by Fosdick in one of his books:

"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 the shock of the crucifixion, the agony of sustained persecution, the frailties of its members, and the discouragement of its campaign. On that group, the Master counted for his work."

In all of this Jesus was laying the foundation for the church which is bound to Him so closely that we call it the body of Christ. And if we believe in Him and in His ways, we cannot be halfway in our devotion. He demands of us a relationship that is total and complete.

#### OUT OF THIS GREW THE CHURCH

He never lost heart in developing this small group of committed friends upon whom the future rested. Out of this unique fellowship there emerged the Christian Church. The church is KOINONIA: that is, a place where you know as you are known. It is an encounter, an encounter where you meet the Eternal in your brother. It is a fellowship where you can remove the mask and come as you are. It is a place, as someone has suggested, a place where the erosions of life are neutralized and the wasting processes are reversed.

The fellowship of the church as the "body of Christ" implies mutual dependence and responsibility. There ought to be in our churches far more of a mutual concern for each other's life and growth than there is. We ought to pray for one another more than we do. We ought to appreciate, love, comfort, restore, accept one another more than we now are doing. This ought not to be left to one who by ordination assumes this as a life's work. You are the church; you are the body of Christ. Above all, as Paul expressed in his letter to the people of Galatia, "Bear one another's burdens". 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.

The newspapers some time ago told of a 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. It is a grim story with many thoughts. If we wall out other people, we wall ourselves in and eventually die of spiritual starvation.

#### THERE IS A CHALLENGE

Now in all of this there emerges a distinct challenge not only for us as individuals, but for the church. The church must strive at all times to reflect in its life those qualities which are descriptive of the way of Jesus in friendship. For one thing, the church must be inclusive - inclusive of all men. The world knows that Christianity teaches the unity of mankind, but at times the world wonders whether the church takes seriously its own practice about the unity of all men.