

"THREE THINGS TO GIVE UP"

INTRODUCTION

Today is the First Sunday in the Season of Lent, and once again we have opportunity to grasp our Christian concerns and responsibilities more clearly and firmly.

As you know, many Christians have been taught to give up certain things during Lent, and some people, even in these less disciplined days in which we live, still do. They give up things that they like to do, things that they like to smoke, or eat, or drink, or places they like to go. They give them up largely, I think, as a practice in self-discipline. They do it (some of them) in order to have the time to give to other things - things dealing with the deepening of their religious life. Some of them do it for still another reason - a deeper reason. They give them up as an offering to God - as a sacrifice, if you will. They offer to him who has given them so much some small thing that means something to them as a token of their sacrifice.

Now I should like to suggest this morning that all of us seriously consider "giving up" something during Lent this year. There are many things that you might give up. I would like to be specific at this point, and suggest three things to you, and the three things I suggest may seem strange to you, not at all like the things you usually give up during Lent. Some of you may not take part in any one of the three things I put before you. Nevertheless I should like to mention them as samples of the sort of things we might give up.

I. DISCUSSION GROUPS

The first thing that I have listed here is discussion groups. In many ways, there is nothing healthier than the free and open discussion of an important issue. There is nothing healthier in a society like ours than a group of people, representing different points of view, coming together to discuss freely, frankly and openly the state of the world, or the state of affairs in New York City, or the state of things in the Methodist Church, or the nature of the Christian faith. In the course of any discussion, information is brought to light, misunderstandings are cleared up, different points of view are brought to bear upon a subject, and people come away enlarged in their total understanding of an issue. This is good. This is as natural and as necessary to our democratic way of life as bread and butter are to our diet.

You wonder then "WHY" should we suggest giving them up for the next forty days? Why? Because there comes a time when discussion and talk can become a substitute for action. I've seen this tendency in different areas of our life. Mind you, it's always a lot easier to discuss and talk about a problem than it is to go out and do something about it. I'm sure there are a great many political discussion groups here in the city, a great many groups where people sit around discussing and debating. // There are not, however, nearly so many who are willing to participate in some form of political action. And there are in this city as there are in every place where Christian people come together, religious discussion groups. These groups can discuss the ins and the outs, the pros and the cons, of the faith from beginning to end. // There are not, however, nearly so many persons who are willing to pray regularly every day and to practice the Christian faith by participating in some one form of its activity.

In line with this, I would venture to say that you can learn more about the political situation in a city by doing one volunteer task in a political group for a year than by going to all of the discussions groups and forums around the town for five years. I would also suggest that you can learn more about the nature of the Christian faith by spending some time each day in prayer and by engaging in some kind of Christian activity than you can by discussing the nature of the faith from now to doomsday!

In other words, there is a time to discuss and there is also a time to do. And this, for us, is the time to do. I therefore move that for the next six weeks - from now to Easter - we give up some of our discussion groups and sign up and pledge ourselves to ~~"doing"~~. ~~that we sign up~~ to serve as volunteer witnesses to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ by doing instead of discussing. Where does one begin. One can begin by spending twenty minutes each day in some quiet place, alone, thinking about God, sitting still, listening and learning, reading his word. Do more than that. Participate in some form of activity that is continuing in a specific way the ministry of Jesus in the world. There are many good and fine institutions that can use volunteer help within walking distance of this place. We can supply you with information on these. Then, too, be a personal evangelist of Christ way of life. Select some person or persons who stand outside the fellowship of a church and make it a project during these next six weeks to introduce the Christian fellowship to that person. Invite them to come along with you on a Sunday morning. Share your faith and your convictions with others.

There is a time to discuss and a time to do. This, for us, is the time to do. We give up discussing in order to do the things we have been discussing.

II. SURVEYS I have listed a second thing in my notes to give up during Lent: surveys. Let me explain what I am thinking of. A survey is an analysis of a situation by an expert. Someone has said that an expert is one who is apt to spurt about X - the unknown. We've all known experts who fall into this classification. Seriously, the expert usually comes from the outside, from outside a situation and therefore brings to it an objective point of view. He gathers together all of the available facts and statistics, looks at the situation in the light of his broad experience, and then draws his conclusions and makes his recommendations. This can be helpful.

For example, a survey of the traffic situation in this city by an expert like Mr. Barnes who has had some experience in the traffic problems of others cities is a good thing. A survey of a church like this one by an outsider like our District Superintendent, Dr. Scranton, who was with us two weeks ago, who can look at the records and reports and statistics with some degree of objectivity, freshness, and intelligence - this is a good thing, a healthy thing. We have done it. We did it two weeks ago. Thank goodness we don't have to do it again for another year. But, I should like to think we learned something from his comments and his survey of what we are attempting to do.

Of course, there are dangers in surveys. We know this. There is always the danger that the expert may not know as much about a situation as the amateur who happens to be at the heart of it. There is the danger that a survey or an analysis of a situation may not tell you everything you need to know about a situation. There is always the danger that people who have made a survey may have the feeling that the work - all of the work - has been done. The survey is only the beginning. It's a picture of the situation. The real work is only beginning.

I'm reminded of some words attributed to Henry Sloane Coffin, one of the great Christian spirits of this city a generation ago; I am not absolutely sure of the context out of which the remark came, but it seems that he was discussing with another minister the exaggerated confidence that the church places in organization, noting the dangers that lurk in too much organization. He said something like this:

"When Christians meet a problem today, the first thing they do is to appoint a committee to make a survey. In the first century, the first thing they did was to survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died".

Certainly there is truth in his observation. Therefore, I move, that for these next six weeks we give up making surveys, and start making hay. Since Christmas as a church we have given a great deal of time to reviewing and reporting our institutional life. Now let's real begin to go to work and together see to it that something happens in this church and community over these next six weeks. We can do it. Let's specialize in the impossible. Let's give up trying to reflect the time and the world in which we live and concentrate redeeming it. Let us work from person to person, starting with those closes to us, taking the individual approach, letting numbers and statistics and budgets and bills, organizational work and committee work take care of themselves. Believe me if there's anything significant taking place in this outpost of the Christian faith, word will get around and we'll see most of our problems of running a church disappear.

Survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of Glory died. Survey the events that are a part of that drama and share them with others. Let us not forget that the little group that met around the supper table on the last night Jesus was alive for the breaking of bread and for prayer had no publicity agent, no promotional expert, no Commission on Finance, no Commission on Evangelism, Education, or Mission - none of those things we consider as essentials to the life of a church today, and yet how they accomplished things. Within a short time the entire world had been turned upside down and they tried to turn it right side up.

EXPRESSION OF UNIFORMED OPINIONS

up for Lent. As a matter of fact, I would urge you to give this up completely. It is the expression of uninformed opinions. We

There's a third thing that I would suggest that you give

should give this up completely because it is bad. We know that we all do it, and that it is impossible sometimes not to do it because we are creatures who must constantly make judgments about people, and they will not always be informed judgments no matter how hard we try. I think all of us can learn to exercise greater control in the expression of our opinions and judgments about others. Let me give you an example or two of the sort of thing I mean.

You are in a crowded elevator. You were brought up in the age when men were taught to remove their hats in an elevator in which there were ladies present. You are a lady. You happen to see a man who does not remove his hat. You make an unkind and audible remark to your friend standing next to you. As you approach the top of the building and the people in the elevator step out and the crowd thins out, you turn around and see the man standing there alone. You happen to see that he has no arms.

Or, you attend a meeting which in your judgment is an important meeting. Someone you think should be there is not there, and you make a critical remark to others about his absence. Later you find out that the absent person was at the funeral of someone who was very close to him, or that (if it happens to be a woman) she had to stay at home and tend to a sick child.

I would move therefore that as we go on from here we try to hold our tongues when it comes to things and to people we do not know about....for by expressing uninformed opinions we may do damage that we shall never be able to calculate. And I suggest that we do this as an offering to God who has so graciously kept silent about so many things that he does know about. Perhaps we would do well to memorize those lines taken, I believe, from the Arabian entitled "Three Gates":

If you are tempted to reveal a tale to you someone has
told about another, make it pass, before you
speak, three gates of gold:
These narrow gates: First, "Is it true?"
Then, "Is it needful?" In your mind give truthful answer.
And the next is last and narrowest, "Is it kind?"
And if to reach your lips at last it passes through
these gateways three, then you may tell the tale,
nor fear what the result of speech may be.

Is it true? Is it needful? Is it kind?

IN CLOSING We read in the scriptures that "God so loved the world that he gave up his only begotten Son....that all who are in union with Him should not be lost, but have everlasting life" And so in response to what he has given us, we give up three things. We give up discussing in order that we may do the will of Him who loved us. We give up surveying in order to serve Him who died for us. We give up talking about the things we do not know that we may tell the truth about the things we do know.

LET US PRAY Accept, O God, our gratitude for what thou hast done for us. Inspire us to make an offering of ourselves unto Thee. In the days that are immediately before us, help us to put our minds on the deed rather than on the discussion. Help us to

serve where we can, and give to each of us the grace to keep still about the things we know nothing about. For we ask this in the spirit of Him who gave up all He had - in order that we might live and live abundantly. Amen.