

"UNDERMINING OUR HERITAGE"

INTRODUCTION

Many, many years ago there lived a very handsome and eloquent prince by the name of Absalom. The Old Testament tells us that

"in all Israel there was none so much to be praised as Absalom for his beauty; from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish on him".

He was a handsome prince, the idol of the kingdom ruled by his father, David. He was also very ambitious. He wanted to make sure that the crown of his father would one day rest on his own head. Coldblooded and treacherous, he plotted insurrection against his father, the king. He devised a clever scheme to undermine him and to win the people to his side. He would get up early in the morning and go and stand at the city gate watching there for the dissatisfied and disgruntled people who came to the city to place their troubles before the king. He would ride through the streets displaying his power. He would talk with winsome affability to everybody and would make himself one with them.

Whenever he met a man with a grievance, he fairly oozed charm and sympathy. "Where do you come from friend?" "From such and such a town". "My name is Absalom. I have connections in the palace. What's the problem?" And the unsuspecting citizen would pour out his troubles against the world in general and against the present administration in particular. "Too bad" would be the reply of Absalom. "Too bad there's nobody in this government willing to hear your case and help you out. Ah - if only I were the king. If only I had the power, I would see that your situation got attention. We'd solve it." And he would put his arm around the person making the complaint.

"And in this manner" the Bible tells us, "did Absalom to all Israel that came to the king for judgment; so Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel". After all, it must have seemed good to them to have the ear of someone in a high place who was willing to listen to their complaints and concerns. They were tiring of David who was getting on in years, and they were ready to listen to this promising, young, democratic charmer. And so the conspiracy grew. David was gradually undermined by this thoughtless and treacherous son, and by those thoughtless, thankless and ungrateful folk who were charmed by Absalom.

But - it's interesting to note that the record goes on to tell us how empty all of the promises of Absalom turned out to be and how sadly the people were deceived. David had his faults, but poor David with all of his faults was an angel in contrast to this young monster of a son. The people came by painful experience to understand that Absalom had his arm around them in order to betray them and that the cures he promised were far worse than the diseases.

DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

This story serves as something of a launching pad for the remarks that I should like to put before you on this Sunday before our national day of Thanksgiving. One thing this story reminded me of was how thoughtless and thankless people can so easily and unconsciously undermine their own heritage by failing to see and to appreciate the good things that are a part of that heritage. ~~The~~ tendency on the part of many today is to dwell upon the imperfections that surround us in so many areas of our lives - private and public alike. We fail to recognize the good in what we have. We look for someone who will listen to our grievances.

This process gets its leverage, as I see it, from two painful facts. The first

There is a growing

guilt

is the fact of an imperfect world. Nothing in life is perfect. There is no perfect system, no perfect government, no perfect church, no perfect university, and it may come as a shock to some that there is no perfect person. There's apt to be something wrong with everything - including you and me. There is no perfect city, no perfect climate. As they say, there are some weeds in every garden, some faults in every friend. We can always find something to complain about, because a certain amount of imperfection is stamped on everything we touch.

And then the second fact is that God has provided us with certain moral equipment to deal with life's imperfections. That is, he has given us the critical faculty, the moral capacity to discriminate, to find fault, to criticize. It is, to be sure, a necessary function and woe to any people when they let this fundamental right be taken away from them. The function of this critical spirit is to correct - it is to see the wrongs and to right them - it is to see the weeds in the garden and to pull them out. And most of our human progress has come because people were critical of imperfections; they found fault and went out to grapple with the imperfect in an effort to improve it. Yes, without criticism there would be no progress. And heaven help us when we lose the right to offer constructive criticism.

HOWEVER But this critical spirit - like every other human faculty contains certain definite dangers. Meant to be corrective, it may easily become a destructive, subversive, disintegrating force. It was such a misuse of this critical faculty that Jesus was referring to when He talked about people who strain at gnats and swallow camels and about the man who saw the mote in his brother's eye. Fault-finding can get out of hand; it can become lop-sided and lost perspective.

You may have heard the story about the two women who were on their way home from a concert here in the city in which a violinist had given an almost perfect performance. "Wasn't that wonderful! Wasn't that beautiful" exclaimed one lady to the other. "I didn't like it at all" said the other. "Why the way he blew his nose after that first number ruined the entire evening for me". Well, there are people like that, people who go through life habitually missing all of the glorious music, and who hear only the blowing of the nose. Such folk are apt to be the ones who concentrate on the 5% that is bad in a situation and overlook the 95% that is good. This capacity to find fault must be balanced by a capacity to recognize and appreciate the good, otherwise what was meant to be an instrument of correction becomes an instrument of destruction.

This was the sin of David's people. Certainly there were faults in him and things that were far from perfect in his administration - but unable to see the garden for the weeds that had sprung up, discontent with the smaller things that were wrong and blind to the larger things that were good, they thus opened the door for Absalom and in so doing they ended up in a real mess.

APPRECIATING OUR HERITAGE One might go on and say that this is a good way to lose the heritage of life itself, with all of the common mercies and blessings that enrich it. I wonder how much value we really put on the very practical and important grace of gratitude. How often we fail to see the good around us and appreciate it.

I've always been fond of the story about the farmer who having lived on the same farm for most of his life, tired of it and desperately craved a change. He subjected everything on the farm to his own blind and critical eye and at last decided that he would sell the old place and buy another arm more to his liking. He

listed the farm with a real estate agent who at once prepared a sales ad for the newspaper. However before giving it to the newspaper, the agent reviewed with the farmer the ad reading to him the description of the property which he had prepared. He mentioned the advantages of the farm: its ideal location, its up-to-date equipment, its many fertile acres, its well-bred stock, its well-constructed barns, its gracious farm house. "Wait a minute" said the farmer. "Read me that again, and this time go just a little bit slower." And so the ad man repeated what he had just read. "Nope" said the farmer, "changed my mind. I'm not going to seal. Matter of fact, I've been looking for a place like that all my life".

The riches of life are so often all around us. And yet how often are we guilty of failing to see them for the simple reason that we magnify the difficulties, over-look the advantages, and fail to recognize the good that is ours!

HOME This, of course, was the story of the prodigal son as he set off for the far country. Something had broken down inside him before he packed his suitcase. Perhaps he had lost the grace of gratitude. He hadn't stopped to evaluate his inheritance. To be sure, there may have been some things at home that weren't up to snuff and in which he found reason to complain: a father too busy to be bothered, an elder brother with a sour disposition. But the prodigal allowed the 5% that was wrong to obscure the 95% that was right, and thus he was easy prey for the voices that spoke from the cellar of his being promising a new freedom in a far away land.

And, of course, the marriage counsellors and divorce courts tell stories about this, too. From homes where the grace of appreciation and gratitude has fallen apart come young people and others not so young who have fallen into the habit of magnifying each other's faults and minimizing each other's virtues so long and so habitually that love has been undermined and the home has been broken. And so we often lose our finest friendships, flare up at some small irritation or magnify some minor fault until all the years of a rich and wonderful relationship are cancelled.

CHURCH The same sort of thing can happen within the church. We sometimes fail to appreciate our spiritual inheritance. True - the church has many faults, stamped with all of the imperfections we have in ourselves, and its critics - both inside and outside - have plenty of ammunition. But the time has come to deepen our appreciation of the church and to balance our criticism of its faults and failures with a recognition of its great worth and witness in our society, lest, little by little, we let this heritage of the church slip by. And whether we think of the church at large, or the little church at the cross roads where we hold our membership, the message is the same. We ought not to allow its faults to blind us to its larger worth.

NATION And finally, this same sort of thing can happen within the nation, too. As we approach our national day of Thanksgiving, some within our land - openly critical and skeptical - may be tempted to say: "Thankful? - for what?" I've sensed this mood, more this year than in any previous year, a mood which may prevent some from entering into the spirit of this day of national Thanksgiving. There is a feeling that all is not well in our land. War, violence, atrocities, poverty, race, drugs, pollution -- these continue to weigh heavily on the conscience of many causing inner unrest and uneasiness.

Admittedly, the headlines are big and black and menacing - but the long range tendencies and the trends of our public life in America are far more hopeful than the daily headlines. There is some good news around these days that is worth emphasizing. And in this we find reason for gratitude.

The War is winding down in Vietnam, not winding up. The United States and the Soviet Union, despite all their differences, are finally starting talks on disarmament. Food production in the world is rising dramatically and the population trend, we are told, is finally leveling off. And even the Federal courts are beginning to talk sense about the antiquated abortion laws.

We are getting tax reforms from the Congress, election reform, and military draft reform and welfare reform. The universities, schools, newspapers and net-works, and even the church are gradually reforming themselves. And even the idea that the human family shouldn't poison itself and choke on its own garbage is making some progress. Mr. Finch at HEW has won the fight to ban the use of DDT for all but essential uses within two years, and the other day the Senate voted \$1 billion to help the states fight water pollution.

These are not unimportant tendencies. We may not be solving our problems today, but we are facing them - probably more directly than any other nation on earth today. There are pressures from the left and from the right, as well as from the Vice President, to examine and to change things and great differences about how they should be changed - but the American society is moving precisely because it is arguing and debating how things can be improved.

This does not necessarily mean that this nation will not be hurt in the struggle. Never has a people, not even the American people, grappled with so many revolutionary problems - social, economic, military and even philosophical - all at the same time, but the historical trends are more hopeful than the daily headlines.

For over a quarter of a century, this country has been expanding its military budget and its political commitments beyond all control or even common sense, while diverting its energies and funds away from the mounting social and economic problems at home. Now this trend has been finally challenged and turned around.

It seems to me that what we are arguing about now, in the main, is not so much the direction of policy as the pace of policy. Some of us want faster and bigger withdrawals from Vietnam and steeper cuts in the military budget and quicker transfer of funds ~~from~~ to the problems of the cities - but the change in the direction of policy has been made and as we come to the end of this decade which nationally has not been one of our best - perhaps we can look ahead to the 1970's with hope and optimism and gratitude that the change of direction has been made.

In this sense, I feel the protesters have not lost but are winning. One could not watch the march on Washington without being impressed by the sincerity and conviction of the young marchers. They have made us uncomfortable; they have made us conscious of the 40,000 dead and revived our sense of pity for the limitations and sorrows of the human family. Their problem is their prayer: "O Lord, give us patience - right now".

In this perspective then, there is a great deal for which we can be thankful as we come to the end of this year, this decade and look to a new decade. And I would that our idea of national greatness will somehow find rich fulfillment in those lines written by G. Ashton Oldham:

"America first - not only in things material
But in things of the spirit.
Not merely in science, invention, motors, skyscrapers,
But also in ideals, principles, character.
Not merely in the calm assertion of rights,
But in the glad assumption of duties,
Not flouting your strength as a giant,
But bending in helpfulness over a sick and wounded world
like a good Samaritan.
Not in splendid isolation,
But in courageous cooperation,
Not in proud arrogance and disdain of other races and peoples,
But in sympathy, love and understanding.
Not in treading again the old, worn bloody pathway
Which ends inevitably in chaos and disaster.
But blazing a new train, along which, please God,
Other nations will follow into the new Jerusalem
Where war shall be no more.
Some day, some nation must take that path -
Unless we are to lapse into utter barbarism -
And that honor I covet for my beloved America.
And so, in that spirit, and with these hopes,
I say with all my heart and soul, "America first".