

"VOID IF DETACHED"

INTRODUCTION It's strange - how two events can conspire to launch a thought for a sermon. The first event was a train ride into New Jersey one day last Spring. It was between commuter rush hours, and I held in my hand one of those special, round-trip tickets, in four detachable sections - New York to Newark, Newark to Westfield - and then the reverse process. On the train I studied the fine print, and more than one of the sections carried the warning: "Void if Detached".

So I let the conductor perform the surgery of separation, but those three words on the ticket lingered in my thought and started me thinking anew about the interdependence of people and of things in our day. How many instances come to mind to illustrate the far wider application of that warning, "Void...if detached". "Not good...if separated". For example, what good was that train if detached from the track on which we were travelling? What good was that traffic light on an adjacent highway if detached from the electric power lines? What good was that store in the distance if detached from the trucks that made deliveries and the farms and the factories that produce the goods? Or what good was my hand that held the ticket if detached from my body and the nerve system that directs it? We can think of other examples to confirm the instance of interdependence - one thing depending upon another - one event waiting upon another - one person relying upon another - and none of them fully effective in isolation. "Void...if detached" said the ticket. "No man is an island" said John Donne in the 16th century.

The second spur to this sermon came a little later in some sentences in a book by the late Dean Samuel Miller, and they struck me as an exposition of the words on the ticket.

"If we are deprived of our relationships, we are deprived of our reality. To be completely alone is to be completely null and void. The authentic nature of human reality cannot be utterly individualized. The further we tend toward the isolation of the individual, the more insupportable life becomes".

So there it was again. "To be completely alone is to be completely null and void". "Void if detached". It's a stimulating subject when you begin to explore it, and it has paths that lead in a variety of directions.

REALM OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS First of all, think about it in terms of the whole realm of human relationships. How many words there are in our modern vocabulary of diagnosis which reflect the detachment and separation between people - words like "alienation" - "estrangement" - "gap" - "segregation". Think of the problems and the tensions that have resulted in so many areas as a result of the situations those words describe. We were made for community, and yet at so many levels we are eyeing one another across gulfs of suspicion and mistrust and separateness. Again and again, you can find tragic human proof of the validity of the warning on that ticket.

There is a way in which a person is void if detached from a family. Back in the Second World War, when London was under heavy aerial bombardment, the English authorities thought that they were doing the very best possible thing for children by evacuating them to northern regions where they would be safer. But it was soon discovered that children, especially those under five years of age, suffered emotional disturbances, though they were safe physically, because they had been removed from their parents' companionship and love. And part of our modern turbulence must be

traced to the weakening of family life, with far too many children scarred and warped by lack of affection and security. Every judge and every social workers in this country could probably preach an eloquent sermon on the text, "void...if detached"

And so on through life. A young person often enough decides that he doesn't need his family - that he's the master of his fate and the captain of his soul - and can get along without the signals and signs and supporting guide-lines from those in the home. And certainly part of this is perfectly normal and necessary - the steps toward selfhood - and the move toward maturity in a life. Only this - when a young person comes into real maturity and assuming he has come from a real home-- then he knows he's in debt to that home and he is not so insistent upon his independence.

The New Testament, of course, provides us with a classic picture of this sort of thing - in that story of the young man who proclaimed his freedom, severed his home ties, took his inheritance, and then took off for the far country where all the excitement seemed to be and there he wasted his life and his money, no one to think about but himself. But read on, and you come to that turn in the road described in that verse, "When he came to himself, he said, 'I will arise.....and go home...'" As William Sangster, the English preacher said of another prodigal whom he knew, "He had lost his way, but not his address". A person needs a home address - for without it and without attachment to home people who know him and love him, life can be pretty empty and void.

Or again, there is a way in which a person is void if detached from friends. Think about it sometime and ponder how different and often how destitute our lives would have been without the influence of our friends in practically every significant incident. This summer I was reading a biographical reference to Thomas Dooley. It spoke of his difficulty in medical school - not so much marks as his manners. And most of the faculty wanted to toss him out because of his irresponsibility - but there was a certain dean who intervened and personally assumed responsibility for continuing Tom Dooley as a student. One friend who had confidence in him at a crucial time, and who can calculate the results of that loyalty? The script differs with each of us, but it is a poor and pathetic life that cannot see the places at which friends have enriched and influenced our lives. "Void...if detached".

There are so many other paths that we would follow in applying that phrase. It has something to say to practically every one of the gaps that are so evident in our time. Like the generation gap. It should never be one generation against another, for either is incomplete if isolated from the other. Youth is like a tree without roots if it cannot learn from the experiences of elders - and age is like a tree that has been winter-killed, if it cannot learn from forward looking youth. Each generation needs each others. Or take the gulf between the races....or the gulf between urbia and sub-urbia. Beware of trying to live in isolation, as though the other half simply does not exist, for with races and regions, as with many a popular contest, we need the "other half" really to win. Abraham Lincoln was sermonizing on our theme of this morning when he spoke those words: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free". Apply it to any of the gaps that threaten to widen in our time.

Our task is not to draw ourselves apart in a detached and rigid exclusiveness - our task is to become architects and engineers of bridges that span the chasms between generations, creeds, races, regions, nations, understanding for ourselves personally and for mankind collectively the urgency of that warning "Void if detached".

HIGHEST SPIRITUAL MEANING

Still and all, we have not come to the highest spiritual meaning of this phrase. There is a particular application of it for the Christian. It brings to mind some words of Jesus spoken to his disciples in the Upper Room:

"Apart from me you can do nothing at all. I am the vine, you are the branches. The man who does not share my life is like a branch that is broken off and withers away. It is the man who shares my life and whose life I share who proves fruitful"

Gathered around him that night were men who knew perfectly well what He was talking about - for they were living testimony to that truth. Lives that had been pretty well withered and worn, until He came along, shared his life with them and infused them with new meaning and strength. Matthew, there in the corner, with a record as a crafty, crooked tax collector, until one day, the Master met him and opened the door to change with those words, "Follow me". Peter, close by, as profane and temperamental as fisherman who ever fished on the Sea of Galilee, until one day he responded to a voice, "Follow me....and I will make you a fisher of men". And somewhere in the background, Mary Magdalene, who was respected by no one including herself, until a day when the Man from Nazareth led her to understand that there might be forgiveness for the past and some meaning for the future. Those who were with him that night recognized the scenery when Jesus used the metaphor of the "vine and the branches" - and they could tell us something of the spiritual meaning of that text written on the ticket, "Void if detached".

And so too could Paul - a generation later. There was that time when he ridiculed all that Christ-claim, a time when he did his best to stomp it out, to ignore it, to escape it. Until one day he was ready to acknowledge that all by himself, he really wasn't making much of his life, that he wasn't having much of an effect on anyone or anything. Perhaps he recalled those words of Jesus to his disciples - "Apart from me you can do nothing at all. It is the man who shares my life, and whose life I share who proves fruitful". At any rate, of a sudden, Paul was ready to share - to belong - to become attached.

I don't know how it is with you, but I know that for myself those words of Jesus in the Upper Room are still amazingly relevant and needful. "Apart from me you can do nothing at all". And yet - we're forever trying - forgetting - forsaking the life of the spirit and the spirit of his life. One thinks of the thousands of people living in this city who have drifted away from Him, from the church, who have neglected the living and vital center of belief. "Void...if detached". Their lives could mean so much if only they were attached and tied in, if only they were really in earnest about these matters of which we speak. Apart - their lives mean so little.

Maybe Jesus did say, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul" - but we become obsessed with the drive to gain as much of this world and its goods as we can.....and maybe Jesus did say, "Love your enemies", but we're much more skilled and accomplished at revenge rather than reconciliation.....and maybe Jesus did say, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross" - but we're much more interested in dividends than in denials - in comfort rather than in a cross - until, apart from Him, what little Christian conviction we have drifts into a vague and harmless religion which is a poor counterfeit of anything that the New Testament knows and shows.

And then something or someone brings us up short - and reveals the real thing, a life really lived in Christ's spirit and reflecting that spirit so naturally and so wonderfully. Some crazy fool for Christ's sake investing his life in some dark and difficult place. Some person coming through controversy and criticism with a glad and gracious spirit. Some person coming through trials and troubles with a steady strength. Some person standing up for ideals and convictions with quiet courage.

On this Reformation Day Sunday we think once again of Martin Luther and of the way he stood up for ideals and convictions - that young monk who challenged the rigidity of the hierarchy of the church of his time. Some of you perhaps saw, as I did on a Saturday night back in September, (on television) the movie "Thomas A Becket" and were reminded of his courage, like Thomas More, a man for all seasons. Remember the answer of the child, when asked who were the saints, and thinking of the figures in stained glass, answered, "They're the people who let the light through". On Friday of this coming week, November 1st, the Christian Church will pause to celebrate All Saints' Day - thinking once again of those great men of the faith out of the past who have let the light of Christ shine through to a darkened world.

I would suggest that there are enough real-life saints letting Christian light through to remind us that there is a present power, enough to renew hope and inspire us to a deeper commitment, enough to reveal part of the secret of Christian growth. There is still a living spirit of Christ that can and does make a difference in a person's life - how he sets his goals, how he deals with trouble and triumph and temptation, how he regards other people and how he regards himself, how he lives and how he dies. Maybe Jesus never said anything quite so simple and yet so eternally important:

"Apart from me you can do nothing. I am the vine and you are the branches. The man who does not share my life is like a branch that is broken off and withers away. It is the man who shares my life and whose life I share who proves fruitful".

PRAYER

Sometimes, O God, we get cut off and find ourselves in isolation from our family, our friends, our fellow-men, even from what Thou hast done for us in Christ. Reind us that we were never meant to be utterly alone. Restore us where we are broken and separated, and strengthen in us that companionship with Christ that puts light and love and meaning into our lives. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

"VOID - IF DETACHED"

INTRODUCTION

It's strange - how two events can conspire to suggest a sermon.

The first event was a train ride into Connecticut last Spring. It was between commuter rush hours, and I held in my hand one of those special, round-trip tickets in two detachable sections - New York to Stamford, and then the reverse, Stamford to New York. On the train I studied the fine print, and noticed that both sections carried this printed warning: "Void - If Detached".

The conductor performed the necessary surgery of separation, but those three words lingered in my thought and prompted me to think anew about the interdependence of people and of things in our day. So many instances come to mind to illustrate the far wider application of that warning - "Void...If Detached". "Not good....if separated". For example, what good was that train if detached from the track on which we were travelling? Or what good was that traffic light on a nearby highway if detached from the electric power lines? Or what good was that store in the distance if detached from the trucks that made deliveries and the farms and the factories that produce the goods? Or what good was my hand that held the ticket if detached from my body and the nerve system that directs it? I'm sure that you could come up with other examples to confirm the fact of interdependence - one thing depending upon another - one event waiting upon another - one person relying upon another - and none of them fully effective in isolation. "Void...if detached" said the ticket. "No man is an island" said John Donne back in the 16th century.

The second spur to this sermon came a little later on in some lines from a book written by the late Dean Samuel Miller of Harvard Divinity School, and they struck me as an exposition of the warning on the ticket:

"If we are deprived of our relationships, we are deprived of our reality. To be completely alone is to be completely null and void. The authentic nature of human reality cannot be utterly individualized. The further we tend toward the isolation of the individual, the more insupportable life becomes"

So there it was again. "To be completely alone is to be completely null and void". "Void - if detached". It's an interesting thought to play around with, and when you begin to explore its possibilities, you find paths that lead in a variety of directions. Let's think about so of them.

REALM OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

First of all, think about it in terms of the whole realm of human relationships. How many words there are in our modern vocabulary of diagnosis which reflect the detachment and separation between people - words like - "alienation" - "estrangement" - "gap" - "segregation" "separation". Think of the problems, of the tensions that have resulted in so many areas of life as a result of those situations these words describe. We were made for community, and yet at so many levels we are eyeing one another across gulfs of suspicion and mistrust. One does not have to go very far to find tragic human proof of the validity of the warning on that ticket.

There is a way in which a person is void if detached from a family. Back in the Second World War, when London was under heavy aerial bombardment, the English authorities thought that they were doing the very best possible thing for children by evacuating them to northern regions where they would be safer. But it was soon discovered that children - especially those under five years of age - suffered emotional disturbances, though they were physically safe, because they had been removed from the love and companionship of their parents. And part of our modern turbulence must be traced to the weakening of family life, with far too many children scarred and

And this is something that happens - 2 -

not only to those caught in poverty...in the ghetto....but also in the affluent, well-do-do homes of the suburbs. warped by lack of affection and security. Many a judge and many a social worker could probably preach an eloquent sermon on the text, "Void - if detached".

And so on through life. A young person often decides that he really doesn't need his family - that he's the master of his fate and the captain of his soul - and can get along without the signals and signs and supporting guide-lines from those in the home. And certainly part of this is perfectly normal and necessary - the steps toward selfhood - and the move toward maturity in a life. Only this - when a young person comes into real maturity and assuming he has come from a real home - than he knows he's in debt to that home and he is not so insistent upon his independence.

Or again - there is a way in which a person is void if detached from friends. Think about it sometime and ponder how different and perhaps how destitute our lives would have been without the influence of our friends in practically every significant incident. Recently I came across a biographical reference to Thomas Dooley. It spoke of his difficulty in medical school - not so much marks as his manners. And most of the faculty wanted to toss him out because of his irresponsibility - but there was a certain Dean who intervened and personally assumed responsibility for continuing Tom Dooley as a student. One friend who had confidence in him at a crucial time, and who can calculate the results of that loyalty and concern? The script differs, I'm sure, with each one of us, but it is a poor and pathetic life that cannot see the places at which friends have enriched and influenced our lives. "Void - if detached".

There are other paths that we could follow in applying the truth of this phrase. It has something to say to practically every one of the gaps that are so evident in our time. The generation gap. It should never be one generation against another, for either is incomplete if isolated from the other. Youth is like a tree without roots if it cannot learn from the experience s of elders - and age is like a tree that has been winter-killed, if it cannot learn from forward looking young people. Each generation needs each other. Or take the gulf between the races... or the gulf between urbia and sub-urbia. Beware of trying to live in isolation, as though the other half simply does not exist, for with races and regions, as with many a popular contest, we need the "other half" to really win. Abraham Lincoln was sermonizing on our theme of this morning when he spoke those words that we need to hear once again:

"A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free"

Apply those words to the gaps that threaten to widen and deepen in our own time, in our own land, in our own city. Our task is not to draw ourselves apart in a detached and rigid exclusiveness. Our task is to become skilled architects and engineers of bridges that span the chasms between generations, between creeds, races, classes, regions, nations - understanding for ourselves personally and collectively the great urgency of that warning printed on that ticket: "Void - If Detached".

Martin Luther King expressed it so eloquently in a sermon delivered in the Washington Cathedral shortly before his death last Spring:

"No individual can live alone, no nation can live alone, and anyone who feels that he can live alone is sleeping through a revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one. The challenge that we face today is to make it one in terms of brotherhood.

We must all learn to live together as brothers. Or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single

garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.
And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly"

HIGHEST SPIRITUAL MEANING

Suppose we move on now to consider the highest spiritual meaning of this phrase. It brings to mind some words of Jesus spoken to his disciples in the Upper Room.

"Apart from me", He said, "You can do nothing at all. I am the vine, you are the branches. The man who does not share my life is like a branch that is broken off and withers away. It is the man who shares my life and whose life I share who proves fruitful".

You'll recall that gathered around him that night were men who knew perfectly well what He was talking about - for they were living testimony to that truth. Lives that had been pretty well withered and worn, until He came along, shared his life with them and in so doing put meaning and strength into them. Matthew, there in the corner, with a record as a crafty, crooked tax collector, until one day, the Master met him and opened the door to change with those words, "Follow me". And Peter - close by, as profane and temperamental a fisherman who ever fished on the Sea of Galilee, until one day he responded to a voice, "Follow me, and I will make you a fisher of men". And somewhere in the background that night, Mary Magdalene, who was respected by no one including herself, until a day when the Man from Nazareth led her to understand that there might be forgiveness for the past and some meaning for the future. Those who were with him that night recognized the scenery when Jesus used the metaphor of the "vine and the branches" - and they could tell us something of the spiritual meaning of that text on the ticket, "Void - if Detached".

And so too, could Paul - a generation later. There was that time when he ridiculed all that Christ-claim, a time when he did his best to stomp it out, to ignore it, to escape it. Until one day he was ready to acknowledge that all by himself, he really wasn't making much of his life, that he wasn't have much of an effect on anyone or anything. Perhaps he remembered those words of Jesus to his disciples - "Apart from me you can do nothing at all. It is the man who shares my life, and whose life I share who proves fruitful". At any rate, Paul came to this realization that all alone, by himself, his life was adding up to much, and then one day he was ready to share - to belong - to become attached - to put his life in with others where it could make a profound difference.

I don't know how it is with you, but I know that for myself those words have rich overtones and are still relevant and needful. "Apart from me you can do nothing at all". And yet - we're forever trying - forgetting - forsaking the life of the spirit and the spirit of his life. One thinks of the thousands of people in this city who have slowly drifted away from the influence of His word and way, who have drifted away from the church, who have carelessly neglected the living and vital center of belief. "Void - if detached" "Apart from me..." What their lives could mean in strengthening the values for which Christ and the Church stand if only they would become attached....truly committed....tied in.

Two Hollywood starlets were sunning themselves on a beach in California. One turned to the other and said, "Have I shared with you my horoscope?" The other said, "I didn't know that you believed in astrology" Her friend replied, "I believe in everything - just a little bit". This is the way it is with so many - a little bit of belief still lingers in their lives. If only we could help them to see what that little bit of belief can add up to when it is added to the belief and convictions of others. Alone and by itself it doesn't have much weight, but when it is put to and attached to that of others, it becomes something strong and vibrant. As it

touches the living and vital center of belief, it grows, deepens and is renewed.

Every now and then, something or someone brings us up short and reveals the real thing to us, a life really lived in the Christ spirit, and reflecting that spirit so naturally in the world. Some crazy fool for Christ's sake investing his life in some dark and difficult place. Some person coming through controversy and criticism with a glad and gracious spirit. Some person coming through trials and troubles with a steady strength. Some person standing up for ideals and convictions with quiet courage.

Remember the answer of the child, when asked who were the saints, and thinking of the figures in stained glass windows, answered, "They're the people who let the light through". Today is Reformation, and we think once again of Martin Luther and of his great stand on the solid ground of Christian truth. Next Friday, November 1st, is All Saints Day - the day when the Christian Church pauses to think once again of those heroic men of the faith in other centuries who have let the light of Christ shine through brilliantly to a darkened world. Thomas More - A Man for All Seasons

There are many real-life saints at work in our world today letting Christian light and love through to remind us that there is a present power - enough to renew hope and inspire us to a deeper commitment, enough to reveal part of the secret of Christian growth. There is still a living spirit of God meeting us in the person of Christ that can and does make a difference in a human life - how one sets his goals, how one deals with trouble, triumph, and temptation, how one regards other people and how one regards himself, how one lives and how one dies. Jesus was underscoring the warning on that ticket, "Void if detached" when he spoke that word to his disciples - so simple and yet so eternally important:
so eloquent

"Apart from me you can do nothing. I am the vine and you are the branches. The man who does not share my life is like a branch that is broken off and withers away. It is the man who shares my life and whose life I share who proves fruitful"

LET US PRAY God - Our Father - there are those times when we get cut off and find ourselves in isolation from our family, our friends, our fellow-men, even from what Thou hast done for us in Christ. Sometimes it is because of our selfishness that this happens. Remind us, in these moments of quietness, that we were never meant to be utterly alone. Restore us where we are broken and separated, and strengthen us in that companionship with Christ that his light and love and meaning may be in our lives and that it may flow into the lives of others. In his name and spirit, we pray. Amen