

## "VOID - IF DETACHED"

INTRODUCTION It's strange - how two events can conspire to suggest a sermon. The first event was a train ride up to White Plains in October. It was between commuter rush hours, and I held in my hand one of those round-trip tickets in two detachable sections - New York to White Plains, and then the reverse, White Plains to New York. While relaxing on the train, I studied the fine print on the ticket 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.

DEVELOPMENT 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 the 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 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 upon another - one event waiting upon another - one person relying on 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.

And then 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 brief warning on the ticket. Said he,

"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 various directions.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS First of all, think about it in terms of the whole realm of human relationships. How many words there are in our vocabulary of diagnosis which reflect the detachment and the separation between people, words like "alienation", "estrangement", "gap", "Separation", "segregation". And think of the problems, the stress, the tension that have resulted in so many areas of life as a result of those situations which these words are describing. 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 the 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 they were doing the best possible thing for the children of the city by evacuating them to northern regions where they would be safer. But it was soon discovered that the children - especially those under five years - suffered emotional disturbances, though they were physically safe, because they had been removed from the love and companionship of their parents. Many a judge and many a social worker could probably preach an eloquent sermon on our text, "Void - If Detached".

And so on through life. A young person may decide that he doesn't need his family - that he's the master of his fate and the captain of his soul - and that he can get along without the signals and signs and supportive strengths from those in the home. And certainly part of this is perfectly normal and natural and necessary - the steps toward selfhood, and the move toward maturity in 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 and he is not so insistent upon his independence.

NEW TESTAMENT      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 head for the far-off country, where all of the excitement seemed to be and there he wasted his life, his money - no one to think about but himself. But read on in that story and you come to that turn in the road described in the 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 that home address - for without it and without attachment to home people who know him, accept him, love him - life can be pretty empty and void.

Or again, there is a way in which a person is void if detached from his friends. Think about this application of the warning and ponder how different and how destitute our lives would have been without the influence of our friends - their support, their encouragement - at some of the turns in the roads that we have travelled. The script differs with each of us, but it is a poor and pathetic life that cannot see the places at which friends have made the difference. "Void - If Detached".

Think of some of the other paths that we could take in opening up the truth of these words. It has something to say to so many of the gaps that are evident in our time. The generation gap. It should never be one generation pitted 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 of elders. 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 that "other half" in order to really win!

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 races, regions, nations, churches and creeds - understanding for ourselves personally and collectively the great urgency of that simple warning on the ticket. Last weekend Martin Luther King's birthday was celebrated. I'm reminded of something he expressed so eloquently in a sermon in the Washington Cathedral shortly before he was killed.

OUT } "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."

And certainly one cannot help but feel the urgent truth of those words on the ticket "Void \* If Detached" for the churches of America, for the denominations and traditions they represent. More and more we sense that we cannot continue to go our own separate ways, for the world, and especially for us - the secular city - are too strong for a divided Church. We are growing in our realization that the walls that have divided us as denominations do not reach up to heaven, that the things that have separated us are not as strong as the things that unite us. And so it is that we see more and more that the future of the Christian enterprise rests with attachment and not detachment. "In unity, there is strength".

OUT } There was a community in northern Ohio, by the name of Milan, through which the canal which linked the Ohio River and Lake Erie passed. As time went on and the railroads were pushed across the continent to the West, there was an opportunity for two railroads to pass through the little town of Milan. The people of the town refused this opportunity on the grounds that they already had the canal. And so one of the railroads was built some miles north of the town and the other some miles to the south of the town. The canal, of course, has long since fallen into disuse and is now a dwelling place of bullfrogs and waterlilies with the main thrust of all life passing by that little town. The timing of the town was off. Our timing as a Church and as a denomination will be off if we fail to respond to the challenge and the opportunity to work with other churches as one family of Christ in ministering to the needs of the city. "Void - If Detached" said the words on the ticket. This is the message and meaning implicit in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity which we celebrate this Sunday.

HIGHEST SPIRITUAL MEANING

Suppose we consider now the highest spiritual meaning of this phrase. We call to mind some words spoken by Jesus to His disciples in the Upper Room on the last night of His life as He shared the Last Supper with them.

"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 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 that said, "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 the text on the train ticket, "Void - If Detached".

And so, too, could Paul a few years later. There was that time when he ridiculed all that "Christ-claim" stuff - a time when he did his best to stomp it out - to ignore it, 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 remembered those words of Jesus to his disciples, "Apart from Me you can do nothing". "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 wasn't adding up to much, and then one day he was ready to share...to belong...to become attached...involved...to put his life in where it could make a difference.

The words of Jesus are relevant and needful. "Apart from Me you can do nothing at all". And yet - we're forever trying...forgetting and forsaking the life of the spirit and the spirit of His life. One thinks of the scores of people in this city who have drifted away from Him, forgotten Him, who neglect the living and vital center of belief. Drop-outs from the Church... drifters from Christ. "Void - If Detached". Their lives could mean so much more if only they were attached, tied in, in earnest about these matters of which we speak.

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, a life really attached to Him and reflecting that personal relationship and that spirit so naturally in the world. Some crazy fool for "Christ's sake" investing his life in some dark, difficult place. Some person coming through controversy and criticism with a glad and gracious spirit. Some person coming through trials and troubles with steady strength. Some person standing up for ideals and for convictions with quiet courage.

And in this we are reminded that there is a present power - enough to renew hope and inspire us to a deeper commitment. 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, how one regards himself, how one lives and dies.

Jesus was underscoring the warning on that ticket, "Void - If Detached" when he spoke that word to his disciples:

"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."

PRAYER

"God, Our Father, there are those times in life when we get cut-off and find ourselves in siolation from fam ly, from friends, from our fellow man and even from ~~me~~ Christ and from what You have done for us in Christ.

Remind each of us in these moments of prayer that we were never meant to be utterly alone. Restore us where we are broken, separated, and strengthen us in that companionship with Christ that his light, his love may be in our lives. Let us flow from our lives and our hearts into the lives ~~the~~ others. In His name and spirit. Amen