

"WASTE, WANT AND WORTHINESS"

INTRODUCTION

In a movie of recent years entitled, "The L Shaped Room", two young people meet for the first time on the stairway of their shabby London boarding house. They fall in love - the shy, sensitive girl, pregnant by another man; the poor, talented boy who wants to be a writer. They begin to share their dreams, explore the mysteries of life together, talk and walk, laugh and play together. Then at last she tells him of her pregnancy. The news torments him, haunts him, sickens him. He still loves her, but he is unable and unwilling to accept her now. And so he breaks off their relationship, leaving each hurt, puzzled and sad. Later, when the baby is born, he visits the girl in the hospital and gives her a story he's written about their affair. In the closing scene of the movie, she returns the manuscript to him at his room. For a long, longing moment they look at each other. Then as she turns to leave him, her sad, wise eyes fall full upon the audience and she says, "It's a beautiful story. It's so true. Only it has no ending."

The parable of the Prodigal Son, read earlier in the service today, is like that - laying bare the love, the longing, the loneliness, the inner turmoil and betrayal, the sad guilt and the deathless hope that surges and turns in our hearts. Beautiful, true, and no ending. "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me....not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country and there he wasted his inheritance in loose living...'"

WASTE

"He wasted his inheritance". Waste is the first theme of this sermon, and it has no ending. Waste is the name of our human sickness. We think of waste in terms of property matters - for instance, the waste of our natural resources - and on the surface it does have to do with that. Tom Lehrer's delightful and caustic musical advice to foreigners about to visit this country come to mind:

"If you visit American cities, you will find them very pretty.
Just two things of which you must beware:
Don't drink the water and don't breathe the air.
Pollution, pollution, they've got smog and sewage and mud,
Turn on your tap and get hot and cold running crud.

See the halibuts and the sturgeons being wiped out by detergents.
Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly - but they don't last long if
they try.
Pollution, pollution, you can use the latest toothpaste,
And then rinse your mouth with industrial waste."

To be sure - there's a bite to that - and we're minded that we have wasted so much of the inheritance of nature and natural beauty that is ours in careless living - forests, rivers, lakes, minerals, land, oceans, and the air we breathe. But the waste of our natural resources is only part of the story. The deeper issue of waste refers not to property, but to people.

It has something to do with man's ruptured relations to his neighbor. Thomas Aquinas once wrote:

"It is the heart of sin that men use what they ought to enjoy, and enjoy what they ought to use".

This fundamental perversion is at the heart of our trouble. The Prodigal Son, we

note, used his father whom he ought to have enjoyed, and tried to enjoy his inheritance which he ought to have used. So the trouble for him began when he broke community, betrayed his family, wasted the person with whom he held his life in common. The parable sums up the separation and the sickness graphically and symbolically: "The younger son gathered all he had, took his journey into a far country and there wasted his inheritance" - there, alienated, separated, cut-off from the human family he had been a part of.

To try to enjoy things and to use people leads sooner or later to impoverishment, to the waste of both property and persons, and so - the very breakdown of our human community. How clever we are in using one another, manipulating, exploiting one another for personal gain, for status or recognition or power. How we jockey for place and position and privilege - eyeing each other suspiciously and mapping our little strategies to get ahead in the game of life.

Remember the dream Cass had in the novel, "Set This House On Fire". Cass is led to a gas chamber to be executed, a warden on each side, and preachers fore and aft. And there - standing at the chamber door, dressed in the executioner's shroud, the cylinder of cyanide in his hand was, as Cass put it, "my kindly, good, old bald-headed uncle who had reared me like a daddy!" That may be the night-mare of our time, when we've come to the place where there's no one to trust, no one to confide in, no one who isn't trying to manipulate us, or use us, or exploit us.

Preoccupation with property at the expense of persons - the attempt to enjoy things and use people - we're guilty of it. To complain about taxes, or property values, or personal liberties, and privileges being eroded - to do this in the face of the human needs for better housing, slum clearance, new hospitals, schools, conservation of streams, clean air and what have you - is to degrade people and ourselves and betray community by trying to gather our property and leave for the far country of private enjoyment...privileged living.

To repeat the words of Aquinas: "It is the heart of sin that men use what they ought to enjoy and enjoy what they ought to use". It is a sin that stills persists and the story seems to have no ending.

"The younger son gathered all he had, took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his inheritance. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country and he began to be in want."

WANT · Want is the second theme of the sermon, and it too has no ending. We are enclined to think of want in connection with our physical needs and on the surface it does have to do with that. We've begun to feel the pinch of the lack of water, of land, of timber, of minerals, of good clean air. In much of the world, the ghost of Malthus still stalks the land as the population explodes faster than the economy can expand and food be produced. Fulton Sheen has reminded us that: "If the hungry of the world lined up outside our door, the line would stretch around the world 25 times".

But physical want, I believe, can be and will be met by the ingenuity and creativity of man whenever we truly decide to do so. Want in a deeper sense has much to do with man's ruptured relation to himself. Ironically, we are most apt to realize we have lost ourselves just when we think we've made it. That want is behind so much of our compulsion in work, in play, in religion, the itch to keep busy, on the "go-go", to create happenings if there are no authentic happenings around - the urge to divert or drug our attention from the true self that we have

somehow lost sight of in our mad rush to supply our physical wants and desires.

This is the substance of many of the films and plays which dissect so carefully our modern life. Bill Maitland is the main character in John Osborne's drama, "Inadmissible Evidence". Maitland is a London lawyer, reputable, respectable, and restless, trapped in routine responsibilities, a bundle of thwarted desires and blighted hopes. One play reviewer sums it up this way:

"Maitland is pushing 40 - a tooth shy, flea bitten leopard, all spots and no strength, frantically pacing the cage of his life - in death. What has matured in Bill Maitland is not himself, but his fears, guilts and anxieties. He must flog a body that is losing its resilience and he smells death's bad breath at dawn. He envies the young for being young and for possessing the integrity that has eroded in him, the appetite for life that has clogged on his palate and the courage that has been drowned. It is not surprising that his self-disgust and self-hatred prove contagious and that in the end everyone stews in his own bile. But the problem is that Maitland is so passive that his degradation is self-induced."

Want is what a man feels who has lost himself in the hollow game of success, status and conformity. Want is what a man feels who has made himself a commodity and sold himself to the highest bidder and who one day discovers that what has matured in him is not his true self, but his fears and guilts. Want is what a man feels who is disgusted with what he is because it's something hollow, empty, less than a man, unmarked and undistinguished because he has not done battle. Want is what a man feels who has allowed himself to become a teddy bear to be cuddled, or a marionette to be controlled by his companions, company, church or country.

It's interesting to note that the Prodigal began to be in want and when he did, he came to himself. It was not primarily his physical plight that bothered him, but the awful realization that he had betrayed himself and sunk lower than his father's servants - become less than human, less than the least among men. And when a person feels want, he has begun to come to himself.

It is significant to note that the Prodigal's decline began when he said to someone else, "Give me..." - and that his recovery began when he said to himself, "I will arise and go..." With that he became responsible for himself and responsible to the God who created him and called him to enact his own destiny. For what is unique about man, what is the essence of being a self, is the power to make choices, to decide for yourself who and what you will be.

"And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough....I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

WORTHINESS Waste. Want. And the third theme - worthiness. It, too, has no ending. Worthiness represents the hope of our human condition. The affirmation of this Gospel that we profess and celebrate is built on the belief that we are worthy before God. His grace, his mercy, his acceptance of us confers that worthiness upon us in spite of the mess that we may have made of things in the far-off country of careless and riotous living. It is our worthiness before God that restores us to our true self and gives us the opportunity for the fresh start, the new beginning.

Worthiness is tied in with two things. First, it has to do with how a man works out his relationship to God. For many persons and rightly so, this means diligence and discipline in the devotional life, persisting in prayer, Bible study and good works - and I suspect working out our relationship to God has much more of this kind of religious discipline than most of us are willing to undertake. But I also suspect, too, that the heart of the matter is not to be found entirely in the devotional life of the individual. There's something more to it, something hinted at by this parable that Jesus told. It goes deeper.

Go back to the Parable for a moment. Remember the words that Jesus put into the mouth of the Prodigal. "I have sinned against heaven and before you". I believe we misread the parable if we think think of the Prodigal's father as representing only God. If that were an accurate reading, Jesus would have made no reference to the Prodigal's sin against heaven as something, or someone separate from the Prodigal's father. Clearly, Jesus wants us to see that God is like that boy's father - willing to receive, to forgive, to restore. But I think he also wants us to understand that the Prodigal's father also represents the human neighbor. Why? human relationships.

Because, I feel, we work out our relationship with God by being reconciled to our neighbor, our human brother - father, sister, mother, and that is the hardest thing. By God's grace, we are worthy before him. It is the neighbor we've hurt, or rejected or exploited or humiliated or bruised by our hostility or indifference or manipulation or selfishness or shortsightedness before whom we are unworthy. So we work out that worthiness before God by going back, seeking out, joining with the neighbor we have hurt. That's what the prodigal did. He went back and confessed to the ones he'd betrayed, denied, abused. That movement is at the heart of working out our sonship and restoring our human family and broken community. To sum it up in one word: reconciliation. Worthiness before God involves reconciliation with our human brothers and sisters.

CLOSING In the movie, the "L Shaped Room" my heart ached to have the girl and the boy who had betrayed and denied each other stay together because I felt it was their only hope. But because they were like us - too frightened, too proud, too sad - they didn't. Going to, seeking out, confessing before, staying with, and loving the neighbor you've hurt is terribly difficult. But because we are sons, by God's grace, we can. And it is the only move that I feel bears hope for our human condition of waste and of want. And it carries the promise that we "who are dead can come alive and begin to make merry together".

It's a beautiful story. True today, as it was then. And it has no ending. The ending, in a sense, is ours I suppose to write - day after day as we make our way through the ways of life.

PRAYER Open the eyes of our understanding, O God, as we try to interpret thy word to us. Keep our minds clear, our imaginations alive, and our hearts pure, humble and sensitive...that we may turn to the great Book in which we find thy word, knowing that in it thou wilt somehow speak to us and to our human condition. In the name and spirit of Christ. Amen