

"WHEN LOVES HANGS ON TOO LONG"

TEXT: "...so one of the people there said to Jesus, 'Look, your mother and brothers are standing outside, and they want to speak with you'" (Matthew 12: 47)

INTRODUCTION The New Yorker once carried a short story in which a candid teenager declared, "The books my mother can't bear to put down are the ones I can't stand to pick up".

The abrasive interaction of the generations is an ongoing fact of life. What excites us likely shocked our parents and probably will bore our children. No home can escape the friction of the generation gap. And it is within the context of this common source of conflict that we examine the text of this sermon which is being preached on the Sunday that ushers in National Family Week.

DEVELOPMENT Jesus ran into the problem head on. All three Gospels tell of the incident. Apparently it happened early on in his Galilean ministry. He was beginning to stir things up, draw out the opposition. He had picked corn on the Sabbath day and eaten it and this didn't go over very well with some folks. He had healed a man with a withered hand. His speech was becoming disturbingly direct: "He that is not with me is against me". "You brood of vipers! - how can you speak good when you are evil?" And when some of the Pharisees asked him for a sign, He replied sharply, "An evil and an adulterous generation seeks for a sign". There's nothing sacchrine or conciliating about Jesus' language here.

The record says, "while he was still speaking to the people...." that is, while he was upsetting entrenched power, running a collision course with the Pharisees, disturbing the status quo, he felt a tug on his sleeve. A messenger whispered in his ear, "Look your mother and brothers are standing outside, and they want to speak with you".

I think we have an idea of what was on Mary's mind. It's safe to assume thatt Joseph was probably dead by now. Mary came to where Jesus was ministering accompanied by her other children - Jesus' half brothers - James, Joseph, Simon and Judas. She was there pressing the claims of an overly possessive love. The Pharisees were suggesting that Jesus was deranged. I doubt that Mary thought this. And yet - she was worried. Her son was becoming more and more provocative. The Jews, you'll recall, were in a precarious relationship to Rome. Any type of distrubance among them might result in some arrests and the end of a shaky peace. She was concerned about Jesus.

So Mary had come to quiet him down, to encourage him to return to Nazareth. Who knows - perhaps her interference may have prompted Jesus later on to comment, "A prophet is not without honor save in his own country or in his own home", or again to observe, "A man's enemies are those of his own household". Here was a love that wanted to hang on too long - a love that was unwilling to release a son to the work He had come to do. Had Mary succeeded, we would not be Christian today. "Look Jesus - your mother and your brothers are standing outside and they want to speak to you".

AND SO IT GOES WITH US So it went with Mary, and so it goes with many people today.

Sometimes it is the dreams we have for our children from which they need to

be released. Have you ever thought of this? Have you ever stopped to consider how we parents want our children to ride every boat we missed, run with every ball we've dropped, obey every stop sign that we crashed. We're guilty of this. Paul Tournier speaks to this point in good fashion in his book, "The Strong and the Weak". Listen to his words:

"How many people there are who are crushed by the feeling of being the horse on which everything is staked, and which must at all costs win the race. Parents are the more demanding in regard to the moral conduct of their children, the more they expect, albeit unconsciously, to compensate thereby for their own failings in the past".

Only God knows how many people in our land are in the wrong marriage, the wrong work, the wrong course of study - all because they have been saddled by unyielding parental expectations. The young are frequently pressured to live out someone else's dreams. "Look, Jesus - your mother and brothers are standing outside. They want to speak to you".

You can take this down another path. Not only is it parental dreams, but sometimes it is our values from which they seek to be released and perhaps need to be released. I know that people of my generation as they came into their late teens were inclined to ask where they would fit in. Many young people today are asking not where, but whether to fit in. Many of them have grave reservations about the kind of society their parents have prepared for them. Many of them are not rushing to embrace the sort of future that mom and dad have worked so hard to line up for them: school, college, career, marriage, security. Some of them are not that anxious to be defined by the commodities that their parents possess: the split-level home, the long car, the hi-fi set, the summer place and all the rest.

Some words of Joseph Sittler come to mind and I pass them on:

"A man's life may be so directed toward - filled with - contentedly unfolded among the sheer operational activities of local and immediate existence that issues having the dimensions of an ultimate concern simply do not swim in his pond at all."

There are new values seeking to be born, or perhaps we could say - some old values seeking to be rediscovered now in the lives and ambitions of the young. We must release them to the discovery and the enactment of those values.

John Gardner, who is cutting an increasingly wide swath in our society, has made this observation in recent years:

"Most institutions have developed a functional blindness to their own defects. They are not suffering because they can't solve their problems - but because they can't see their problems"

And this, in part, is the mission of the young: to see what their fathers cannot see.

Who was it who said: every man over forty is a scoundrel? Was it George Bernard Shaw? We may not like it, but it comes close to home, for it does seem that the older we get the more we become adjusted to evil, to meanness and compromise.

Painful as it may be, we must release our young to the visions that do impel them. For instance, when they refuse to "buy" the Vietnamization of an Indo-

China war, or the bombing of North Vietnam, it is because they feel that death is death whether it be white death or yellow death and this is no solution. When they read that the nuclear stock-piles of the world are so vast that the equivalent of fifteen tons of TNT exists for every individual in the world, they are right in declaring that this is an A-1 madness. When they recoil from involvement in corporate life because of sensitivity to exploitation at home or abroad, this is part of their vision. When they march in protest against the defilement of the environment, they are living out the truth they feel.

What is gratifying is that so many of our young are willing to pay a price for their vision. They're willing to work for the Peace Corps, or VISTA, or prepare for service occupations. I'm reminded of a young man in my study not too long ago who said, "I'd like to go into the ministry, but my father tells me I shouldn't because there's not enough money in it". He's a minister today - parental objections notwithstanding.

I suspect that Coleridge, the English poet, was right, even though it pains one to acknowledge it, "the largest part of mankind are nowhere greater strangers than at home". "Look, Jesus - your mother and brothers are standing outside, and they want to speak with you".

HIS RESPONSE Do you recall Jesus' response? His reaction to Mary's intervention was swift and it was stunning. He gestured to those who were around him, who had been listening and believing and responding...and he said, "Behold, here are my mother and my brothers...." It hurts. We wonder - was he unduly harsh and insensitive? Many might think so. Some might say that Jesus here was trampling upon the flesh and warring against the most legitimate cravings of the heart. Yet - he exalted the home and the family. He was submissive to his parents as a child. He was considerate of Mary even in his own dying hour.

The issue at point is this, and we come to the heart of the matter: spiritual affinities take precedence over our earthly ties. Out on the mission fields dramatic separations often occur. When first generation Christians believe, they often have to leave their homes quite literally. Less dramatically, but no less painfully - it happens here at home as young people who see a vision and who begin to penetrate the mind and heart of Christ find it necessary to subsume all earthly ties beneath their loyalty to God. And unless we release our young to their vision, we deserve to be penalized a foul shot or even more for some defensive holding back.

Let me add one thought to this. This is not to infer from this treatment of Jesus' words that "anything goes". There is no suggestion, mind you, in anything Jesus said or did that would legitmatize a drift into easy sex, easy drugs, easy money, easy liquor. What we put in place of the will of our parents, if need be, is the will of God - not the will of self. Jesus made it clear in those words: "Behold, here are my mother and brothers! For whosoever shall do the will of my father in heaven, the same is my brother and sister and mother".

SUMMARY Personally, I find in these words a warning to myself as a parent to beware of oversteering, of hanging on too long. A family ought to be a harbor from which the ship leaves to sail the seas - not a dock where the ship ties up. It's also a warning to any young people present - a warning that as they press for their release, they should know what they are going to, as well as what they are coming from!

PRAYER It is of thy plan and thy providence, O God, that the generations overlap - for the advancing new and the receding old have much to give to each other.

May these moments spent in thy house this day, O God, help to clarify our relationship to Thee, that our relationships with one another in our homes may be wisely ordered and joyfully maintained. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen