

"WHEN OUR SPIRITS ARE DOWNCAST"

INTRODUCTION

The sermon today begins with this observation that in order to grow in self-understanding and self-mastery we have to learn how to deal with the ebb and flow of feeling in our inner life. We know that human nature, like the weather, is essentially variable. We all have our good days and we all have our bad days. One morning we jump out of bed and tackle our work with enthusiasm and vigor and the next day we may have to drive ourselves and push ourselves to it and getting it done is an effort, a strain. The words of the well known Negro spiritual strike a responsive note in us because they describe our case: "Sometimes I'm up and sometimes I'm down - Oh, yes, Lord".

DEVELOPMENT

Now many persons tend to fret over these changing tides of feeling within themselves. They may develop a guilt complex about them, or perhaps make heavier demands upon themselves. We need to recognize that we are battling against a law of life which is universal in its operation and scope. There is no need for us to fret or be humiliated or acquire crippling guilt feelings. Much of our striving at this point is a waste of vital energy.

We need to be reminded from time to time that the road of life we are called upon to travel is not a uniformly level and smooth road, with the sun shining on it all the time, but a succession of hills, plains and valleys. It is in the nature of things, not only normal, but inevitable for us to have high days and low days. It is the way we are made. Instead of fretting, resisting, rebelling, the course of wisdom lies in teaching ourselves to recognize and accept these rhythms of our inner life.

Experience soon makes clear to us that low spirited hours are dangerous hours. Where the fight for character is concerned we are always vulnerable, but we are especially vulnerable when fatigue, inertia and depression take hold of us. A sentence in the Old Testament illustrates this point. An enemy of David said to his fellow conspirators, "I will set out and pursue David tonight; I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged, and throw him into a panic". The enemy of souls is a past master in that kind of strategem. He is seldom far away in our zero hours. A low spirited person is a person with his guard down. It is then that he is apt to act out of character, fall below his best, say things and do things that afterwards he deplores. This is why zero hours should never be decision making hours. When you are in them don't pass judgment on yourself, on other people, or on the state of the world. I remember some advice my father gave me as a growing boy:

"Never make your decisions at night when your energies are at their lowest; make them in the early morning hours after a good night's sleep".

I. KEEP THEM TO YOURSELF

Now there can be no creative acceptance of life's emotional rhythms unless we find ways of handling our bad days. Let me suggest two things at this point. First of all, one should make a determined effort to keep them to one's self. If we are in the grip of melancholy it should be a point of honor with us - a part of our code as Christians - not to go about advertising or bemoaning the fact.

The fact that we are dispirited gives us no right to make our neighbors dispirited, and yet how often we do this. How often we share our black moods with others thus putting them into a mood of depression. We need to remember that other people are fighting a hard battle; they, too, have their ups and downs. When we mingle with them we owe them the duty of cheerfulness; it is a duty we particularly owe the members of our home circle. Why should the world see us at our best - smiling, affable, cordial, and our kinfolk see us irritable, morose, petulant?

(Why some of us can't wait to get on the telephone before the day has even started to share our dark moods with others...)

Remember those lines:

"We flatter those we scareely know.
We please the fleeting guest.
And deal full many a thoughtless blow
To those we love the best"

I read somewhere sometime ago that among the regulations for the officers of the British Navy there is this point:

"Every officer is to avoid saying or doing anything which might discourage the men or render them dissatisfied with their conditions or with the serve in which they are or may be employed"

Here is a regulation each of us would do well to make our own - something to follow in our work, in our church, in our home - to keep our black moods, our critical attitudes, our inner frustrations to ourselves and not go about spreading them out where others will see them and pick them up. Someone has said, "Never display a wound except to a physician". If you have a wound, don't forget the great physician. I think the truly courageous soul is reluctant to make an emotional indulgence or display of his or her trouble. Courageous souls are adept in concealing them. Robert Louis Stevenson, for example, plagued with sickness throughout his lifetime, but in his family circle offering this prayer in the morning:

"Call us up with morning faces and with morning hearts - eager to be happy, if happiness shall be our portion - and if the day be marked for sorrow, strong to endure.

III. FAITHFUL IN DAILY TASKS

In the second place, in dealing with our bad days we should also make it a point of honor to be faithful in the performance of our daily tasks and duties. I think the pull at such times is mostly in the opposite direction. The tendency is to be lethargic, careless, slack, irresponsible. However, what happens then is that despondency increases and with it our gloomy introspection. So much of our low-spiritedness is due to self-absorption. What we usually need is something that will take our minds off of ourselves.

Nothing serves that purpose so well as work. I'm a great believer that "work's a blessing". There was a time when doctors sent their fashionable patients off for a rest cure. Nowadays it is recognized that in nine cases out of ten a work cure will do far more good. Rest and quiet often intensify low spiritedness. "Go and lie down" in many instances can be poor advice. "Go out and do something kind for some one else" is sounder advice. One way to get out of zero hours is to persevere, whether we feel like it or not, to persevere conscioustiously and doggedly in the carrying out of our appointed tasks. Remember this "Perspiration precedes inspration". When you leave undone those things you know you ought to do, when you neglect responsibility, evade your duty, putting self and self-indulgence before duty and service, you are heading deeper into the pits of depression.

Listen to this judgment offered by a man in the medical profession:

"In all conditions of life and all the varied situations in which an individual may be placed, in periods of monotony and boredom, or in times of storm and stress, in all the varied fortunes and misfortunes that meet the individual, when opportunity is lost, when dishearted by failure, even in conditions of distress and despair, the

day's work is the one consolation; and with habits of coordinated activity, of mental and physical work developed from childhood, one has always an anchor of safety whatever the mental chaos and distraction"

III. RESOURCES OF GOD

First - learn to keep your dark days to yourself. Second - be faithful to the daily tasks and responsibilities. And third, remember there is still another anchor - an anchor of the soul - sure and steadfast. Through changes of circumstance and fortune, we can school ourselves to live in reliance on the resources of God. We can make our prayer that ancient prayer: "HEAL ME AT THE CENTER AND LET THE WORLD COME ON". We can root ourselves, ground ourselves in the faith that God is love, that He will never leave us nor forsake us, that He knows the way and that His hold is on us all the time.

It is easy to talk glibly about this. I hope I am not conveying such an impression. The faith in God that proves to be a real anchor in our lives is seldom come by easily. It is the result of disciplined effort - the result of our cultivation of spiritual habits.

Perhaps part of the reason our faith is not more meaningful is that we do so little to cultivate it. A recent analysis points out to us (and if you have reached your 70th birthday, this may startle you. If you haven't, perhaps these figures will encourage you to make some changes) -

"Statistics show that the average person of 70 has spent:

3 years in education -
8 years in amusement -
6 years in eating -
11 years in working -
24 years in sleeping -
5½ years in washing and dressing -
6 years in walking -
3 years in conversation -
3 years in reading -
and
6 months in worshipping God"

It's no wonder then that our faith is not more dynamic. The casual, haphazard approach never produces anything vital.

During the Second World War, a man lost his only son. All his hopes had been centered in the lad. The news of his death overwhelmed the fath. He said, "When a thing like this happens to a man, there are just three ways out of it; there is drink, there is despair, and there is God; and by His grace, it is God for me".

Our greatest need is the old, old need of trust in God. To live without faith in Him is to be out of our native element, inadequate for the pressures and the responsibilities that crowd upon us. Out of our native element because God has made us for Himself and our hearts are bound to be restless till they rest in Him. If we are to see clearly and act wisely and live courageously, we must learn to stay our souls on God. The poet Whittier recognized this when he wrote those lines that speak to our hearts:

"I know not where His islands lift
Their froned palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond ^{is} love and care"

LET US PRAY

Make us now conscious, O God, of thy enfolding presence, of thine eternal love, of thine acceptance of us just as we are. Speak the word of absolute forgiveness of all our sins, and empower us for the duties of another week.

We ask this in the spirit of Christ. Amen

Such a faith - such a faith is an anchor in our lives when our spirits are downcast and our days are filled with darkness and despair.