

"WHO WILL TELL THE CHILDREN?"

TEXT: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you"  
(II Timothy 1: 5)

INTRODUCTION I dare say that at first reading the Biblical text for today's sermon would be rated "~~0~~" for ordinary. Nothing stellar here. No dazzling miracle. No big names - just some "second-stringers" like Timothy, Eunice and Lois. But on second and third readings, the importance of what is written here quietly begins to shine through.

Here is the under-rated wonder of religious nurture at its near best! Three generations old and still going strong.

hunger, poverty

DEVELOPMENT We live in a world of colossal problems: inflation, over-population, racism, pollution, arms control - to name a few.

In such a world it is most tempting for Christian people to forget the home front and to plunge into one action group after another. In my work hardly a week goes by but what some cause with good credentials is seeking to enlist my support. The same, I'm sure, is true with you. Why, all you have to do is walk from here over to Third Avenue and the opportunity is yours to be enlisted by Dr. Moon, the United Farm Workers, or the friends of Phoenix House - just to name a few of recent weeks. Come here. Please listen to us. Do this. Do that. Go to this meeting. And in its place, this is good. But the home front is of even greater importance - transmitting the faith, and reproducing after our kind spiritually.

St. Paul knew the tremendous value of Christian nurture. He was there in death row, rather sure that his flame would soon be snuffed out. And as he reflected back over the year, he became conscious of the good that God had wrought for him through Timothy, a young man on whom his mantle would soon fall. He thanked God intensively day and night for Timothy's great faith, remembering that that faith had belonged in turn to Lois and Eunice. Paul was grateful for a mother who told her daughter, and for a daughter who told her son. Three generations.

It so happened that Timothy came from a small hick town called Lystra. On one occasion when Paul and Barnabas were there they managed to heal a man who was a cripple. The crowd surged forward and wished to make them gods. They wanted Barnabas to be called Zeus and Paul, Hermes. Presently, some of Paul's enemies infiltrated Lystra and turned the crowd against them. Paul was actually stoned, dragged from the city and left for dead. That must have made a tremendous impression on young Timothy. Yet, Paul did not presume that that incident, however dramatic, had brought this young man to faith. The sincere faith that he found in Timothy dwelt first in his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice. He did not claim Timothy for himself. Paul gave credit to the nurture offered in that Christian home.

WHO WILL TELL THE CHILDREN Who will tell the children? This is my question to you on this day when our Sunday School comes together once again. Who will tell the children? We have a variety of interests as Christians vis-a-vis the faith. Some of us are seeking to express it. Some are seeking to apply it. Some are seeking to define it. Some are seeking to under-

stand it. Some are seeking to structure it. Some of us are playing hide and seek with it - leaving it now and then, but never for too long.

And yet, while all of this goes on, and in a sense must needs go on, the concern presses with insistent urgency: who will tell the children? While you are busy re-structuring, while you are busy reading a book on the Incarnation, while you are exploring new frontiers on your pilgrimage, while you are playing hide and seek, who will tell the children? God needs to make a new church every twenty years. To what point do we discuss structure and theology and social action if we neglect the young lives in our charge? All we need to do is miss one generation and there won't be much need to re-structure, or express, or apply, or understand. There won't be a church. ~~It is not enough to fight the wolves. We must also feed the sheep.~~

Who will tell the children? They won't become Christians automatically. There is no such thing in America as an osmotic Christian. And if we ever believed in the myth of the Christian state, we can hardly so believe any longer. One can easily find his or her place in our society without ever finding God.

The schools? Hardly. Public or private. If I were a teacher, I would worry about the inflated expectations society has of me. How many wrongs can our teachers be expected to right? It is not proper for us to expect the schools to do what is essentially a parochial task.

Or should we adopt the strategy of benign neglect? Just allow our children to come and go as they will. Sitting back, more or less, to see what will happen. If you tried that with a backyard, refusing to plant any seeds at all, you would soon be looking out upon an indiscriminate collection of weeds.

THE CHURCH No - the church will tell the children in conjunction with the home. That's the way it should work. The church does it in conjunction with the home. And this responsibility deserves the highest possible priority in the life of a church. It is high time we gave it more priority in this church. It is high time we paused to salute our church school teachers, too, most of whom are not present down here on a Sunday morning because they are busy upstairs telling the children. And this is something that some of them do thirty-five Sundays across the year. Truly, it is a labor of great love.

Whether we now have children of our own in the Sunday School, I do feel we owe something to those who in years past and in other places took the time and effort to transmit to us the joy and challenge and understanding of the Christian faith. It is not enough for any one of us to simply appropriate the faith, we must be concerned to transmit the faith as well.

But the church, if it is to be successful in telling the children must have the help of the home. We cannot do much without the help and cooperation of the home.

At time we may think we have it rather hard here in New York - not too much out there that would inspire belief, to put it mildly. But did you know that in that little town of Lystra where Timothy grew up there wasn't even a synagogue. On the other hand, there was a monstrous pagan temple. What chance did a mother have to bring up a child there in any tradition worthy of Yahweh God. Yet, even in Lystra, where the odds were against them, a mother told a daughter. A daughter told a son. And Timothy's faith resulted.

Home is where our preferences and our priorities are revealed. I doubt very much whether there is a church school anywhere in the nation that can offset the damage of a crassly irreligious home. I could be wrong. I know this. We have a way of farming out our children...Thinking that they will learn to dance at dancing school, become literate at school, perhaps even have a bit of religion rub off on them at Sunday School. We send them out into a variety of activities with the home as the hub from which they depart and to which they return. But that hub has a tone and a character all of its own which is most decisive. I think it greatly influences what happens when the youngsters go out and return.

I have always had a deep respect for Bob Gibson of the St. Louis Cardinals, a man courageous enough to speak his mind. Someone asked this great righthander if he didn't feel that he had a responsibility to the children of America to set a good example. You know what he said. Gibson said that he felt no responsibility at all. He said it was up to the fathers to set a good example for their own sons. With that I agree. John Calvin put it this way in his typically robust language asserting that "Domestic examples are powerful excitements to urge us forward".

#### WHY TELL THE CHILDREN

Who do we tell the children? Certainly not to coerce them or brainwash them. A child psychologist awhile back gave an interesting expression to the public. He spoke of the "pampered, neglected child". This is the child whose every wish is so anticipated by parents that the child develops no ego of his own. It works like this. The mother says, "Put on your coat, I'm cold". Or, "Eat all your supper, I'm hungry". Or, with regard to religion, "Believe in God, I'm afraid." That's not the reason we tell the children.

We tell the children because we want them to be able to speak their own "yes" or "no" - that's all. We want to bring them to know the memories, the hopes, the symbols, the wisdom that belongs to this family of God we call the church.

You know how it is in a human family. We practice a kind of short-hand there. Around the supper table someone says, "Remember that old '56 Chrysler?" - and all the members of the family begin to woolgather and recall. Their thoughts turn to trips in the summer, a trip to the DQ, or eating McDonald's hamburgers along the road. All one needs to say in my family is '56 Chrysler and the recollections spill over and help to keep a family together and even the youngest adds her contribution, "you mean the old grey bomb, daddy?"

Sometimes all that needs to be said is "How poppy would have enjoyed ~~this!~~" - and with those words a whole slice of life shared with in-laws and grandparents is re-experienced. Or, sometimes the mention of a pet's name. "How Sneakers would have loved that bone!" Such a remark can summon to the minds of children all the years they had together with a pet. The symbols, the short-hand, the gestures, the signs, the code-words - all help to keep families together.

~~And in a larger sense, this is what the context of the faith is all about.~~ As Christians, we have a body of literature, a cast of characters, a set of assumptions, a long history, a heritage of music and liturgy. What we desire for these boys and girls is that they become familiar with these things.

There are certain properties in the Bible that every youngster ought to know about: Noah's ark, Jacob's ladder, Solomon's Temple, Joseph's coat of many colors, Elijah's mantle, Job's ash pit, Judas' 30 pieces of silver, Pilate's wash basin, Jesus' cross. All are highly symbolic.

And there are places our children ought to know: the River Jordan, the Garden of Eden, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Upper Room, the Isle of Patmos, the Damascus Road, the Emmaus Road, Mars Hill. And there are certain moods that our youngsters ought to know about from the history of the faith: David dancing before the ark, Solomon humble at the dedication of the Temple, Jeremiah hesitant about taking on the work of a prophet, Peter in his cocksureness, Thomas in his doubt, Gideon with his courage, Moses with his anger at the idolatry of the golden calf, Jonah with his defiance, "I won't go and tell those people anything".

CLOSING "I am reminded of your sincere faith" said Paul, "a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother, Lois, and Your mother, Eunice, and now, I am sure dwells in you". What was it the Psalmist of Israel said, "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations". This is more than a wish. It is a distinct possibility. For what we have received can ~~and must~~ be transmitted across the years".

I have always been impressed by the great pains to which our Hebrew friends go to transmit their Biblical heritage to their children. Some of them put us to shame. This is part of their history. Some of them lived before the written word was invented so that in the earliest centuries the transmission was oral. Mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers had to sit down literally and recount the works of God. Psalm 78th states the intention: "We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and His<sup>H</sup> might, and the wonders which He has wrought".

It is not enough to fight the wolves. We must feed the sheep as well. ~~Over the years we have had children in our church school who come from different parts of the world. What an opportunity is ours. But two or three cannot do it all. More are needed.~~ Who will tell the children? We will, and we shall do it gladly, with your help and the help of God.

PRAYER Standing as we do, O God, between generations past and generations still to come - we ask for fidelity to both. Help us to number our priorities well in this church, and to spend our strength and our time on those concerns that really matter the most. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen  
in the long run.

for fidelity and commitment to both.