

March 28, 1965
Matthew 26:14-25
Norman S. Rosen

ON BETRAYING THE BEST WE KNOW

"I will deliver him unto you."

-Matthew 26:14

"I do not know the man."

-Matthew 26:72

What a wonderful privilege it was for the twelve disciples to know Jesus, to see him face to face, to look into his eyes and hear his voice. Once in a lifetime a man has the rare privilege of meeting a saint, or a spiritual genius. In his presence we feel ourselves in the presence of a divine light. For a brief moment we feel the reality of eternal things.

Peter and Judas both had this opportunity. They lived with Jesus for at least a year. When they awoke in the morning it was to see this man of God at prayer. During the day they saw him heal the sick and bring comfort and understanding to a sad and unhappy people. They hung on his wonderful words of life and listened as he told them how each man was of infinite worth in the sight of God:

"Not one (sparrow) is forgotten before God, but the very hairs of your head are numbered. Fear ye not, therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows."

Peter and Judas both knew Jesus as well as any man ever knew him. Certainly, he was the finest and noblest thing they had ever known. Yet they betrayed him: Peter with a vehement denial and Judas with a kiss.

For 2,000 years men and women have read about this betrayal of the most beautiful life ever lived. For 2,000 years men have talked about it and condemned it. Yet for 2,000 years men have gone on betraying the best that they knew in little ways and large ways. They have offered all kinds of excuses for their actions, trying to make what they did sound reasonable, in fact, sacrificial, but the truth remains: Men and women go on age after age betraying the highest, and the best, and the noblest things they know. When engaged in philosophical conversation they deny that they would ever compromise their principles, but in the daily press of life they compromise them continually. They do it primarily because they are afraid, just as Peter and Judas betrayed Christ because they were afraid. Fear rules our lives instead of faith.

"Fear ye not, therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows."

II

There is, I have no doubt, no one of us here this morning who has not at some time or other betrayed the highest, noblest, finest things he has known.

We claim to live by certain principles but we ignore, or compromise, or deny those principles depending upon circumstances. We dedicate ourselves to the Christian life and then betray it by refusing to love God and our neighbor with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

If you are denying at this moment that you ever betrayed the finest and best that you know, it is because you are thinking of the big things. You have never committed a murder, perhaps. You have never engaged in an outright theft. You have never intentionally libeled and debased the character of a friend. You have never cursed God. But have you ever interrupted anyone telling a dirty story and tried to show him how he was debasing that which was noble, and good, and lovely and true? Have you ever refused to listen to gossip and insisted that it was destroying the character of another human being? The most valuable thing on earth is human life, and when anyone of us does anything to debase and destroy the beauty and nobility of life, we betray that which God created in his own image.

We all are guilty and our betrayals are revealed by the hesitancies which we show in the face of commitments. We will seldom commit ourselves unless forced to do so. There was a time when the most honorable man was the man who was wholly committed. He was dependable, he was prompt, he was a man of his word, he was wholly trustworthy. May I suggest that a great many people shun that way of life today. We shun commitment to truth, to honesty, to integrity. It might interfere with our fun -- and for too many people the chief end of life is to have fun.

I don't want to pull my punches this morning by appearing frivolous, but there is a humorous story sent me by a member of the church which is to the point. It deals with a pig and a hen strolling down a dusty western street, and noting in a restaurant window a sign which read, "Have an all-American breakfast -- ham and eggs." "That," said the hen, "is a noble sentiment." "Well," replied the pig, "You may take it lightly. For you it's all in a day's work. For me it is a total commitment!"

How total is your commitment to the highest and best that you know? How total is your commitment to basic moral principles? Will you deny them when it is no longer easy and comfortable to live by them? Will you betray them when to be loyal to them may cost you popularity, prestige, or perhaps even your life? The greatest weakness of Christianity today is the fear of commitment on the part of its adherents. Henry Drummond used to say to his theological students: "Do not touch Christianity unless you are willing to seek the kingdom of God first. I promise you a miserable existence if you seek it second."

There are indeed first things to which we must give our loyalty if western civilization is to prosper and continue to exist. Charles Lindbergh pointed this out many years ago in the book which recorded his experiences. Said he,

"I saw the science I worshiped and the aircraft I loved destroying the civilization I expected them to serve, and which I thought as permanent as earth itself. Now I understand that spiritual truth is more essential to a nation than the mortar in its cities' walls."

What profiteth a nation to be the most productive, the richest, the largest, with the most natural resources, and the largest number of literate citizens, if it has no proper goal? It is held together by fear rather than by love, by selfishness rather than by desire for service. Such a nation cannot but perish as have so many other nations before it.

You and I have made a commitment to God through the Christian church. It must be a total commitment. There is only one excuse for the church's existence. The church is on earth to seek and to save those who are lost. If we fail to keep this task central, we betray the highest and the best that we know. We betray our Christ as surely as did Peter and Judas.

Frank Laubach has said it for us:

"I disapprove of the usual practice of talking small talk whenever we meet, holding a veil over our souls. If we are so impoverished that we have nothing to reveal but small talk, then we need to struggle for more richness of soul. As for me, I am convinced that this spiritual pilgrimage which I am making is infinitely worthwhile, the most important thing I know of to talk about, and talk I shall while there is anybody to listen."

And George Buttrick makes the same point when he says:

"Listen to the conversation on a railroad train, or in a street. People are concerned with automobiles, prices, furniture, sports. A man who discusses human destiny, or the claims of Christ is odd. The others in the company shuffle in discomfort. When sickness comes and the shadow of death darkens, we are tongue-tied for we are accustomed to only trivial topics. When the crisis has passed, we return with relief to our casual speech."

III

Now let us for a moment compare the lives of Peter and Judas with the life of Jesus. Does one not immediately have thrust upon him that which makes the startling difference in these lives? The first two men are ruled by fear. The latter is the master of life because his life is based on firm and fixed principles which he will not betray.

May I offer an analogy. St. Exupery in his book, Wind, Sand and Stars tells of an airplane flight over the Sahara desert. Night fell and directions were lost. Suddenly a light twinkled off in the distant darkness near the horizon. The plane's course was altered but soon it was discovered that the light came not from a distant beacon but from a setting star. Time and again similar lights were seen. Time and again the course was changed. Time and again the lights prove to be not beacons promising a safe landing, but distant suns whose light was illusory.

March 28, 1965
Page 4

Firm principles and deep convictions, based on reason, understanding, and faith are beacons which can lead a man on a straight course toward a worthy goal. As for me, if I can give my own children nothing else, I pray God I can succeed in giving them a few basic principles concerning what is eternally right, good and true. If they have these few principles and refuse to betray them, I will have no fear for their future.

Grant that you too may possess these principles and pass them on to your children that they too may live by faith and not by fear.