

February 27, 1966
Luke 17:1-10
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FAITH AND YOUR FUTURE

"This is the Victory that overcometh the world,
even our faith."

I John 5:4

Not long ago, a speaker came to Wauwatosa to relate her experience in a land little known to the world at large. That land is Hunza, a small native province near the northeastern corner of Pakistan, and bordering communist China. It is surrounded by the high Himalayas and few Americans have ever been there. The story which the speaker shared with us was in such sharp contrast to what I had previously believed that I returned to an author I had read a few years earlier.

The book which was the source of my information was written by John Clark, a geology professor from Princeton University. Dr. Clark had first encountered Hunza while serving in the United States army during the second World War. What he saw there, the sickness and deprivation, determined him to return to the country following the war and try to help the inhabitants gain a higher and better standard of living. With the help of a few friends he was able to finance a stay of nearly two years.

He found the inhabitants of Hunza so lacking in contact with the outside world they had never seen a wheel. When he showed them one they thought he had invented it. So limited was their diet they had meat during only one week out of the entire year. Due to vitamin deficiencies they were afflicted with numerous skin diseases. John Clark's charitable inclinations were not always welcomed. He was often opposed and misunderstood. Communists and petty officials continually tried to force him out of the country. The state of his own health became precarious. He developed a dysentery which never left him during most of his stay. A rectal abscess gave him constant pain.

In spite of everything John Clark remained in Hunza. He taught woodcarving to the native boys and set up a small shop for them. He surveyed the geological possibilities of the area. He showed the leaders how they could develop new, small industries. He gave the people new methods of agriculture and healed their diseases. He brought new life and light to a hungry and in many ways an unfortunate people.

II

Let me contrast the experience of John Clark in Hunza with another brief story which happens to come from Maine, but which could be duplicated in many other places. In my own native state of Utah, I have witnessed the same situation as described in this story told by a Maine resident. The setting is Flagstaff, Maine. You probably have never heard of it. It doesn't even exist anymore. It is buried under a man made lake created by a government built dam. The resident tells how when the news got around that the dam was going to be built, all progress, all hope, all faith in the future of that town and its inhabitants, died. There were no more improvements and repairs, no new construction or plans for the future. Why do anything for tomorrow when the whole town would soon be blotted out? Week by week the town deteriorated and died.

III

Now there is a significant relationship between these two widely separated geographical locations -- Hunza and Flagstaff. They both witness to the same principle, that where there is no faith in the future, there is no power in the present.

Why did the little town of Flagstaff fall apart? Is it not obvious that it was because there could be no faith in the future of a town that would soon be engulfed under thousands of gallons of water? Why did John Clark stay in Hunza in spite of every difficulty? Is it not because he did have faith in the future of this little country and its people? Faith in the future is power for the present.

I suppose it is theoretically possible to have faith in the future without having faith in God, but it must certainly be more difficult. It will also be a very different kind of faith than that possessed by one who believes in a Supreme Being-- a God who creates and sustains all that is. It would be faith in a completely materialistic future, and it could extend no further than the grave. Rather than faith, it is probably more accurate to say that the atheist has only hope. He hopes there will be a tomorrow in which to enjoy the fruits of today's efforts.

If there is no God, if the seeming order of the universe may fall apart at any moment, then there is very little reason for living the good life. You may say that virtue is its own reward, but as Harry Emerson Fosdick once pointed out, when a man sacrifices his life to save another, just what is the reward if there is no life and no consciousness after death? Faith in the future is essential if we are to have any power in the present.

Faith is power because it gives a sense of meaning to a man's life. Where is there any meaning in life if life's end is in the grave? But if a man can have a vision of something beyond the grave, his life suddenly makes sense. His life takes on purpose and there is something to work for.

IV

Sir Isaac Newton, one of the greatest scientific geniuses that ever lived, once invited a friend into his laboratory. On a table there stood a model of the solar system. It was a very complex and beautifully constructed thing, showing all the various planets revolving around the central sun, and each one rotating on its axis. The friend looked it over, admired it, then turned to Newton and asked, "Who made this lovely model?" Sir Isaac Newton replied, "Nobody." "You are being facetious and enigmatic," replied his friend. "Of course, someone made it. Such a thing as that couldn't just happen." "Ah," replied Newton, "you tell me that this model could not possibly have happened by accident, and yet you claim to be an atheist, thereby holding that the universe which is a million times more complicated than this model did happen by accident."

Is it not a challenging, thought-provoking illustration? We look at our wrist watches and say that such a device could not possibly have happened by the mere random allocation of particles. Does it then make sense that a human being, vastly more complicated than a watch, is the result of pure chance and accident? Faith does indeed become the choice of the most meaningful hypothesis.

During this season of Lent our attention is turned to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Surely it is difficult to look at his experience on this planet and to say that his life had no meaning and significance. Yet what is it that we see in his life? Do we not gain from him a sense that life has a deeper meaning than that which is visible on the surface, that underneath his life and actions there is something of eternal significance, something that is divine and holy?

It is interesting to note that in the Orient, God is pictured as a rather complacent being. The Buddha sits in perfect peace contemplating his navel. He is withdrawn from creation and apparently unconcerned about it. The religion which takes its name from him, therefore, is pretty much unconcerned with man's state in this world.

It is not too difficult, therefore, to understand the story of two communist boys in China given the job of destroying churches and chapels. One evening at dusk after they had desecrated a small chapel they decided that they would sleep in it. As they were lying on the floor, one of them seeing the crucifix high on the wall that they had not been able to reach, said to his companion, "Do you see the picture of God nailed to a piece of wood?" "Yes," said the other lad, "what of it?" "You know", said the first boy, "I never saw a God who suffered before."

Jesus brought God into the innermost life of man, and it is a Christian belief that God continually enters into and shares the common life of his people. When one looks at the progress Christianity has been responsible for in our world, meager though it may be, and compares it with the achievements of other great religions, one begins to see that it is the Christian's faith in this aspect of God's activity with man, the Christian faith in the future possibilities, that has provided men with the power to uproot and overturn evil and establish whatever righteousness and truth our free societies now enjoy.

V

There is a story about a missionary in Rhodesia who was one day walking through the scrub to visit some of his converts. Suddenly a lion jumped out from behind a bush and stood squarely in his path. To the missionary, being on foot, the lion looked rather alarming. He got slightly fearful. He had no weapon, what was he to do? He breathed a prayer, and then flung the Bible he was carrying straight at the lion. It dropped dead. Recovering his Bible, he returned thanks to God for his deliverance and resumed his journey. Rounding the next corner, he found a man cleaning his rifle.

The kind of faith I am talking about this morning is not blind. It is not irrational and unthinking. It is not a vain hope that things will be better. It is choosing to believe that that toward which all the evidence points is indeed a fact. It is not a substitute for action, it is not a substitute for intellectual endeavor, but it does bring to us and make available to us a reservoir of spiritual energy which sustains us when all else fails.

This is what faith can do for your life. But you can't have that faith by wishing for it. You can't have it until you want it more than you want anything else. You can't have it until you begin assiduously to follow all the spiritual disciplines we ministers talk about during Lent. You must seek time to separate yourself from the world, you must work, and study, and pray.

Faith is the choice of the most reasonable hypothesis. What is the most reasonable hypothesis? You will never know until you follow the disciplines of the spirit. But remember, there is no power in the present without faith in the future.