

May 28, 1967
Memorial Sunday
I John 4:16-21
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THE PRICE OF LOVE

"He that loveth dwelleth in God and God in Him."

I John 4:16

Memorial Day was originally appointed for the purpose of commemorating the soldiers and sailors who died in the Civil War. Later it was extended to commemorate also those who died in the Spanish American War and the first World War. Today it has become a general day of commemoration on which, theoretically at least, we remember all those dead whom we have known and loved.

At one period in the time of my childhood this day was known only as Decoration Day, and we made an annual family pilgrimage to the cemetery with all of our other relatives in order to "decorate" the graves of our loved ones who had died. The day remains in my mind and I have fond memories of it. It seemed to give us children a tie to the past and an appreciation for the ongoing movement of history. Today's Americans who seldom stay long in one place have lost many benefits thereby, and this sense of belonging to a community through the generations is one of those losses.

II

Let me introduce what I wish to say today with a story by Eugene Field. I have occasionally used it at funeral services, so some of you will have heard it before.

It tells the story of a young boy who one day wandered away from home and came to the edge of a large river. It was a dark and forbidding day, the clouds hung low, the mist was heavy. The boy was met at the side of the river by an old man with a beard. The old man tried to take the boy in his arms and carry him across the river, but the boy would not go. He broke away from the old man and ran back home to the arms of his mother. Years later when the young boy had grown to young manhood and married and now had his own family, he once more came to the edge of the river. Again it was dark and forbidding. He was met this time, not by an old man with a beard, but by a fearsome warrior who did battle with him and tried forcibly to take him across the river. Again the young man was able to break away and to go back to his wife and his children who needed him. The years went by and finally the boy had grown into an old man. His children were grown, most of his friends had gone on before him. His life was full of years and full of memories. He came again to the edge of the river. This time the sun was shining, the day was bright and clear. He could just discern across the river the voices of his loved ones and the faces of his friends, and he was met this time not by an old man, not by a fierce

warrior, but by a gentle angel who said to him, "Lean your head upon my breast and I will bear thee safe across the river to those who call to thee."

I know of no lovelier way to describe the incident of death. Most parables, and this is a parable, break down at some point along the way. I do not think this one does. Death, when it comes to someone who is young, who has not achieved even a small part of his potentiality, always seems to us to be a tragedy. But for most people who are full of years, death is no surprise; it is expected and seldom feared.

When death comes to one of any age, however, it usually brings with it sorrow and loneliness for those who must now live without this person they knew so well and loved so dearly. There is one way--as we all know if we think the matter over carefully--there is one way in which we could escape all the suffering, all the sorrow and loneliness death brings, and that way is the way of love-less-ness. If we never love we will never know the pain of losing those whom we might have loved. But is any of us willing to pay that price? Would you sacrifice the beauty and the joy of love in order that you might never know the suffering you might have known had you loved? To have loved is worth this price which love exacts. That is why it has been believed through all the ages of civilization that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

Today we know that those persons who do not love, who are constitutionally incapable of loving, are emotionally sick. Many of them, if not all of them, once did love. Their love, because it was rejected or scorned, or because the object of their love was lost to them, caused them pain and anguish and the unconscious mind determined never to love again. It identified love with sorrow and pain and of course the mind tends to reject all sorrow and pain and that which causes it.

But the person who rejects love is really rejecting life itself. Love denial is life denial. Love is one of the things which makes us human. Animals cannot know the pain human beings know for several reasons. They do not feel the same measure of physical pain because they have a less highly developed nervous system. They do not feel the same measure of spiritual pain because they cannot love. Their attachments are instinctual.

Love, therefore, is the mark of our humanity. He who does not love is not really human, he starves his soul and it dies. And without love we do not know God. He that loves dwells in God, and God in him. St. Paul was right: The three most characteristic spiritual traits of man are faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love. If the price of love is suffering, it is a small price to pay for so great a gift.

III

We ought indeed to remember with affection and honor those who have gone before us and who have contributed in large or small measure to the enrichment of our lives, mentally, morally and spiritually. Many have labored before us and we have entered into the fruits of their labor. We ought to be thankful for the contribution to our happiness and security which they have made.

We ought also, and this is just as important, to determine that we shall leave an equally rich heritage to those who follow after us. You might ask yourself this morning, "If I should die today, will I have left behind me anything that will make a difference in the life of any other person?" If you cannot in any way give an affirmative answer to that question, I feel sorrow and pity for you.

IV

Now we have on this Memorial Sunday talked of the dead. It is therefore not inappropriate, I think, to talk of dying. It is one of the few universal experiences. Taxes is not one of them. There are people who have never paid taxes, and we have recently read of certain millionaires who pay no income tax. No one, however, has ever escaped death.

Here I would like to quote Dr. Elizabeth Ross, an M.D., a psychiatrist, and a professor at the University of Chicago medical school. Says Dr. Ross:

"When we compare dying in less civilized and less sophisticated countries, we cannot help but see that we in the so-called advanced civilization die less easily. Advancement of science has not contributed to, but rather detracted from man's ability to accept death with dignity." *

Dr. Ross goes on to say that with which I heartily agree, and I quote it because she says it so much better than I could say it:

"Dying is no longer a very personal, intimate family affair-- a kind of natural ending of a more or less fulfilled life. The person who is dying more often than not is rushed away from home in an ambulance into the impersonal world of the hospital, and instead of being peacefully surrounded by members of the family with whom he could have some last words, some advice, or perhaps just the silent companionship of a loved one, he is rushed to the operating room or to an emergency room. He receives infusions, transfusions, an artificial kidney, lung or heart. His biological life may have long ago ended, but his heart still beats unless someone unplugs

* Chicago Theological Seminary register, Vol. 57, No. 3,
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"an electrical cord--by mistake or intention. We so often are uncertain as to when a man has actually ceased to be. We often sedate one who is dying to the point where he is unable to communicate what he wants to say so badly. The relatives are left standing in long, cold hospital corridors, waiting, rather than sharing in the last moments with the dying."

That is not the way a man should die. I have so often had relatives whisper to me, "He has cancer, but he doesn't know it and we don't want him to know." How foolish that is. A person has a right to know. It is his life, and most of the time the relatives aren't fooling the patient at all. He knows, but he doesn't want his family to worry about the fact that he knows.

We have no right to deprive a person of the serenity and dignity of his final hours by poking him full of holes, filling him full of tubes, deadening all his senses with medication and causing him to merely vegetate until his heart stops beating. Are a few more hours of life so sweet and precious that they are to be purchased at such a price?

I will tell you how I want to die--the same way the father of a friend of mine died. He had lived a long and useful life. When death came near, the loved ones were called to his bedside in his home. He said goodbye to each of them, and when the final sleep had come, his wife and his children gathered around his bed, joined hands and sang together:

"Blessed assurance Jesus is mine,
Oh what a foretaste of glory divine."

This is how I want to die--in the midst of love--with those I have loved and who in turn have loved me.

Yes, the price of having loved is sorrow and loneliness, but thank God we have been given the ability to love; it is worth the price.