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Luke 15:11-24
Norman S. Ream

THE FUGITIVES

"And when he came to himself."

--Luke 15:17

A number of you have no doubt seen the latest of the few motion pictures that can be recommended for family viewing. It bears the title, "The Happiest Millionaire". The middle-aged father, to whom the title refers, has an optimistic, positive, attitude toward life. He accepts it as a challenge. He uses it as an opportunity. At one point in the picture he is speaking to his young daughter in the midst of one of her periods of temporary unhappiness, and he gives her a pretty good description of what life is all about:

"Life's a pretty precious and wonderful thing. You can't sit down and let it lap around you. . . You have to plunge into it; you have to dive through it! You can't save it; you can't store it up; you can't hoard it in a vault. You've got to use it. The more you use, the more you have. . . That's the miracle of it!"

If any of you have read the recently published autobiography of Eddie Rickenbacker you will know that he is one man who has lived by that philosophy.

Human beings have always employed an enormous number of clever devices designed to enable them to run away from themselves and from the realities of life. Many, if not most of us, are fugitives from real life because we do not understand, as did the happiest millionaire, what life is all about. He understood, in spite of his millions, that life is, as Jesus insisted, "more than meat and the body than raiment".

Most men and women seem dominated by the idea that life is only meat. They are running away from life; real life, full life, abundant life, because they are afraid of its demands. They are fugitives from the wonderful, glorious, spiritually healthy existence God would like them to have.

At this point think not of your neighbor and not of your friends or relatives, but only of yourself. Are you a fugitive from life?

II

As most spiritual authorities have pointed out, the material comforts and pleasures of good living are not adequate to satisfy the human spirit. If they were the human spirit would today be ultimately and deliriously happy. We have been able to satisfy our material needs and desires on a scale unprecedented in human history. In spite of that, however, we have increasing numbers of alcoholics, dope addicts, suicides and the mentally ill. If we ever needed or desired evidence that material prosperity is ineffectual in giving us abundant

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life and happiness, then surely that evidence is now at hand. One could make a strong case for the proposition that the more people in general possess, the more unhappy and miserable they become. This may or may not be true of individuals.

If the physical comforts and pleasures of good living could in themselves make us happy and satisfied, a large percentage of people would be able to throw away their tranquilizers and young people would not be seeking to take trips away from reality with L.S.D. and other drugs.

Although I hold no brief for that dying group called hippies, if our kind of sex saturated, materialistically dominated, spiritually sick society is what they have been rebelling against, I can have great sympathy for them. I rebel against it also. But the answer is not in withdrawing from life. Rather it is in discovering what life really is and living that life to the full.

A young woman who visited her psychiatrist told him how weak she continually felt and what a terrible inferiority complex she had. After listening to her for the usual fifty minutes, the psychiatrist announced, "Madame, you are not suffering from an inferiority complex; you are inferior!"

In spite of the great empire we Americans have built, in spite of our inventions and discoveries, in spite of the progress we have made in medicine and in the proliferation of comforts and luxuries, many of us have a sneaking suspicion that our society may in many ways be inferior to that of our predecessors. We can well understand the feelings of Elijah meditating under the juniper tree, afraid for his life because of his sins, and crying: "Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers!"

Listen to this commentary by John W. Gardner:

"We can keep ourselves so busy, fill our lives with so many diversions, stuff our heads with so much knowledge, involve ourselves with so many people and cover so much ground, that we never have time to probe the fearful and wonderful world within. More often than not we don't want to know ourselves, we don't want to depend on ourselves, we don't want to live with ourselves. By middle life most of us are accomplished fugitives from ourselves."

This, then is our problem. We are fugitives from our best selves. We are running away from the life God intended us to live. We have been so intrigued with the mysteries of our environment we have ignored the mysteries within ourselves.

There are some persons who are actually afraid of religion and philosophy. Religion and philosophy raise too many difficult questions. Others have been frightened by the very thought that such a phenomenon

as extra sensory perception might really exist. Some there are who shun meditation and silence and keep the radio or TV going all day long--not because they are interested, but because it helps them to escape from themselves. It insulates them from their own deepest thoughts. They are fugitives from their real selves.

III

So let us turn to the text. In the New Testament parable from which it comes, the story of the prodigal son, Jesus says of the prodigal: "When he came to himself he returned to his father." You see, he typifies those of us who think that heaven or paradise or utopia is always somewhere else, never where we are. We are like little children who suppose that if they had only one more toy they would be happy. How wrong they are and how true it is that if we cannot be happy with what we have, we will never be happy with what we do not have.

"Life--rich, full, abundant, meaningful life--does not consist in the number of things a man possesses." Happiness is a quality of life not quantity. It is something inside of you, not those things our hands are so often outstretched and grasping for.

Did you read carefully that little poem by Emerson printed on the back of last week's Congregationalist which described true happiness?

"To laugh often and much,
To win the respect of intelligent people and the
affection of children.
To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure
the betrayal of false friends.
To appreciate beauty.
To find the best in others.
To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy
child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition;
to know even one life has breathed easier because
you lived."

That is happiness. That is real life. Why do we run away from it? Why do we become fugitives from our best selves? Because we are poor misguided creatures who have not yet been convinced that life consists not in the abundance of things a man possesses, but on those inner qualities of faith, patience and understanding.

I spoke to a circle of the Woman's League last week on the subject "How To Live A Fuller Life". I shared with them some of the things that had come to my mind as I considered the subject. Here are a few:

"Life is not a cup to be drained, but a chalice to be filled."

"No one ever finds life worth living; he makes life worth living."

"What you get out of life depends entirely on what you put into life."

All of which is only to say what William James said even more succinctly:

"Lives based on having are less free than lives based either on doing or being."

As a matter of obvious fact, the more one has the less free he is.

IV

Let me now suggest a positive way in which each of us can make life more worth living, and thereby stop running away from our deepest and best selves. Find something about which you care deeply, something not basically egocentric and give part of your time to it. You will discover what a few have already discovered--"it is indeed more blessed to give than to receive."

Some men and women do just the opposite and end up miserably unhappy. They leave a work and a place they care deeply about to do something less interesting and challenging because it offers more money or greater status or more power. To quote John W. Gardner one final time:

"How many times have we seen middle aged people caught in a pattern of activity they don't care about at all--playing bridge with people they don't really like, going to cocktail parties that bore them, doing things because 'it's the thing to do'. Such people would be refreshed and renewed if they could wipe the slate clean and do one little thing that they really cared about deeply, one little thing that they can do with burning conviction."

In the final analysis, any man or woman who really wants the Kingdom of God, paradise, utopia, or just a little bit better world in which he and others may live, must do what the prodigal son did--must come to himself, for the Kingdom of God or any other better life than we now have is within us. The first step toward the richer, fuller life is always an inward one. Get inside yourself. Know yourself. The potential for ultimate happiness is nowhere else than in your own mind and spirit.

"For what good will it do a man if he gains the whole world but parts with his life? What can a man give to buy back his life?"

May I suggest again that you think not of your friends, your neighbors or relatives, but only of yourself. Are you a fugitive from life--the life God wants you to have?