

February 20, 1972
First Sunday of Lent
Matthew 27:27-44
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TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

I cannot help but wonder what thoughts came first into your head this morning when you noticed the title of this sermon.

Perchance you thought the minister had suddenly become a physical culture addict and was about to admonish you to a strict discipline of daily exercise, proper diet and adequate rest.

Perhaps you conceived the possibility that the American Medical Association had gotten to me and persuaded me to urge you to get your yearly checkup and take care of any physical malfunctions which might afflict you.

Or possibly the minister had undergone a sudden change in his philosophical and religious position, and was now about to recant his previous admonitions to forget self and think of others in favor of forgetting others and thinking of the self--a reversal of the usual Lenten discipline!

Well, none of these things has happened. There is a completely different explanation. One hint concerning the central thought behind the sermon lies in a proper emphasis of the title words. The emphasis is not on the word "care", but rather upon the word "yourself"; not "take care of yourself", but "take care of yourself." The latter word is the object of the sentence and the subject of the sermon.

The kernel of this idea occurred to me sometime ago while reading a quotation from St. Anthony, the third century founder of Egyptian monasticism. At the height of his sanctity, it is recorded, he once asked God, in deep concern for his fellowmen, "Lord, what about all these other souls?" "Anthony," his Lord replied, "I have given you your soul to save. The others are mine."

II

This is a matter which sorely vexes many young ministers. They came out of seminary deeply imbued with a passion for saving the world. They feel frustrated and defeated if they fail to change every life with which they come in contact. At least let it be said that that is how I once felt in my early ministry. That I do not feel that way now may be charged against me as indifference and apathy to my holy profession and my sacred obligation to seek a conversion of all who are within the sound of my voice or the reach of my ministry. Or else it may indicate a much stronger faith in God, and much less confidence in my own powers.

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But hear again one sentence from this morning's New Testament lesson. It was recorded by Matthew that at Golgatha the passers-by mocked Jesus. That compound word, "passers-by", has always bothered me. How could men just pass by when they saw a human being nailed to a cross? Did they not even know who this man on the central cross was, if they thought him nothing more than another thief, would they not be forced by the very horror of this awful sight to murmur within themselves, "There, but for the grace of God, go I"?

But the sentence I call to your attention goes on to say that in addition to the "passers-by", the "chief priests, lawyers, and elders mocked at him saying: 'He saved others, but he cannot save himself.'"

As a matter of fact they were, of course, completely wrong. Just like every young minister--and old ones for that matter--Jesus failed to "save" or to "win" everyone he spoke to. You will recall that the rich young ruler turned and walked away. When it is recorded that "he healed many", it is implied that there were some he did not heal, and presumably it was because they lacked faith in him.

But the truth is that Jesus did save himself, and he saved himself before he saved any others. Had he not first saved himself, he would have found it impossible to save others. He took care of himself, and he took care of himself first, not last. He could confidently and boldly do this because he knew all those other souls were in the care of God.

This morning, therefore, I urge each of you to take care of your soul, your spirit, your life, that one day you may become more fit and able to help save others.

III

We need not limit this idea to man's spiritual or religious nature. Take care of your principles as well as your morals and ethics. Take care of your ambitions and ideals and goals. Make them pure and fine and noble. Let your life be attracted by nothing that is less than the best. Take care of that first of all, then you may be an example to others. For in the end Albert Schweitzer was terribly and discouragingly right, "Example is not the best thing; it is the only thing." As Paul said it to the Corinthians: "You yourselves are a letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men."

The Nineteenth Century newspaper man, Henry Stanley, after sobering reflection on the month he had spent in the bush country with David Livingston, remarked, "He made me a Christian, and he never knew that he was doing it." What an accolade for any man. And what a tremendous testimony to the power of example, "He made me a Christian, and he never knew he was doing it!"

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Someone asked the other day about the action of the Wisconsin legislature in reducing the age of legal adulthood from 21 to 18. In the first place, the politicians, save in a very narrow legal sense, can have nothing to do with the matter of when a child becomes a mature adult and it doesn't really matter much whether the legal age is 18 or 13. What really matters is what goes on in the homes of those young people and politics can do nothing about that. Politics is always too late. Raise a child in the right kind of home where there is love, discipline, responsibility and reverence, high ideals and pure ideas, and it won't make a bit of difference what the lawmakers say or do.

These boys who are getting their God and Country awards this morning were without a doubt primarily, if not completely, motivated by the homes from which they came and by the parents who gave them life. They come from families which have believed in taking care of themselves.

Jesus took care of his relationship to God first. If he hadn't we would never have heard of him. It was only when he was sure and certain about his relationship to God that he began his ministry to inspire others and to guide others into the same relationship. If every man took care of himself first in this fashion, few men would have time to interfere in the lives of others. It might even be possible one day to do without the lawmakers and the lawyers whom, you may have noticed, do not come off well in the New Testament; nor do the legalistic priests, scribes and Pharisees, who were the clergymen of that day.

IV

Men and women of all ages, but particularly young people, have often asked, "What can I do to make this a better world?" There is no better answer than this: Take care of yourself--not in any narrow, selfish, egocentric fashion, but in molding and fashioning your life into the most Christ-like kind of being you can possibly become. You can do nothing that will be more important to the future of the human race.

You will recognize, of course, that we have this morning been using the word "saved" in a special sense. Jesus saved himself--he responded to the will of God for his life and thus gained a sense of God that nothing in this life could destroy. He would not save his life in the ordinary sense that we would use the word "save". He could not save himself from the cross without being faithless and false to all that he held most dear in life.

When we use the expression "save yourself" we all too often mean "spare yourself". Avoid struggle, abhor pain, stand aside from any effort, take it easy and do not let anything disturb the ordinary, ongoing, pleasurable events of your life. What if Jesus had thus

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saved himself? That's about what we mean today when we say, "I don't want to get involved." And because we didn't want to get involved and we didn't bother to take care of our best selves, we have a society in which a Kitty Genovese and others can be murdered while some of their fellow human beings stand by watching and doing nothing. The worst kind of cowardice is the refusal to get involved in something we ought to be involved in.

Take care of yourself, great and deliberate care, of that eternal, spiritual, sacred self that God made, that God gave you, and which God meant to have eternal worth and value.

If you neglect anything that could make you a finer, better person in the eyes of God you neglect that which could make your life what He intended it to be--you endanger your soul. It doesn't make one bit of difference what others are doing or not doing. God is not judging you by comparing you with anyone else. He is judging you as you are against the person you can be. How do you measure up?

Paul it was who said, "We are not our own, we were bought with a price." And what a price it was. Thousands of your human counterparts suffered, struggled and died in order that you might live at this moment in time enjoying the blessings of life, liberty, and the free untrammelled right to pursue happiness. Thousands more share this moment of time with you or shall follow after you. If not for your own sake, then for theirs, take care of yourself and God shall pronounce his blessing on you, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

God has given you your soul to save, the rest are in His hands.