

March 12, 1972
Matthew 4:18-25
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RELIGION AT WORK

One of a minister's greatest joys is to have a letter occasionally from a young person he has seen grow up, go through school, and take his rightful place in the midst of the world's serious affairs. Christmas is one of the times one often hears from those youth, and to know that they are engaged in good works and are still growing spiritually and mentally is indeed heartening.

During the past Christmas season a card was received from a young man who has long been admired and who is now busily engaged in shaping the minds of those even younger than himself. I am confident that he is shaping them for the good. In his card this young man, knowing of my own appreciation for good literature, recommended to me a short but old novel and a new and unusual play. I paid heed to both his recommendations and both attested to his most excellent judgment.

The play we will mention at another time, but the novel is relevant to today's sermon theme. It is by an author known to all by his classic story of the great whale, Moby Dick. But Herman Melville's short and almost certainly autobiographical story, Bartleby, The Scrivener, will be known but to a few. It is the story of a strange and lonely man who lived a strange and lonely life. The main character, Bartleby, carries with him some mysterious secret. That secret is never fully disclosed in the story, and yet when one lays down the book he is not dissatisfied, nor left with a feeling that he must know more.

The melancholy hero, Bartleby, is one of those innumerable persons whose trouble and woe is always hidden. One may be certain he is troubled, but one may not know what it is that troubles him. Of such persons Herman Melville writes these pointed and almost pathetic words:

"Happiness courts the light, so we deem the world is gay; but misery hides aloof, so we deem that misery there is none."

"Happiness courts the light". How true. When people are happy they celebrate and invite others to celebrate with them. Witness, the forgiving father in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son: "Kill the fatted calf and put a ring on my son's finger," he cries. "Let all my friends and servants celebrate, for this my son was lost and now is found." Such happiness must be shared and one cannot hide it. One sees that happiness and joy, for example, in the very eyes of the young couples who come to the minister's study to plan for their wedding.

But it is not so with misery and woe. Although there are some who will always be happy to regale you with their aches and pains, few of us go around catching the ear of anyone available to tell them of our unhappiness, our disappointments, our failures, our sins. That, we usually reserve for a trusted friend and confidant. The minister, however, sees it over and over again, and each year he becomes more and more certain that Job was right:

"Man was born to trouble as the sparks fly upward."

Over and over again one sees men, women and young people who, to the casual eye, have "life by the tail". One is tempted to envy them until one day their own story of disappointment, pain and sorrow is poured out in a sudden, compelling need for help and consolation.

My friends, I strongly admonish you to envy no other person, for if you knew his life as it is, rather than as it seems to you from a distance, you would instead weep and pray for him.

II

Contrary to what the majority of sociologists, theologians and parish clergymen seem to believe today, Jesus' primary mission was directed toward those individual men and women who he knew carried this heavy burden of pain, guilt, sorrow and loneliness--this great store of misery which so often "hides aloof" and which so often we assume does not exist.

It is obvious to any who can and will read the Gospels, that Jesus, sensitive though he must have been, is nowhere recorded as having concerned himself, certainly not directly, with racism, or slavery, or political intrigue, or international relations. He concerned himself with a man who was blind, a woman who had a hemorrhage, a centurion who had a sick servant, a sinful woman who had committed adultery, a tax collector who was greedy and dishonest, a rich young man who wanted spiritual reassurance. Anytime he helped one of them he created a better world.

In this there is some hope for you and me. We can help the same people Jesus helped. We too, in such a manner, can make this a better world. Ask the average man to end war, solve complicated international problems or serious national issues, and he will throw up his hands in despair. He cannot do it and he knows he cannot do it. All you do is ask him to suffer a terrible guilt complex.

A letter came the other day from a friend who was depressed and discouraged. Unfortunately I answered when I too was having a low moment. (Yes, ministers have them too.) I wrote some words I wish now I could retract. Thinking of all I was busy doing, and of this miserably sick world in which I was doing it, plus all I thought needed to be done, I wrote, "I feel like taking my finger out of the drain and letting society run down into the sewer."

For a moment I had had a serious lapse of faith and a terribly enlarged ego. I am not holding the world together. That is in far more capable hands than mine. And if I were to pass from the scene today the world would go on quite well without me. The same can be said for each of us, no matter how important we may be.

But here is where you can count. You can help ameliorate the burden of mankind's misery. You can encourage a discouraged friend. You can offer sympathy, understanding, compassion to the tired and disillusioned. You can do all of those little things that will ease the pain, the loneliness, the despair, the discouragement that inflicts itself on every human life at one time or another. And if we do it in the same spirit as Jesus did it, this it is that makes us Christ-like. This it is that makes us Christians--not what we profess, not what church we belong to, not some creed to which we subscribe. This is religion, and more particularly the Christian religion, at work.

III

We often talk about curing or solving the world's problems. That cannot be done. We can't cure problems, we can only cure people, for people are problems. There are no problems except as what we are talking about relates to people. Jesus cured people, not problems.

I have been in the ministry now for over 30 years. I preached my first sermon in a Presbyterian church within a month after I had graduated from college. When I was given ten dollars I was grossly overpaid for my feeble efforts. I have had experience which I would not exchange for all the proverbial wealth of the Indies. I have learned many lessons and learned them well. This is one I have learned particularly well--money, by itself, has never yet solved a problem. Only people have problems and only people can solve problems.

Listen to the story of John. And accuse me if you will of propaganda. John lives alone with his arthritis and his days are filled with solitary nothingness. He is an old age pensioner, a widower without children. He has been very much alone since his wife died nine years ago. On a typical day he gets up, puts the parakeet's cage on the porch, has a morsel of breakfast, shaves, cleans and dusts a little and looks out the window at the empty street. He fixes himself a meager lunch, answers a letter from a faraway relative, and dozes over a newspaper. When night comes he irons a little and watches television a little. Apart from TV John has not heard another human voice through all that lonely day.

Those of us who are younger think it will be different with us when our old age comes. The elderly are an army of strangers and we have no intention of joining them. But it is not quite that simple and if we don't care, who will care?

There is no better place, no more needed place to put our Christian energy to work. The young people of this particular church will attest, I am confident, to my love and concern for them. Certainly they need our help and our cooperation. But if we have made one mistake with them it is rather in doing too much for them rather than too little. They need and desire the opportunity to do things for themselves. But the elderly, the retired, those who have given of their talent and energy for 50 or 60 years--who will care about them? Who will offer them a chance once more to live happy, useful, meaningful lives in an environment which supports and sustains them? I know of no greater opportunity to enrich the lives of others and render needed Christian service--no greater opportunity to put religion to work--than right at this point.

IV

The problems of old age are only indicative of part of that vast store of misery which Melville described as "hiding aloof" in our world. It is only one aspect of the sum total of human misery, only one part of the total picture. There is on the other hand, happiness. There is much of that also and fortunately it is more easily and more often remembered than our miseries.

But mark this, the greatest happiness is his who uses his life to alleviate someone else's misery. When one comes to the end he knows that his particular store of happiness was not in what he possessed in material things, but in what he gave of himself to make life better for others.

The scripture we read this morning is a capsule description of Jesus' ministry in eight short verses. He taught, he preached, he healed. He did it all as an individual, on a person to person basis, and his ministry became the leaven which transformed the world. What Jesus did, we must do if we justly and rightfully call ourselves his followers. This is religion at work.