

April 2, 1972
Easter
Luke 12:13-26
Norman S. Ream

SOMETHING WORTH LOSING

The saddest and most tragic words I have read in the past year I read in a magazine whose subscribers are almost exclusively physicians and surgeons. The author was in fact a medical doctor and a professor in a well known medical school.

Writing about patients suffering from so-called "hopeless" conditions and urging the use of heroic measures to keep such patients alive as long as possible, this author insisted,

"In my opinion, death is an insult: the stupidest, ugliest thing that can happen to a human being."

As I say, that is the saddest and the most tragic thing I have read all year. It may well be the saddest, most tragic thing I have ever read, for the author offers no qualifications. There is nothing said here about laying down one's life for a friend, which Jesus proclaimed to be the highest expression of love. There is nothing said here about death as a kind and welcomed friend coming to offer sweet release to one who is old, tired and full of suffering and pain. Death, says this physician and professor, is an evil and an ugly thing per se under any and all conditions.

If death is wholly evil, one must suppose that the author of that statement would eliminate death were it within his power. If he were successful in that effort, he would of course also eliminate birth. The whole life process must necessarily grind to a halt if there is to be no death. There would be a population explosion indeed and it would soon demand the total cessation of birth.

No, there is a time in the course of life when, as Paul put it, "It were better to die." I have known those, as has every doctor, who longed for death, who prayed for death, who begged to be offered a sweet release from life. For him who believes "death is an insult: the stupidest, ugliest thing that can happen to a human being," I have nothing but pity. Such a person must indeed be a miserably unhappy creature, for he knows that death awaits him as inevitably as tomorrow's sunrise and escape it he cannot.

II

I would tell you now what I believe to be "the stupidest, ugliest thing that can happen to a human being". It is to come to the moment of death and have nothing in one's life that is worth losing. That is the greatest insult to life; to have built into it no values, no character, nothing that the world will really miss when it is gone. That is an ugly and a stupid thing.

There is, to be sure, something ugly and stupid in Jesus hanging from a cross. It was ugly and stupid for men to put him there, but it was not ugly and stupid for him to let himself be put there. It was the ultimately beautiful, the ultimately heroic. It was the kind of act that ennobles all human life and gives to it eternal meaning and significance.

If you will carefully examine the Gospels you will readily discover that Jesus talked very little about death. His whole emphasis was on life and the quality of that life, not its quantity. "Build into your life," said Jesus, "qualities that will be missed when you are gone, that will make the world a better place because you have lived in it."

Ernest Crosby echoed the thought of Jesus when he wrote:

But to live--everyday to live out
All the truth that he dreamt,
When his friends met his conduct with doubt
And the world with contempt.

Was it thus that he plodded ahead,
Never turning aside?'
Then we'll talk of the life that he lived,
Never mind how he died.

The man who lives life well, whose life enshrines beauty, character and noble principles, does not fear death. Much more does he fear littleness of life which adds nothing to humanity's storehouse of truth, beauty and goodness.

I have commended to you a book entitled Night Country by Loren Eiseley. In that beautiful book he tells of an experience he had a few years ago. I would share it with you in his own words:

"I had come into the smoking compartment of a train at midnight out of the tumult of a New York week end. As I settled into a corner I noticed a man with a paper sack a few seats beyond me. He was meager of flesh and his cheeks had already taken on the molding of the skull beneath them. His threadbare clothing suggested that his remaining possessions were contained in the sack poised on his knees. His eyes were closed, his head flung back. He drowsed either from exhaustion or liquor, or both. In that city at midnight there were many like him.

"By degrees the train filled and took its way into the dark. After a time the door opened and the conductor shouldered his way in, demanding tickets. I had one sleepy eye fastened on the dead-faced derelict. It is thus one hears from the gods.

"Tickets", bawled the conductor. I suppose everyone in the car was watching for the usual thing to occur. What happened was much more terrible. Slowly the man opened his eyes, a dead man's eyes. Slowly a sticklike arm reached down and fumbled in his pocket, producing a roll of bills. "Give me," he said then, and his voice held the croak of a raven in a churchyard, "give me a ticket to wherever it is." The conductor groped, stunned, over the bills. The dead eyes closed. The trainman's hastily produced list of stations had no effect. Obviously disliking this roll of Charon he selected the price to Philadelphia, thrust the remaining bills into the derelict's indifferent hand and departed. I looked around. People had returned to their papers, or were they only feigning? In a single sentence that cadaverous individual had epitomized modern time as opposed to Christian time, and in the same breath had pronounced the destination of the modern world."

That is the stupid and ugly way to deal with life; either to drift through it or race through it, looking for something that will make it worth living, without realizing that if one cannot make life worth living where he is, and in this particular time, he is unlikely to find it worth living in any other place at any other time. The real essence of life is not determined by outward circumstances, but by an inward quality--by principles, ideas, ideals, moral values.

"Take no thought for your life," said Jesus. "What you shall eat or what you shall wear. . . Life does not consist of the abundance of things a man possesses. . . Follow me and I will lead you into life."

III

I borrow another illustration from Loren Eiseley. A colleague of his who suffered from severe absentmindedness, once turned to his wife as he was about to make a long journey and asked, "Is the place where I am going in my pocket?"

Do you know where you're going? Is it in your mind and in your heart? Do you have a plan for getting there? Have you studied the way and counted the cost? A lot of us have a very fine program for keeping physically fit. Do we have an equally fine program for keeping spiritually and mentally fit?

I knew a judge once who every night read the dictionary for half an hour. I heard of another lawyer who read through the entire Encyclopedia Britannica. One man sets himself a reading schedule in a different field of knowledge every year. These men know where they are going intellectually. Do you and I know where we are going spiritually? Are we just existing, just drifting, just idly passing through the grand experience of life without any knowledge or concern as to where it is we hope to go and what it is we hope to accomplish?

That man who has a fine physical discipline which he practices regularly, but no spiritual discipline, testifies to his belief that life consists only in that which is physical and material and the rest doesn't really matter.

Ah, yes, this is Easter, the most joyful and happy time of the Christian year. The true Christian observes it in celebration of his faith that Christ conquered death. But no minister can help wondering every year what it is that causes men to throng the temple on this particular Sunday. One must ask, "Why did they come, why did they come?" Those that come with sincerity of purpose do come, I am convinced, because this is the one hope they have that the grave is not the end of life, and who believe that if death is the end of all our striving, then life is a terrible travesty and a miserable joke.

It is never death of which we should be afraid. It is life which is more often the dreaded adversary. Death offers peace, surcease from struggle and pain. It is life with which we must struggle and which so often hurts and defeats us.

Hear again those words of the physician with which we opened the sermon, and remember that many physicians are afraid of death because they are so highly trained and conditioned to preserve life:

"... Death is an insult: the stupidest, ugliest thing that can happen to a human being."

Now compare these lines by William Cullen Bryant:

"So live that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan which moves
To that mysterious realm where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou goest not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave
Like one that wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

Easter puts the emphasis on life and that's where the emphasis ought to be. We Protestants have always put the emphasis on the empty cross, not the crucifix with its lifeless body. Life is the important thing! Life is the only thing, and death is but an incident within it. You and I are charged with taking care of this life which has been given to us. If we do that, and do it well, then God will take care of death.