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John 17:14-21 (N.E.)
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STRANGERS AND FRIENDS

Genuine love of God and genuine love of country go hand in hand. People who do not seek to love and serve God cannot expect to live in a country that is worth loving or worth saving. That message is reiterated over and over again by all of the Old Testament prophets.

The United States of America is in one of the most, if not the most, serious moral crises it has ever encountered. As has been said many, many times by many, many people, our primary enemy is not external but internal, and America today has a vast number of internal enemies.

It is not that all of these internal enemies are knowingly such. Most of them are not out to destroy or "bury" America. They are for the most part citizens who are ignorant of or indifferent to America's great heritage. More importantly they are people who do not understand that America is the sum total of all its people with all of their weaknesses and immoralities.

Therefore, if we are at all concerned about America we must be concerned about religion and morality. Some forms of government may conceivably find it possible to survive and to prosper without such a concern on the part of its people, but not a federal republic. A representative democracy such as ours stands or falls on the moral quality of its people. Today, I repeat, we are in the midst of a grave national moral crisis. Great and powerful as America is, it may not be able to endure this crisis, for in the midst of every crisis there are those who cry for more and more power in the hands of political officials, and it is primarily this--power in the hands of political officials--which corrupts our government, our institutions and our people.

There is an ancient Roman apothegm which insists that in all questionable things, "Caesar's wife ought to be above suspicion". If such be true then certainly Caesar himself in all matters affecting the welfare of the nation ought to be even further above suspicion. Today those who stand in the place of Caesar in our beloved country are not above suspicion; they are either guilty of illegal and immoral activity or they are extremely foolish to the point of being stupid. It is a tragedy that the nation should have to tolerate either alternative.

One cannot help but wonder just how familiar President Nixon may be with the letters and speeches of our first President, known as "the father of his country". In 1786 George Washington wrote a letter to James Madison concerning which, if he is familiar with it, Mr. Nixon may well have spent a considerable time pondering. Wrote Washington:

"No morn ever dawned more favorably than ours did; and no day was ever more clouded than the present."

A few months ago Mr. Nixon had everything going for him; now he finds everything crashing down around his ears.

But more important and of far greater consequence to the republic are the words of our first President as quoted after his death by Gouverneur Morris. They ought to be the motto and the maxim of every public officer:

"Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair."

This administration has certainly failed to do that:

In the first paragraph of his excellent book, The Power In the People, Felix Morley put his finger on the great strength, and perhaps the fatal weakness, of our kind of government when he wrote:

"This republic is distinctive in history for one supreme reason. Its government assumes and is designed to strengthen a moral code of honorable individual conduct."

Unfortunately our politicians, for the most part, do not present us with many favorable examples, to the point where we must constantly be concerned with the problem, "Who is going to govern the actions of the governors?" One of our greatest dangers today is that the majority of our citizens are completely cynical concerning the answer to that question. Most of us now know enough about human nature and psychology to know that there is no human capable of being completely trusted when he possesses the power possessed today by the President of the United States.

II

Now again, as last Sunday, I think I have established my primary point. In case I have not made it clear to all I will reiterate. A representative democracy or a federal republic (which ours is) cannot endure apart from a people and a leadership that is deeply committed to just and honorable principles of morality. Without such principles the government cannot promote the happiness and the felicity of its people.

That is the primary point and its relevance and relationship to the religious life should be obvious. A few moments ago we read from Jesus' beautiful prayer for his disciples in which he twice insisted that his disciples were strangers in the world. In order to understand what he meant let us refer to another of Jesus' references to those same disciples.

Earlier in the Gospel of John in what are called Jesus' "farewell discourses" to his friends, he says to the disciples, "I no longer call you servants, I call you friends!"

Do you see what Jesus is really saying? If one is truly a follower of God and of God's will he will be a friend of Christ and a stranger in the world. Any man who seeks wholly to be a Christian will be a stranger to the kind of world men and women have been living in for at least the past 2000 years. He will not really fit. He will feel out of place. This world as it is is not his true home. It is a place where the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus Christ are frequently looked upon as strange and esoteric doctrines, an ethic for a spiritual world that does not really exist.

That is why our world and our nation is in one bloody and corrupt mess after another. We assume and we act, regardless of what we may say, that the teachings of religion are not practical, are not relevant, are not suitable to this hard world of reality wherein most men and women are clamoring for power, prestige and popularity. That is why the followers of Jesus are strangers in this world. As a matter of fact this is the only kind of world where the teachings of Jesus are relevant and practical. In a perfect society they would be unnecessary and redundant.

Some people may misunderstand what I am saying this morning.

Some may think that I am saying, "You can't be a politician and be honest." I am not saying that, but I do think it is extremely difficult to be an honest politician, for every human being tends to be corrupted by power, and politicians possess power.

Some may think that I have implicated the President of the United States in the Watergate affair as a knowing participant. I have not said that. But I would suggest that if the President is not implicated--and I hope he is not--then at least he has shown himself to be a poor judge of men.

Some may think I am saying that because men are human and as such are subject to base and corrupt motivations and actions, a representative democracy cannot long endure, that it has within it the seeds of its own destruction. That is very close to what I am saying. A country such as ours certainly cannot endure for long unless it maintains a high level of morality, especially within its political leadership--its governors. That is extremely difficult to do for who will govern the governors when even the United States Supreme Court so frequently gets carried away with a sense of its own power and begins to exercise legislative rather than judicial functions?

No, what I suppose I am really saying is what a wise man said long ago: "The people get the kind of government they deserve." (1)

(1) Joseph de Maistre, "Every nation has the government it deserves"; and Mahatma Gandhi, "We get the government we deserve."

If we are strangers to the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus Christ we reap the consequences of ever increasing corruption and moral decay, for a government is but a reflection of its people. The people must learn, by becoming the friends of God and of God's moral commandments, how to put fetters and restraints upon their own greed and selfishness. Men who do not know how to govern themselves will have little success at trying to govern others.

A follower of Jesus Christ will indeed be a "strange" person in the kind of world in which we live today. Perhaps it has always been so, but today it is certainly so and we have too many cynics in our society, too many pessimists, too many who say that nothing can be done and so accept all that they despise.

III

In spite of everything I have said and that could be said, however, ours is still a great and glorious country. In his little book, Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush, Ian McClaren has a dying mother say to her son, "Laddie, always say a good word for Jesus Christ."

Today we parents must teach our children to say a good word for the United States of America, which in spite of all of its faults, is the grandest country ever known to human history. We need to educate our children concerning their great heritage as Americans. We need to be "flag wavers" for all that is good about America.

We need to repent and we need to lament, but we need also to recognize that true patriotism and true religion can never be in conflict. They bear a symbiotic relationship to one another. They nourish one another. Genuine love of God and genuine love of country go hand in hand.