

Palm Sunday
March 23, 1975
John 15:1-17
Norman S. Ream

OBEDIENCE, THE TEST OF LOVE

A number of years ago it was quite common on the occasion of a wedding for the bride to promise the groom she would love, honor and obey him. Long before the advent of the women's liberation movement that phrase was dropped from the ceremony. Occasionally a bride will still ask if the phrase is to be used and when she receives a negative answer one can see a look of relief spread over her features. I must say, however, that on one occasion I did have a bride specifically request that a promise to obey be inserted into the ceremony. I have often wondered how that marriage worked out and whether or not she is still obeying.

It is relatively easy for someone to profess his love for another person. Such a profession, however, is not a very adequate test of love. Love requires some kind of commitment, even though it may not be that of constant obedience to the wishes of another person. Jesus gave us the supreme test of all love when he said, "By their fruits you shall know them." What a person does is far more revealing of his true feelings than what he says. How a person acts is far more important than all his professions of love. In the case of one's Christian love and devotion, Jesus gave us a specific test: "If you love me keep my commandments." The test of our love for Christ is obedience. In religion, in the spiritual life, obedience is the requisite of true devotion.

The medieval Christian church had a trinity of disciplinary measures without which it was felt there could be no progress in the spiritual life. That triad consisted of the vows requiring poverty, chastity, and obedience. Chastity disciplined the body. Poverty disciplined the economic life. Obedience disciplined one's will. Today, outside of certain Roman Catholic orders, great masses of men and women seem to have rejected all three disciplines. They argue that there must be another and equally efficacious way to a moral and spiritual life. But one wonders if the real reason for the rejection is not simply that the old requirements were just too demanding and we have become too soft and indulgent to heed them.

The theory of the Middle Ages was that poverty, chastity and obedience developed self-control. The theory was based on the principle that if one made himself subservient, at least in part, to the will of another, his own ego did not always rule his life. The theory was, no doubt, a correct one. Whether or not our present lack of self-control is due to having forsaken those disciplines or to other factors may be in dispute. It is nevertheless true that it is only when we do bring the self under control that we become free to look for God and to find him.

Now, of course, you may challenge this position by responding that you have no desire to become a saint. If I were to ask for a show of hands here from all who wished to become saints, and you answered honestly, I doubt that there would be a great show of hands. And of those who did wish to become saints, few would be willing to pay the price. You perhaps can think of nothing more boring than to be a saint and to spend all of your time in the company of other saints. No doubt a great deal depends on our definition of saint, but be that as it may, we still require some experience of poverty, chastity and obedience in our lives if we are to be our best selves and attain to our highest potential. Perhaps we need these disciplines to some lesser degree than is required for saint-hood, but we nevertheless need them.

Poverty, or frugality, as we might call it today, is something it would be good for all of us to have experienced at one time or another. It can teach us many valuable lessons: how to get along with less; how truly to appreciate what we already have; how to avoid two of the seven so-called deadly sins, sloth and gluttony. It is difficult to consider poverty a virtue, but there are such things as "the blessings of poverty", even though they are seldom realized or appreciated until the poverty has been replaced by plenty.

Continence, or chastity, is an exercise of the will, and in spite of some who insist that self-restraint may injure our psyche, it seems adequately established that a lack of self-restraint can cause much more serious damage to both the individual and the family.

But what shall we say about obedience? The concept is not in good repute. In a society where all the emphasis has been on rights and privileges rather than on duties and responsibilities, the prevalent philosophy rests on the principle that in every way, "I'm as good as you are". Well, if we are all equal in every way, and if every person is as good as every other person, where is there any place or any need for obedience?

This attitude has spilled over into religion. What do the religious ideas and religious personalities of the past have to say to those of us who live in the sophisticated 20th century? We do not wish to obey or to be subservient. Obedience sounds demeaning to us. Even God has no right to ask that we become his servants. One would not be surprised if someone took the whole matter before the American Civil Liberties union and sought an injunction against God.

II

Well, this is not the pattern we see in the life of Jesus Christ whose followers we claim to be. Paul did not see such an attitude in Christ: "(Christ) humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." If the virtue and the discipline of obedience was necessary for Jesus Christ dare we say that it is not necessary for us?

It is a sick society in which wives will not obey their husbands, and husbands will not obey their wives, and children will not obey their parents, vast numbers will not obey the laws of the land, and those who make the laws of men will not observe the laws of God. It is a sick soul that will not obey the statutes and precepts of God discovered in mankind's long march from tyranny and chaos toward civilization and order. The consequence is a not-so-long march back into tyranny and chaos. Where there is no order in the souls of men--and there can be none where there is no obedience to God--there will be no order in society.

In the spiritual life the absence of obedience marks the absence of love. Listen to how many times and in how many ways Jesus links together love and obedience in that one chapter of John's Gospel:

"If you heed my commands you will dwell in my love."
". . . I have heeded my Father's commands and dwell in his love."
"This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you."

This connection is extremely important. There have been times and situations in the history of the Christian church when men and women obeyed out of fear. But in the Gospel of John it is made abundantly clear that if obedience is to be a constructive discipline it must be obedience offered in love.

If a husband or a wife obeys the other out of fear the marriage is on pretty shaky ground. If children obey their parents out of fear alone, a healthy relationship will never develop. If we obey God because we fear punishment and hell rather than obey him out of love for his goodness and mercy, that obedience will not enable us to know him better, but will drive a barrier of misunderstanding between man and God.

Let me go back to one important point to which we have already referred. If children do not obey their parents when they are young they are not likely to obey God when they have become adults. Why did Jesus call God his heavenly Father? Because of the love and respect he had for his earthly father, Joseph. Of that there can be no doubt. The home and religion grow and develop together or they disintegrate together. Neither can there be any doubt about that. The present muddle in which our society finds itself is a direct result of the disintegration of the home and the consequent disintegration of religion. The home and what happens there is everything!

Religion often speaks about rewards. But the connection between obedience and rewards is often misunderstood. It is not a case of there being a reward if you keep the law, or after you keep the law. The reward is in keeping the law. As one discovers and heeds the will of God there come peace and joy and serenity. Obedience to God, springing out of love, leads to the only true freedom for it banishes all fear.

III

Now what has all of this to do with Palm Sunday? On Palm Sunday Jesus gave us the supreme example of spiritual obedience. His decision, arrived at after much anguish and struggle, to go to Jerusalem, set off the whole chain of events which put him finally upon the cross.

"He was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

If you object that the will of God for your life is not that clear to you, let it then be said that no man can ever go far wrong who obeys his highest and most noble impulses. And no man can ever be ultimately happy and at peace with himself who ignores his highest and his most noble impulses. Most of the time those impulses will be in harmony with the will of God, and they should be obeyed.

Let each one of us seek so to live that it may be said of us what Whittier said of the American statesman, Charles Sumner:

"One language held his heart and lip,
Straight onward to his goal he trod,
And proved the highest statesmanship
Obedience to God."