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Luke 6:43-49
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A CURE FOR CYNICISM AND DESPAIR

Not infrequently these days I receive letters from college students. Some are complimentary. The writers tell me how much they have received from their relationship with their church and express appreciation for it. Others are not so complimentary, but are full of ideas as to what a church like ours and its ministers ought to be doing to help solve the many complicated social problems with which our nation is confronted.

I appreciate all of these letters whether they be for us or against us, whether they be complimentary or antagonistic. Over the years I have learned how to accept criticism. I have been condemned by some because I was too liberal and by others because I was too conservative. I have been called a communist, but I have also been picketed by communists. I have learned that if you try to please everyone you please no one. I have by this time in my life developed some deep convictions and have learned that one should live by and preach his convictions, while respecting those whose convictions may be different. Be faithful to your own understanding of God and God's will for you; try to be open to new truth and understanding; do the very best you can; commit the rest into the hands of God.

Today many of the letters I receive, and the conversations in which I engage, both with youth as well as with mature adults, reflect a deep sense of frustration which often ends up being a form of cynicism and despair. Things are in such awful shape, the problems are so immense, there is skepticism that any solution is possible. The population explosion, the problem we have with pollution, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the apparently insoluble problems in Ireland and Israel, and more recently the economic dislocations here at home which cloud the employment picture and threaten economic insecurity--all of these, added to the disillusionment caused by the Watergate scandal, lead many people to a sense of hopelessness. Where they once might have asked with a kind of quiet desperation, "What can we do?" they are now tempted to state with an attitude of cynicism and despair, "There is nothing that can be done!"

Such of course is not the case. There is always something that can be done and many things that should be done. Doing is indeed the very essence of the matter.

I am acquainted with one young man not wholly atypical, but fortunately one whose number is not large, who has become so discouraged, hopeless and frustrated with the condition which he now perceives the world to be in that he does, to all intents and purposes, absolutely nothing save sit and ponder the whole sorry mess. He does not go to school to prepare himself to serve, nor does he work and contribute something socially useful.

There is of course a time for pondering. There is a time for prayer and meditation. There is a time to study and to learn. But there finally comes a time when one must do if only to preserve his own sanity. It is that which I prescribe this morning as the cure for cynicism and despair.

II

Our times are not good times. There is little doubt about that. Whether or not they are the worst of times only future historians will know. I have no doubt, however, that there were times in the past which other men and women felt were the very worst of times, and that is really what is significant--not whether our particular times really are the worst, but whether we think they are.

One such time was surely the age and place in which Jesus lived and worked. The masses of men were extremely poor, the land in which they lived had been a constant battleground for a thousand years, they were a subject people living under the domination of a powerful foreign nation. Surely many of them must have had precisely the same feeling about their time as many of us have about ours.

Along came a man named Jesus. He was an idealist. He was one who had spent much time in prayer and meditation. He had gone into the desert for over a month in complete isolation in order to ponder the world in which he lived. But he didn't stay there. He was not overwhelmed with cynicism and despair, and because he was so good the world must have looked very bad indeed. He followed the admonition of one who was to come after him by the name of Paul, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Someone once said, "All times are good times if only we know what to do with them." This is what to do with them; overcome evil with good!"

A man I highly admire and a man who is widely quoted by lovers of freedom is Edmund Burke. One of his quotations appears daily on the masthead of a local newspaper, but it is one with which I cannot agree. This is the quotation:

"All that is necessary for evil to prosper is for good men to do nothing."

Perhaps I am quibbling, but it is my contention that good men do not in the face of evil sit around doing nothing. To do nothing is finally to be overcome by the very evil we deplore. Men and women who do nothing are not "good" in the moral and ethical sense in which Jesus would use that word.

There is in the book of Psalms a heart-rending cry emanating from the soul of a man who saw evil covering his world with darkness. In his despair he lamented,

"If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3)

I am not enough of a Hebrew scholar to know whether the modern translations are more accurate, but they are certainly more pertinent when they read,

"If the foundations be destroyed, what have the righteous been doing?" (American translation)

Recently I came across a bit of graffiti which seems to characterize too many of our citizenry today. It should certainly not be applicable to Christians but unfortunately it often is. It reads:

"The whole world is apathetic;
And nobody cares!"

That is, of course, what bothers thoughtful and idealistic college students.

How can we show that we do care? Not by doing what the Hebrew captives did during the dispersion when they cried,

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept."
(Psalm 137:1)

To repeat, there is a time to weep for our sins, to repent of our errors that brought us to this impasse, to study, to pray, to meditate, to ponder. But then comes the time to act and to do. When all seems lost, when evil seems to have won the day, when you are discouraged and cast down, throw yourself back into the fray and do something, however small, to mitigate the evil day. Overcome evil with good.

III

This, I now submit to you, is exactly what Jesus did and what he admonished us to do. He advised his hearers to have faith in God. But telling a person to have faith is like telling a boy to be a man. What does he have to do in order to become a man? Jesus' answer to the question, "How can I have Faith?" was, "If you really want faith in the goodness and mercy of God, live and act as if you already possessed that faith. Go out and do what you have seen me do."

The illustrations are abundant:

"Not everyone who calls me "Lord, Lord" will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of my Heavenly Father." (Matthew 7:21)

Or in another place:

"Whoever does the will of my Heavenly Father is my brother, my sister, my mother." (Matthew 12:50)

And again,

"Everyone who comes to me and hears what I say and acts upon it... is like a man who in building his house dug deep and laid the foundations on rock... He who hears and does not act is like a man who built his house...without foundations."
(Luke 6:47 follow ff)

Jesus clearly believed that those who acted on the truth of God, rather than merely pondering it, would be spared cynicism and despair:

"If you know these things, happy are you if you do them."

The way to happiness, satisfaction, hope, faith, is in doing the truth, not in merely knowing it.

Listen to the first century followers of Jesus, living in a cruel and perilous age, saying the same thing:

Paul: "It is not by hearing the law but by doing it that men will be justified before God."

James: "Be doers of the word and not hearers only."

John: "The world passes but he who does the word of God abides forever."

IV

The next obvious question that many will ask is, "What is it that I should do?" It is very tempting for some ministers and others to tell you precisely what it is that should be done. You should join the American Civil Liberties Union, you should demonstrate in the streets, you should not have any children, you should stop eating lettuce and grapes, etc., etc. Such pretended solutions, however, are based on the erroneous assumption that truth and what you do about it is the same for every person. It is not. The truth is apprehended in many different ways. We will apply it and use it in different ways. The important thing is that we seek it and use it in some way.

One student who wrote me included a quotation from a rock-blues song. It goes like this:

"And everybody is feeling so determined
Not to share in anyone else's pain."

But of course that is not true either. I could take you into many places today where men, women and young people are in many ways voluntarily sharing the pain of their fellowmen. There are not enough such people, but there have always been some of such people. Because they are doing the truth and not merely pondering it, they are not frustrated and discouraged. They are doing a good work so they have no time for cynicism and despair and they are not preoccupied with the victory.

God told me I had to fight;
He didn't tell me I had to win.

Become part of the answer and you will stop being part of the problem, and you will have found your cure for cynicism and despair.