

September 18, 1977  
Psalm 84  
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### MAN'S RELIGIOUS IMPULSE

At the close of the day a man pauses in his work, lifts his eyes to the western horizon, and fills his mind and soul with the gorgeous beauty of a perfect sunset. He is overwhelmed by the myriad colors and as he gazes with rapture at the magnificent sight, he says to himself, "All of this beauty and majesty just has to be the work of an Almighty Hand."

Another man lifts his eyes to the starry firmament above and observes, as other men and women have observed for several thousand years before him, the constancy and the order of the heavenly bodies, and he whispers within himself, "God made all of this and God keeps it all; because of God not one fails."

A woman grieves over the loss of a beloved husband and cannot accept the annihilation of this one who meant so much to her. She believes that his beauty of character and all of his qualities of goodness must somehow endure and that there must one day be, in the goodness of God, a reuniting.

Two loving parents sit anxiously at the bedside of their sick child whom they love more dearly than life itself. They clasp hands and close their eyes, beseeching whatever power rules the destiny of men to preserve this precious life.

A thoughtful and reflective person thinks about his life and about all of the blessings with which that life has been filled, and when he does so cannot refrain from lifting his arms to heaven to offer thanks to whatever God or Gods there may be who made possible all of the richness and the beauty and the joy of life.

### II

Now all of these are incidents in the history of mankind which recur over and over again. They are the evidence of man's religious impulse, his inner compulsion to look to some power greater than himself and beyond himself--to the great, intelligent, creative Lord of the universe.

Such illustrations have been a part of the human story since at least the beginning of recorded history. For that reason anthropologists and others have insisted that man is incurably religious. He believes because of all of these experiences and more. He sometimes believes almost in spite of himself. He seems to have an instinct of some kind within him that tells him that he must believe.

The French philosopher, Pascal, said it this way:

*"It is the nature of man to believe and to love: if he has not the right objects for his belief and love, he will attach himself to wrong ones."*

Because this impulse, this compulsion, is so strong within the human spirit, we have seen Pascal's words come true even in our own time. The will to believe asserts itself and, in the case of the young, if they reject the faith of their parents for whatever reason they will frequently attach themselves with a passion to whatever faith or philosophy seems to meet their needs at the moment. And so we have the flower children, the Moonies, the pot smokers and all the rest, seeking answers anywhere they think answers can be found. Unfortunately they often want the easy answers, ignorant of the fact that the really satisfying answers are never the easy ones.

Yes, within the human mind and spirit there is a religious impulse, a feeling, a conviction, that behind what is seen is something far greater that is unseen. That deep, religious impulse accounts, does it not, for those millions who have wanted their children to be baptized and thus dedicated to God; those who have wanted their marriages blessed in a religious ceremony; those who have wanted their deceased loved ones laid away with religious rites and not discarded as if they were so much human refuse. That is why they have built churches and temples and shrines that they might have a place to gather together and remember that "it is God who hath made us and not we ourselves."

"It will be found," said Dean Inge, "that men of pre-eminent saintliness agree very closely in what they tell us. They....have arrived at an unshakable conviction not based on inference, but on immediate experience, that God is a spirit with whom the human spirit can hold intercourse...."

### III

From whence then does this religious impulse arise? St Augustine believed it was a natural result of God's Fatherhood, an inborn feeling put within us by the Creator himself:

*"Thou has made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee."*

Professor Alister Hardy, until recently at Oxford, and a scientist, has put it a bit differently:

*"Could it not be that there is in man's experience a deeply felt contact with a power which he feels to be sacred and from which he is able to draw strength and encouragement in his actions, and further that his culture could not in fact have been achieved without its having some reality?"*

But it should be unnecessary to pursue that question this morning. Most of us are here because we do indeed believe there is some profound reality behind religion. The more important question concerns what that religious impulse in man should lead him to be and to do. What are its consequences?

Professor Hardy shares his conviction concerning those consequences: Religion, he says, is a

*"....factor in human life that appears to have a profound affect, something which, if man responds to it, provides him with a power over his difficulties that he might not otherwise have and gives him a feeling of confidence and courage in the face of adversity."*

Certainly those of us who are religious will not argue with that; but we will argue for more.

No one gave us a better test for the reality of religious experience than did Jesus himself when he said, "By their fruits you shall know them." He went on to say, "A good tree yields good fruit; a poor tree yields bad fruit....A man who hears these words of mine and acts upon them is like a man who built his house on a rock."

There is no record anywhere in the New Testament of Jesus praising or commending anyone because that person held all the right beliefs. Jesus' praise was reserved for those whose actions were a testimony to love, mercy, and compassion. "By their fruits you shall know them."

Recently there have appeared in the newspapers articles about a book which has been published in England by a group of Biblical scholars. The scholars express doubts about some of the long cherished creedal dogmas of the Christian church, primarily that Jesus was not God incarnate and that he did not rise bodily and physically from the dead. Such media articles are likely to cause difficulty and concern for those Christians whose faith is based primarily upon right beliefs. May I suggest that it does not cause great concern to those whose religious faith is based primarily on right action which grows out of the love of God and which love motivates them to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

What I say now I want to say in all kindness and charity. There are large numbers of people who seem to feel that religion has no validity unless it is filled with wonders and miracles. Some of these people are Christians who put almost their entire emphasis on such things as the virgin birth, a physical resurrection of Jesus' body, an unquestioning faith in Jesus doing such things as walking on water and changing water into wine. If one denies or doubts these things, one is immediately accused of having no religious faith at all, or at the best, a warped one.

All of this is reminiscent to me of one of Jesus' disciples whose name was Thomas. History has succeeded in appending to him the name, Doubting Thomas. He would not believe until he saw and touched the wounds in Christ's hands and side. He had to have a miracle with which to validate his faith. Do you recall what Jesus said to him, "Blessed are those, Thomas, who have not seen and yet have believed."

There are many of us whose faith would be shaken not at all if you could absolutely demonstrate to us this morning that there was no virgin birth, no physical resurrection, no walking on the water, no changing of water into wine. We would still believe in God, we would still love God, we would still seek to be followers of Jesus Christ, because there is within us this deep assurance, this religious impulse, this conviction, that the message that comes to us from God through Jesus Christ is a valid one. We believe in it, we seek to live by it, not because it has been validated by miracles and wonders, but because it is the truth. We emphasize God's great love, not his punishment. We emphasize God's goodness and mercy, not his desire for justice and revenge. We emphasize the rewards of the good life, not the punishment for a bad one. Are we therefore any less religious? If you ask, have we been born again, we call your attention to Thoreau. Asked on his deathbed if he had made his peace with God, he replied, "God and I have never quarreled."

#### IV

The religious impulse moves different persons in different ways. It has moved some to offer God incense and sacrifice. Others it has moved to build beautiful temples and cathedrals to his glory and honor. Some have been moved to renounce all earthly things and give themselves solely to prayer and meditation. Perhaps none of these things is wrong, but none of them is right if it ignores the one thing which Jesus said was all-important:

An expert in the Law got up to test him and said,

"Master, what must I do to make sure of eternal life?"

Jesus said to him,

"What does the Law say? How does it read?"

He answered,

"You must love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole soul, your whole strength, and your whole mind, and your neighbor as you do yourself."

Jesus said to him,

"You are right. Do that, and you will live."