

"LEFT BEHIND"

May 27, 1990

TEXT: Titus 1:5 "This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective. . . ."

This last Sunday in May is always a very special time for me, for some of my earliest --and warmest-- memories are of Memorial Day (or Decoration Day as we called it then). I remember, for instance, the wonderful glow of excitement which began early in May when the American Legion band came to our end of town to practice for the big parade. There was not much traffic out where we lived, and they could march up and down the streets without bothering anyone. And every boy and girl in the neighborhood --myself included-- would march right along behind them, trying to look very serious and very military.

And I remember the big day, itself. There was no school, of course, but every child in town, and most of their fathers, were part of the parade in one capacity or another. I remember the bands, the Boy Scouts and Girls Scouts, the Cubs, and the Brownies, Bluebirds and the Campfire girls. I remember the sailors from Great Lakes Naval Training Station and a jaunty convertible which carried the two or three Civil War veterans who still lived among us.

I remember, too, that, once the parade had run its course and the last of the speeches was over, my family would go home, cut some of the peonies that grew along our front walk, and drive to the cemetery to decorate my grandparents' graves. We always took more of the pink peonies than white because my grandmother always loved pink.

And even now, though the bands are mostly stilled, and parades are hard to find; though we call it "Memorial Day" instead of Decoration Day and it always comes on Monday so we can have a nice three day weekend; though many seem to have forgotten just how precious our freedoms are and at what cost they have been bought; even now --on this last weekend in May-- my thoughts turn back in time, and I think not only of those old parades, but of the men and women who died defending this land and of my own dear, honored dead.

I also think of all those hundreds of families with whom I have met over the years, whom I have tried to comfort after a loved one has passed away. At times like that, we ministers often hear questions like "Why couldn't it have been me?" "How can I go on alone?" "Why couldn't I have gone too?" "What is there left for me now?" They are not so often asked when a

parent or some older person dies. But they frequently show up when it is a spouse or a child who goes.

We know, too, that often a survivor may resent the deceased, at least subconsciously. They feel abandoned and betrayed. Sometimes they actually say, "How could he or she have done this to me?" More often, it comes out as, "Why didn't he take better care of himself?" Or perhaps, "If only she had gone to the doctor sooner."

Sometimes, to cover up such feelings they talk on and on about how perfect the deceased person was and how wonderful he or she always was to the survivors. Psychologists have a name for that. They call it "inversion." But, one way or another, those who are left behind very often wonder why. Today I would like to offer some answers to that question.

Actually, the author of this morning's scripture has answered it already. He tells us his name is Paul, "a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ." Liberal scholars doubt that this is the same Paul who wrote so many of the New Testament letters, and for good reason. His style and vocabulary are very different from Paul's undisputed letters, and the situation he describes appears much later than the first century A. D.

But whoever he was, this Paul and Titus apparently worked together setting up churches on the island of Crete. Then, for some unknown reason, Paul went away, leaving Titus behind. And, like so many others, Titus felt left out. He recognized the importance of the work he was doing on Crete, but he saw Paul as having all the real adventure and excitement. And he could not understand why. Perhaps he even wrote to Paul asking if he could come and join him. Perhaps Paul merely sensed his unexpressed concern.

At any rate, he wrote to Titus, saying, "This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective. . . ." Or, in the words of the New Revised Standard Version, which, by the way, is just out and is a wonderfully accurate and readable translation, "I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done."

To put in order what remained to be done. There are many things we do not know about death, such as why our loved ones die when they do. Not that we expect them to live forever. Sir Francis Bacon once wrote, "It is as natural to die as to be born." And we accept that by and large. But why now? Why could it not be later? Preferably much later? For questions like that we just do not have any answers. But this much we know. Those who remain have been left behind because there is still something for us to do, some need for us to fill. "I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done. . . ."

Perhaps there is something that remains to be done in us. Some spiritual lesson yet to be learned. Some place where we still need to mature more fully. Some faith, some love, some talent still just a seed within us. A seed that needs to grow and bear fruit before we, too, are ready for God's call. We might not see it that way, but, in God's infinite Grace, He is more concerned with our development than our convenience.

Or perhaps there is something which remains to be done through us. Something needed by those around us. We may hold a special key to meet the needs, of our children, our families, our friends. At 93, my mother sometimes feels that she is just sitting around waiting to die. But she is doing far more than she knows. Something needed and, to me at least, important. Every day she prays for me and for my work in this church. And, as I often tell her, she is the only one I know who does that. And, if there are others, that is all right with me. Like St. Paul, I need all the prayers I can get.

Perhaps it is the same with you. Perhaps your love, your faith in someone is all that stands between him or her and desperation. Perhaps just knowing that you care keeps someone going when things get rough.

Or perhaps there is something wanting in the world. Something that you can put in order for God. You may have some talent, some virtue, some trait which God needs in order to do what He wants to do. The man who was the subject of my doctoral dissertation was not a very nice man in some respects. He was arrogant and proud. He was pushy and assertive. Not at all the sort that most of us would want to invite to a party. But those very traits were ideally suited to help the New England colonies at one of the most difficult times in their history.

And, during the Civil War, President Lincoln was greatly in need of a man like Grant. You see, Lincoln was troubled by the excess caution of General McClelland. McClelland kept his army looking spick and span and saw to it that they were thoroughly trained. But he never risked a major engagement with the enemy. He would always find some excuse to avoid going into battle. So, at last, Lincoln turned the army over to Grant, who was hardly a brilliant general but who doggedly thrust his forces into one decisive battle after another. Once, after a temporary defeat, Lincoln responded to Grant's critics by saying, "I can not spare this man. He fights."

I do not know exactly what talents or traits you have, much less what God would like to do with them. But I am convinced of this. Like Titus, we were left behind for this reason, that we might put in order what remains to be done --in us, in those around us, and in the world. Let us praise our honored dead. But let us remember that words and flowers and martial music constitute only the briefest of memorials. The only real remembrance is in the lives of those, like us, who have been left behind. In the words of John Mc Crae:

"To you from falling hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders Field."