

"PRESERVE THE HIGHEST VALUE"

June 23, 1991

"May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and in his grace gave us unfailing courage and a firm hope, encourage you and strengthen you to always do and say what is good." II Thessalonians 2:16 (TEV)

When I served this congregation as its senior minister something occasionally happened which I am certain continues to happen. When members, for various reasons, left this area and moved to some distant place they would often write and express their disappointment that in their new location they could not find a church like this one. I did not at that time take those comments too seriously but now, being in a similar situation, I understand exactly what they meant.

During the past eight years of retirement, Muriel and I have visited many churches of various denominations. We have, I must tell you, heard some quite dreadful sermons, listened to some appalling music, and had read to us every unimportant announcement printed in the weekly bulletin under the apparent assumption that we were illiterate. We have also been hugged and embraced and I for one detest being hugged by any clergyman. Now that we are getting so many clergywomen my attitude may change, but I doubt it. The author of the book *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It* has made the excellent suggestion that every church should have at least two exits--one for those persons who wish to enter and leave church services without being hugged.

No, I can now vouch for the fact that there are not many churches like this one and Muriel and I are happy to return to it if only briefly. We came nearest to a marital separation when I separated her from this congregation. To leave was not easy but it was, I think, wise.

But let me share with you two recent experiences. I preached one day in a lovely mountain chapel where the regular preacher is a flaming, fundamentalist evangelical. Following the service as I stood by the only exit greeting worshipers a physician and his wife approached. I had met them once before and knew they also were from Wisconsin. The wife clasped my hand in hers and exclaimed with real sincerity, "O, Norm, it is so good to hear you; you give us some hope!"

Some months later, in Estes Park, I received a phone call from a good and thoughtful friend of mine asking if I could meet with him and the physician friend I have just referred to. We agreed to meet at McDonald's where, if you are retired you can always get a free cup of coffee, one of the many fringe benefits for those of us who are chronologically gifted. When we had assembled our convenor laid before us a question to which he obviously had been giving a great deal of thought. In substance it was this: "Is society today, and individuals in society, better or worse morally and ethically than 50 to 75 years ago? If the situation is worse or no better, then is there any hope that it will get better?"

I do not, of course, know what your answer would have been but both the doctor and I immediately responded that morality and virtue were currently in a sad state of disrepair and probably worse than at any time within our memories.

Now I do not like being either a pessimist or a cynic. I would like always to be able to give my listeners hope, but as I observe the world around me today I often find it difficult not to be both a pessimist and a cynic. In a church I once served before coming to Wauwatosa there was an educator who once referred to me as a "unique freak." I do not know exactly what she meant but she was probably right. Recently, while chatting with a member of this congregation about some of these matters I was called "an old curmudgeon." I wasn't sure what an old curmudgeon was and when I looked it up in my thirty year old unabridged Webster it said I was "avaricious" or "miserly". I didn't think that was what she meant so I turned to my modern collegiate dictionary and it revealed what she must have had in mind. There a "curmudgeon" is revealed to be a "bad-tempered and cantankerous fellow." My wife might agree with that but let me have the privilege of defining for you what I think I am.

II

I am, if you please, old-fashioned. I believe in the sanctity of human life. I believe in marital faithfulness. I believe in the ultimate value of the Christian family. I believe there are objective values and that some things and some actions are eternally better than others. I believe in individual freedom. I believe schools ought to educate and that that government is best which governs least. I believe in the moral and ethical principles taught by and exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth. Knowing all that about me you are now free to describe and define me in any way that pleases you.

I have some good historical support. The poet, James Russell Lowell, wrote that our Republic would last as long "as the ideas of the men who founded it remain dominant." One of those founders was George Washington who said, "A free Republic cannot be sustained without a virtuous people." Thomas Jefferson insisted that it could not be sustained with an ignorant people. Today, I very much fear, there are many churches which fail to make people virtuous and many schools which fail to enlighten ignorance.

The Apostle Paul urged early Christians to think about those things that were "true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and honorable." Do you see the media today recommending those virtues either by work or deed? Paul also told some of those early Christians that he was praying for them that God would encourage and strengthen them to do and to say what was good. Does one today see the entertainment industry and much of the sports world, fulfilling that devout hope?

Now let me sum up the whole sorry situation in which I believe, we find ourselves today by quoting from a letter written to a newspaper columnist by a man in Florida. He complains as follows:

"(We have taken) the melody out of music, the beauty out of art, pride out of appearance, romance out of love, commitment out of marriage, responsibility out of parenthood, togetherness out of the family, learning out of education ... civility out of behavior, refinement out of language, dedication out of employment, prudence out of spending and ambition out of achievement."

That is something of the world today as I see it. Knowing that about me you are now free to label me "old-fashioned," a "unique freak," or a "curmudgeon." But remember that labels are almost always libels.

III

But let me engage in another bit of nostalgia. When I served here I met for a brief period with a group of young mothers to discuss prayer and the spiritual life. Of course, we discussed many other subjects as well as they related to our religious lives. When I was about to leave here the group presented me with an attractive brass door-stop. On it they had inscribed one of my many one-liners. The doorstep is so situated in our Estes Park home that I see and can read the inscription every day. It says, "Preserve the highest value."

When we face the many controversial problems prominent in today's culture how can we decide what is the highest value? When we confront all the daily decisions each of us must make how can we always know what is right? Of course, it is sometimes crystal clear if we have any Christian conscience at all but many times the answer is not so clear. Should a woman divorce her alcoholic husband? Should a man leave his unfaithful wife? Should a teenager turn in his friend who has become a drug dealer? Should an employee report to the authorities that his company is cheating on a government contract? What are we to think about abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, and capital punishment to name but a few of the problems which today sharply divide our society.

First it seems to me, the church must sound the tocsin. It must cease being a follower in society and become again the moral and spiritual leader of society. It must forget popularity and prestige. Its primary responsibility and duty is in the moral and spiritual realm and not in the political realm.

Again, the Apostle Paul urged a handful of Christians in the early church to stand up and be heard regarding the values and ideals they represented as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. He closed with these words: "If the trumpet gives an uncertain sound who will heed the call to battle?"

The Christian Church must insist that there is a hierarchy of values, that some things and some actions are better than others, that not all opinions are of equal value. The trumpet must declare not an uncertain note but the positive proclamation that the Ten Commandments and the moral and ethical teachings of our Lord are alone the values that will promote and preserve a healthy society.

Even more important is for you and me firmly to establish these values in our own lives and be unashamed to proclaim them and live by them. These are the values which can alone give those lives the rich and full abundance of which Jesus spoke. It is vitally important to you and to others that you stand faithful to that which is just and good and true. Stand for your beliefs, your principles, your ideals, in your home, your business, your public life. For awhile you may stand alone but sooner or later another will stand at your side and finally the day will be won. There is hope if we will do that.

A number of you here present this morning knew my dear and wise friend, Leonard Read. He once spoke to this subject in a short paragraph. Here are his words:

"Human life is dependent not only on the knowledge of right principles but dependent also on actions in accordance with right principles. Admittedly there are wrong principles and right principles. However, the nearest that any person can get to right principles -- truth -- is that which his highest personal judgement dictates as right. Beyond that one cannot go or achieve. Truth, then, as nearly as any individual can express it, is in strict accordance with this inner, personal dictate of rightness."

I am not an optimist, one who thinks things will always turn out right. I am not a pessimist, one who thinks things never turn out right. I am one who believes there is always hope because this is still God's world and in it will always be men and women who seek His will and who will honor and cling to those values He has revealed in so many ways to be good, true and eternal. Nourish and cultivate them and then, when the challenges come, as come they will, seek ever to preserve them. You will be following in the footsteps of your Master and mine, Jesus of Nazareth.

There once lived a saintly man who prayed daily and lived a holy life. God recognized his goodness and sent to him an angel who offered him the fulfillment of one wish. The man thought for a moment and then asked that he might have the ability to go about doing good without knowing it.

What better virtue could anyone ask than to go about doing good without knowing it. If you and I continually search for the highest values and seek to preserve them by living them we too will be going about doing good without knowing it and we will be providing hope for a spiritually and morally hungry world. Amen.