

"BEING THERE"
August 25, 1991

TEXT: II Timothy 1:16 ". . . For he often refreshed me."

Some time ago I read about a young man who went to church alone one Sunday because his mother was sick. When he came home, his mother asked him what the sermon text was. The boy thought for a moment and then replied, "It was something like 'Keep your shirt on, and you'll get a blanket.'" Understandably confused, the mother phoned the pastor and learned to her amusement that his text had been, "Be patient and your comforter will come."

I do not suppose that story makes sense in any language other than English, where "comforter" can mean either a thick, quilted bed cover or someone who brings help, consolation and solace. But, to confuse matters even further, the King James Bible sometimes uses the word to mean the Holy Spirit. So in John 14:16 we read, "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever" And, in John 16:7, we read, ". . . if I do not go away, the Comforter will not come unto you" No doubt, it was in that sense that the word was used by the preacher in my opening illustration.

In the Old Testament, however, the word, "comforter", is also used of people, as in the sixteenth chapter of Job where Job turns on his visitors and chides them, saying, "Miserable comforters are you all." From that passage, of course, we get our term, "Job's comforter", meaning someone who manages to make us feel worse while supposedly trying to cheer us up.

The late Jamie Keillor, whom I met at the first International Congregational Fellowship meeting in London, told me about one such "comforter" in his life --an elderly woman in his first parish in Scotland. He had been the associate minister there, and, as he was leaving, the senior pastor announced that he, too, had decided to accept another pulpit. One day, as Jamie was going around the parish saying his goodbyes, this woman said to him, "Whoever our new minister is, Jamie, I hope he's just like you." And as his spirits soared at the compliment, she added, "This Kirk couldna' stand an educated man in its pulpit." Twenty years later Jamie said, "I'm still reeling from that blow."

Well, such are the hazards of those who wish to be comforted. Yet, we know there are times in our lives when we desperately need the strength and solace which only another human

being can give. Times when the touch of a hand, a consoling word, or just the silent, but loving, presence of a friend can make all the difference in the world. Often it is in just such an experience that we really begin to understand and accept the love of God.

So this morning I would like to tell you about another such comforter. His name was Onesiphorus, and, unfortunately we know almost nothing about him. He is mentioned only twice in the Bible and nowhere else. But what we do know marks him as a great Christian spirit and a fine human being.

In II Timothy, we find the Apostle Paul in a Roman prison, where he is condemned to death. The charges against him were almost certainly political as well as religious, for we know that early Christians were often denounced as troublemakers of the state. Under such circumstances, it would have been very dangerous for anyone to be too closely connected to him. Paul, himself, tells us that "all who are in Asia turned away from me and among them Phygelus and Hermogenes."

But not Onesiphorus. We think that he may have come to Rome on business, but, as soon as he could, he began to search for Paul. Paul tells us that he had to search earnestly, for the Christian community apparently neither knew nor cared to know where Paul was being kept.

Just what Onesiphorus was able to do for Paul once he found him we can not really say. Perhaps he was able to give him better food than the standard prison fare. Perhaps he brought news of old friends. Surely Paul would have liked that, for his letters are always full of references to people. Perhaps he gave him a chance to talk out his concerns and feelings. We all certainly need that. And perhaps it was just the fact that he cared enough to come in spite of the danger.

Sometimes we do not have to do anything. Just "being there" is all that really matters. I remember a story about a little girl who was late coming home from school. When she finally got home, her mother chided her and asked why she was late. "Oh," she said, "Susie broke her favorite doll, and I was helping her."

"But what could you do?" her mother asked. And the little girl answered, "I just sat with her and helped her cry." Sometimes that is the very best help of all.

At any rate, Paul tells us that Onesiphorus "often refreshed me." What greater compliment could Paul have paid? In Greek, the word anapsucho literally means to cool someone off. And, in the hot, dusty world of the Mediterranean the word would be especially expressive. Certainly you and I can appreciate that imagery on a hot summer day like this.

But how many of us express that same grace that was in Onesiphorus? How many others have we refreshed during the past

week? Surely we had our opportunities: a neighbor worried about her son in a distant city, a man afraid he may be laid off from his job, an elderly friend or acquaintance who is lonely and concerned about the future.

We all have opportunities to refresh someone we know. A postcard which says, "I'm thinking of you." A telephone call to let someone know you care. A small present --chosen for appropriateness rather than cost-- and sent when no special occasion warrants. An offer of a ride on a hot day. A kind word or gentle smile for a stranger.

Some people seem to drain the strength of those they meet. Because of their self-centered concentration on their own problems or their constant complaining, they leave others tired and depleted. Others, like Job's famous "comforters", pick and condemn till even little faults threaten our self-esteem. "If you'd been more careful it wouldn't have happened." When we are feeling bad, who needs to hear that? Still others, like Phylgelus and Hermogenes, just leave us to face our problems by ourselves.

But, thank God, there are those like Onesiphorus, people who somehow manage to bring a refreshing breeze wherever they go. Or, as Moffatt translates the passage, who "brace people up." They may not even realize what a wonderful blessing they have been. The person who goes about loudly peppering others up seldom does more than weary us. But, when we are tired or discouraged, when we are lonely or afraid, who of us is not "braced up" by a friendly contact from someone who cares about us?

Such people are interested in others. They do not "preach" or give advice. They just show that they really care about us. And they are like a cool breeze on a hot day to those who need them.

Paul had a friend like that in Onesiphorus. And, because he did, he was "often refreshed." But what about our friends? Do they have someone to "cool them off"? Like Paul, there is someone you know who is trapped in a prison of sorts. Someone desperately needs refreshment. You can be a Phylgelus or a Hermogenes and turn your back on him. You can be a "Job's comforter" and make him feel even worse. Or you can be an Onesiphorus, refreshing him, bracing him up. Not by saying or doing anything terribly brilliant, but just by being there.

In Seattle this summer, Mike Robertson, the new Executive Secretary of our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, asked the Executive Committee how we could know that we were doing our job. Coming from a business background, he asked, "What's our bottom line?"

And finally, after some discussion, I said to him, "Mike, I'll give you three bottom lines. When our churches are in need 1) Are we there?, 2) Do we listen?, and 3) Do we show them that we care?"

Jesus said, "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it also unto me." When life is over and we come to give an account of our stewardship, what greater joy can we have than to hear someone say, "He often refreshed me"?

In the words of Emily Dickinson:

"If I can keep one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Into its nest again,
I shall not live in vain."