

"THE PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO LIFE"

IV

in a series of Sermons on the

CRISES OF MOTIVATION

Text: 1 John 4:7-12

A Sermon Preached

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by

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One thing that we can say for our year 1968 is that we have no shortage of slogans and sayings. More catch phrases have been placed on paper and held up at demonstrations and rallies than in any year since the battle for women's suffrage. The problem for the modern man lies in the fact that when he manages to settle upon a slogan or prescription, he soon discovers that the solution has an embarrassingly brief motivational life. That is to say, a saying only exerts real influence for a limited time and then fades away to be replaced by another motif.

The other day I found the perfect solution to this dilemma and fortunately for us all, it has been marketed. It is a blank button with one hundred interchangeable slogans that can be attached to the face of the badge. In this way the thoroughly modern person can keep abreast with each "in" cause. There is a badge for each conceivable mood: for irritation toward children there is "Bomb Disneyland," anger toward Washington, "Dean Rusk is totally uncommitted," historical resentment, "Benedict Arnold was framed," anti-Communist feelings, "Mao is a minor poet," destructiveness, "Help Stomp out whooping cranes," general over-all anger, "Reality is a crutch," and finally, the cry for help, "My head is a depressed area." These are just a few but they prove the point that the social and individual causes of 1968 are very short-lived, interesting but momentary.

How can a man find a source of motivation that is able to last out a whole four years of college and better yet - his whole life? How can I find a world view that works pragmatically? The Christian way of life meets the pragmatic test and, therefore, I propose to recommend it as an adequate source of motivation.

It works first of all because the Christian view of man is realistic. The Christian way avoids two very common mistakes that are committed by almost all other ideologies; and that is either on the one side the glorification of man, or on the other, his debasement. If man as a simple unit or in his collected state is glorified, the result is to drive him to the mirror for every answer to the riddles of life. He must seek all resources for living from within himself. But, man can not bear the weight of self glorification, and sooner or later the myth of his supremacy is broken.

If this side of the coin is true, then its reverse side is also true. Debased man is only fitted for slavery. The nihilistic conclusion about man is the inevitable sequel to his glorification so that out of the collapse of man made everything is fashioned in despair the hollow man of broken vision and ideals.

The Christian gospel rejects both errors and in their place sees man in wholeness, body and spirit united in a complicated, realistic whole. The crises of human waywardness is not evaded nor is it absolutized. Man is beloved in the face of what he is in his totality and, therefore, hope for positive change is born out of a realistic grappling with the concrete situation as it really is. This whole view is evident in the text I have chosen for today:

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."

1 John 4:7-12

The Christian way works because its realism is matched with a challenge that is idealistic in the strongest sense and, therefore, appeals to the moral core of a man's life. There are two kinds of idealism, one good, the other deceptive. They both call to the individual to stretch beyond his natural limits. Good idealism is founded upon accurate and valid presuppositions, deceptive idealism is founded upon faulty presuppositions. The one calls us to meaningful hope, the other sets us up for disillusionment.

Christian moral imperative, the idealistic cutting edge of the Christian way of life, is good idealism because the presuppositions are valid. All Christian ethical motives begin with a presupposition about the world. We begin with confidence in the rock bottom moral base line to the universe. That is to say, we believe that truth is more durable than falsehood because the underlying reality of everything is moral, not immoral or amoral. This is a sound presupposition and it implies a way of looking at history that is more creative and pragmatically useful than that which other options provide. Christian idealism also proceeds from the assumption that man himself is the crucial variable in the social order and consequently he must be resolved before the programs and dreams for the whole can be fulfilled. Therefore, while the Christian should be at work to make the social whole more moral, at the same moment he begins from an assumption that recognizes that man, the individual, with his complex inner feelings, problems, needs, must himself be faced as he is and healed. I cannot be challenged to love mankind unless I feel inwardly within my own soul the sense of belovedness. This is the force of the I John text: before the ethical challenge to love our neighbor, we are addressed "Beloved...", and following that endorsement of our own personal selfhood, we are commanded, "Beloved, let us love one another...."

Christian idealism is established upon a non-tribal foundation which gives the ethical challenge more stature. We are called to work for the good of all

men. Since Jesus Christ our Lord is the Savior of the whole earth, his victory on Good Friday and Easter is in favor of the whole family of man whether they know it or not. Because of this fact, the Christian is given an ethical perspective that stretches beyond the boundaries of the immediate circle of his own family and tribe. We see all men as beloved of Christ and this gives an ethical motive which is expansive and evangelical.

Consider another fact. The Christian way really works in the long pull because it has at its core a strategy that is designed for amateurs. The remarkable cross-cultural impact of Christianity is explained, I believe, right at this point. Our gospel is not dependent upon a place with shrines or elaborate ritual nor is the gospel trapped within the mystical jargon of religious specialists. Christianity is a lay movement that is sustained by the impact of truth so basically true that it does not require special priestly protection or handling. Anyone who has himself experienced the love of Christ is expert enough.

In the last analysis the pragmatic power of Christianity is found in Jesus Christ himself. It works because God really does care about man and man's world.