

*Ethics of Compassion\**

*For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself.* ROMANS 14:7

AS I SUGGESTED last Sunday, we shall be discussing the problems of ethics in our next service.

When the scribe asked what was the greatest commandment in the Old Testament, Jesus replied by combining two precepts—love of God and love of neighbor. This, as we saw last week, raises the question of the nature of ethics, of the ultimate, fundamental principle of morality. We were not satisfied with the age-old answer that the essence of ethics is love. We went on to ask what love really is. What is the sort of love toward God which compels us to be kind to others? What does love for our neighbor mean? And we asked not only the heart but also the reason to explain the ethical. For, as we saw, the weakness of our times lies in a lack of a morality based on reason, a failure to discover an ethic immune to prejudice and passion. We never assume that reason and heart can walk effortlessly hand in

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hand. But the true heart is rational and the true reason has sensitivity. As we noticed, both heart and reason agree that in the last resort the good consists in elemental reverence of the enigma we call life, in reverence for all its manifestations, both great and small. The good is what preserves and advances life; evil is what hinders or destroys it. We are ethical if we abandon our stubbornness, if we surrender our strangeness toward other creatures and share in the life and the suffering that surround us. Only this quality makes us truly men. Only then do we possess an inalienable, continuously developing, and self-orienting ethic of our own.

"Reverence for life," "surrender of strangeness," "the urge to maintain life"—we hear these expressions around us, and they sound cold and shallow. But even if they are modest words they are rich in meaning. A seed is equally commonplace and insignificant, yet within it rests the germ of a lovely flower or a life-giving food. These simple words contain the basic attitude from which all ethical behavior develops, whether the individual is conscious of it or not. Thus the presupposition of morality is to share everything that goes on around us, not only in human life but in the life of all creatures. This awareness forces us to do all within our power for the preservation and advancement of life.

The great enemy of morality has always been indifference. As children, as far as our awareness of things went, we had an elementary capacity for compassion. But our capacity did not develop over the years in proportion to the growth of our understanding. This was uncomfortable and bewildering. We noticed so many people who no longer had compassion or empathy. Then we, too, suppressed our sensitivity so as to be like everyone else. We did not want to be different from them, and we did not

know what to do. Thus many people become like houses in which one story after another has been vacated, a lifeless structure in which all windows look empty and strange, deserted.

To remain good means to remain wide awake. We are all like men walking in the bitter cold and snow. Woe to him who gives way to exhaustion, sits down, and falls asleep. He will never wake again. So our inmost moral being perishes when we are too tired to share the life and experiences and sufferings of the creatures around us. Woe to us if our sensitivity grows numb. It destroys our conscience in the broadest sense of the word: the consciousness of how we should act dies.

Reverence for life and sympathy with other lives is of supreme importance for this world of ours. Nature knows no similar reverence for life. It produces life a thousandfold in the most meaningful way and destroys it a thousandfold in the most meaningless way. In every stage of life, right up to the level of man, terrible ignorance lies over all creatures. They have the will to live but no capacity for compassion toward other creatures. They can't feel what happens inside others. They suffer but have no compassion. The great struggle for survival by which nature is maintained is in strange contradiction with itself. Creatures live at the expense of other creatures. Nature permits the most horrible cruelties to be committed. It impels insects by their instincts to bore holes into other insects, to lay their eggs in them so that maggots may grow there and live off the caterpillar, thus causing it a slow and painful death. Nature lets ants band together to attack poor little creatures and hound them to death. Look at the spider. How gruesome is the craft that nature taught it!

Nature looks beautiful and marvelous when you view it from the outside. But when you read its pages like a

book, it is horrible. And its cruelty is so senseless! The most precious form of life is sacrificed to the lowliest. A child breathes the germs of tuberculosis. He grows and flourishes but is destined to suffering and a premature death because these lowly creatures multiply in his vital organs. How often in Africa have I been overcome with horror when I examined the blood of a patient who was suffering from sleeping sickness. Why did this man, his face contorted in pain, have to sit in front of me, groaning, "Oh, my head, my head"? Why should he have to suffer night after night and die a wretched death? Because there, under the microscope, were minute, pale corpuscles, one ten-thousandth of a millimeter long—not very many, sometimes such a very few that one had to look for hours to find them at all.

This, then, is the enigmatic contradiction in the will to live—life against life, causing suffering and death, innocent and yet guilty. Nature teaches cruel egotism, only briefly interrupted by the urge it has planted in creatures to offer love and assistance for their offspring as long as necessary.

Animals love their young so much that they are willing to die for them. They have this capacity for sympathy. Yet the self-perpetuation of the species makes all the more terrible their utter lack of concern for those beings unrelated to them.

The world given over to ignorance and egotism is like a valley shrouded in darkness. Only up on the peaks is there light. All must live in the darkness. Only one creature can escape and catch a glimpse of the light: the highest creature, man. He is permitted to achieve the knowledge of reverence for life. His is the privilege of achieving the knowledge of shared experience and compassion, of transcending the ignorance in which the rest of creation pines. And this understanding is the great event in the evolu-

tion of life. Through it truth and goodness appear in the world. Light shines above the darkness. The highest form of life has been attained, life sharing the life of others, in which one existence feels the pulse of the whole world and life becoming aware of its all-embracing existence. Individual isolation ceases. Outside life streams like a flood into our own.

We live in the world, and the world lives in us. Even this knowledge raises a host of questions. Why do the laws of nature and the laws of ethics diverge so sharply? Why cannot human reason simply take over and develop its discoveries into an expression of life in nature? Why must rationality come into such terrible conflict with everything it sees? Why must it discover that the law of its own being is so utterly different from the laws governing the world? Why must it be at odds with the world just when it discovers the principle of the good? Why must we experience this conflict without the hope of ever finding solution? Why, instead of harmony, is there cleavage? And further, God is the power that sustains the universe. Why is this God who reveals himself in nature the denial of everything we feel to be ethical? How can a force rationally create life and irrationally destroy it at the same time? How can we reconcile God as a force of nature with God as ethical will, the God of love as we must conceive him when we have risen to a higher ideal of life, to reverence for life, to empathy and compassion?

Several Sundays ago, when we were trying to clarify optimistic and pessimistic views of life, I told you that it is a great misfortune for mankind that we cannot offer a harmonious philosophy of life. The more knowledge increases, the more it deprives us of such a possibility. Not only because it becomes increasingly plain how little we can grasp in knowledge, but also because the contradictions in

life become increasingly evident. We know in part, as St. Paul says. But this is not putting it strongly enough. The greater obstacle is that our knowledge affords only a glimpse into insoluble contradictions, all of which can be traced back to the one basic contradiction: the law according to which all this illogic occurs has, in itself, nothing that we recognize and feel to be ethical.

Instead of being able to anchor our morality in a coherent world-view and a harmonious concept of God, we must constantly defend it against the contradictions arising from our world view, contradictions that threaten it like a destructive breaker. We must erect a dam—but will it hold?

The other threat to our capacity and our will to empathy is nagging doubt. What is the use of it? you think. Your most strenuous efforts to prevent suffering, to ease suffering, to preserve life, are nothing compared to the anguish remaining in the world around you, the wounds you are powerless to heal. Certainly, it is dreadful to be reminded of the extent of our helplessness. It is worse still to realize how much suffering we ourselves cause others without being able to prevent it.

You are walking along a path in the woods. The sunshine makes lovely patterns through the trees. The birds are singing, and thousands of insects buzz happily in the air. But as you walk along the path, you are involuntarily the cause of death. Here you trod on an ant and tortured it; there you squashed a beetle; and over there your unknowing step left a worm writhing in agony. Into the glorious melody of life you weave a discordant strain of suffering and death. You are guilty, though it is no fault of your own. And, despite all your good intentions, you are conscious of a terrible inability to help as you would like to. Then comes the voice of the tempter: Why torture

yourself? It is no good. Give up, stop caring. Be unconcerned and unfeeling like everybody else.

Still another temptation arises—compassion really involves you in suffering. Anyone who experiences the woes of this world within his heart can never again feel the surface happiness that human nature desires. When hours of contentment and joy come, the compassionate man cannot give himself unreservedly to them, for he can never forget the suffering he has experienced with others. What he has seen stays with him. The anguished faces of the poor return; the cries of the sick echo in his mind; he remembers the man whose hard lot he once read about—and darkness shuts out the light of his joy. Darkness returns again and again. In cheerful company he suddenly becomes absent-minded. And the tempter says again: You can't live like this. You must be able to detach yourself from what is depressing around you. Don't be so sensitive. Teach yourself the necessary indifference, put on an armor, be thoughtless like everybody else if you want to live a sensible life. In the end we are ashamed to know of the great experience of empathy and compassion. We keep it secret from one another and pretend it is foolish, a weakness we outgrow when we begin to be "reasonable" people.

These three great temptations unobtrusively wreck the presupposition of all goodness. Guard against them. Counter the first temptation by saying that for you to share experience and to lend a helping hand is an absolute inward necessity. Your utmost attempts will be but a drop in the ocean compared with what needs to be done, but only this attitude will give meaning and value to your life. Wherever you are, as far as you can, you should bring redemption, redemption from the misery brought into the world by the self-contradictory will of life, redemption that only he who has this knowledge can bring. The small

amount you are able to do is actually much if it only relieves pain, suffering, and fear from any living being, be it human or any other creature. The preservation of life is the true joy.

As for the other temptation, the fear that compassion will involve you in suffering, counter it with the realization that the sharing of sorrow expands your capacity to share joy as well. When you callously ignore the suffering of others, you lose the capacity to share their happiness, too. And however little joy we may see in this world, the sharing of it, together with the good we ourselves create, produces the only happiness which makes life tolerable. And finally, you have no right to say: I will be this, or I will be that, because I think one way will make me happier than another. No, you must be what you ought to be, a true, knowing man, a man who identifies himself with the world, a man who experiences the world within himself. Whether you are happier by the ordinary standards of happiness or not doesn't matter. The secret hour does not require of us that we should be happy—to obey the call is the only thing that satisfies deeply.

So I tell you, don't let your hearts grow numb. Stay alert. It is your soul which matters. If only these words—words in which I am laying bare my inmost thoughts—could force you who are with me here to destroy the deceit with which the world tries to put us to sleep! If only you would all stop being thoughtless and stop flinching from the challenge to learn reverence for life and true empathy, if only you could be absorbed in compassionate awareness, I would rest content. I would consider my work blessed, even if I knew I would not be allowed to preach tomorrow or that my preaching thus far had been useless or that I would never again be able to achieve anything else.

I who generally shrink from influencing others, because

of the responsibility it entails, now wish I had the power to transform you, and make you have compassion, until each one of you had experienced the great suffering from which there is no escape and had gained the wisdom that compassion brings. Then I could tell myself that you are on the way to real goodness and that you will never lose it again. None of us lives for himself. May this word pursue us. May it never let us rest until we are laid into our graves.

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## *Fulfill Your Destiny\**

### I

*In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*

1 THESSALONIANS 5:18

“INGRATITUDE IS THE THANKS you expect from the world,” a saying goes. It expresses an angry truth experienced by everyone at one time or another. These words contain more than the simple observation that the world tends to repay favors with indifference. An echo is heard of the sentiment: “There is no sense in doing good.” That is the tragedy. The prevalence of ingratitude leaves much dissatisfaction in the human heart. Ingratitude fails to produce much good that might otherwise be done. Ingratitude stifles the spirit that is eager for ethical action in the world.

Of course, when people so readily agree with the pessimism of the proverb, they are not always being honest. Have we who complain of ingratitude looked only for the

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