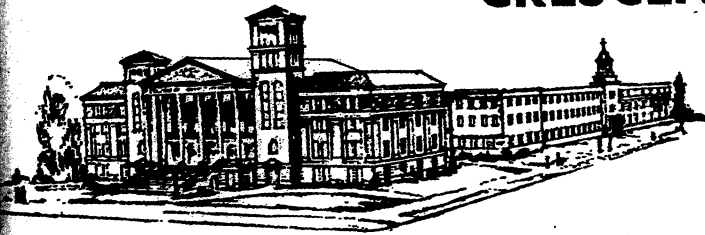


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE ONE AND THE MANY"



Sunday Morning, June 24, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Luke 9: 23-25

Several years ago a movie was released by the title Separate Tables. The scene was laid in a resort hotel on the British Isles, and the plot revolved around several individuals who were staying there. In one of the reviews of the picture, a critic was high in his praise, but he ended with these words: "Excellent as it was, the film leaves unanswered the fundamental question: namely, why do we invariably sit down to the banquet of life at separate tables?"

That question lodged in my mind and has remained there all these years. It put into words a dilemma that I had often felt but could never verbalize. Who of us has not at some time experienced this contradiction at the heart of our existence? We know life to be social by nature; it is a banquet in which we are meant to share. Yet there is the strong inclination to pull off to ourselves, to withdraw, to make life a solitary pilgrimage. We feel the pull in both directions all the time. We are split right down the middle between what we need and what we want. There is a cleft in our natures that makes our inner life a constant tug of war. Here is the banquet - I know I am meant for that. Yet I always seem to wind up over here - by myself at a separate table. This is another example of "man at war with himself"; it is but one of the facets of the age-old problem of "the one and the many."

Now the Biblical revelation is vitally concerned with this matter. Man's schizophrenic state is recognized in all its seriousness, and a solution is set forth that deserves a hearing by all.

If you will look at the first three chapters of Genesis, there you will find a graphic description of this very problem. Man is made in the image of a social God (1:26), and fulfills his life by sharing with other creatures and with God Himself (3:8). But suddenly a tempter appears on the scene and challenges this approach to life (3:1). He infers that man is missing the higher way by being involved with others. He encourages him to strike out on his own. He bids him to break away from all ties and to live to, by, and for himself alone. This man does by taking the forbidden fruit and hiding from God (3:6-8). And so evil entered the world, leading man to contradict his nature and to aim at the wrong goal. This describes what is known as the Fall of man, and accounts for our disjointed condition. Here we are, with certain needs placed in us by God, yet with the opposite inclinations placed in us by evil. We can say with Paul: "O wretched man that I am" (Romans 7:24). What I need I do not want; what I want I do not need.

To this distortion of creation, the Bible records a Divine reaction. With all His Being, God responded to this challenge. He worked first through a people and then a Person. He moved from a covenant to a cradle to a Cross. What began with some broken tablets ended in a broken tomb. In it all, God was reaffirming the true nature of life and trying to redirect the hearts of men back into community. He set out to restore creation to its original state; to set right what had gone wrong; to

undo what had been done by evil. This Divine response came to its climax in Jesus Christ. He was at once a revelation and reconciliation. He came as He had always been that men might become as they once had been. An early Christian hymn describes the Christ-event perfectly (Philippians 2:5-11). Christ was the very essence of God, which meant He did not try to fulfill Himself by grasping or self-assertion (5). Rather, "He emptied Himself...took the form of a servant...humbled Himself...became obedient unto death" (7-8). Here was self-fulfillment by self-emptying; self-realization by self-giving. This pattern receives Divine approval, for God "exalts Him and gives Him a name above every name" (9). Here is the second Adam doing what the first Adam should have done. Dramatized in one life was what all life was intended to be. Over against the Great Perversion is set the Great Truth: God is love...we are made in His image...therefore, we fulfill ourselves together and not apart, in relationship and not in isolation. This is the same note that summarized Christ's teaching. "He who would find his life must lose it" (Matthew 10:39). His words correspond exactly to His deeds. It sounds utterly contradictory, but this is the paradox that is seen in Christ. We receive only as we give; we find only as we lose; we are filled only as we empty ourselves; we are exalted only as we humble ourselves.

This is the message of the Gospel to our divided lives. All its weight falls on one side - that we are social by nature and therefore social in our need. It stands against the solitary, self-seeking way, and affirms that only as we give ourselves away in love can we find true joy.

Now this is by no means a new truth, but it is by all means one that we should ponder carefully. Because it is so fundamental, we need to hear it and apply it fully.

We need to hear it as individuals. I have said it many times before, but I must reiterate it. Life at its deepest levels is profoundly personal. We are so constituted that we achieve our highest only in relation to and in fellowship with other personalities. The truth of this should be self-evident. What is your most pleasant memory? When do you experience your greatest joy? To what do you most look forward? The chances are that all these will be answered in relation to someone else. There is hardly any experience of life that is not enriched by having been shared or impoverished for having to be done alone. Who really prefers always to travel by himself or eat by himself or live by himself? The truth is that life would soon lose its meaning if there were no others. One of the foreboding things about atomic warfare is that it might cut us off from other humans. What if you and you alone were left to inhabit this earth? All its material treasures and fabled possibilities would yield little satisfaction in absolute isolation. We look on solitary confinement as the worst punishment short of death, and this should teach us something about life. The longer I serve in the ministry, the more convinced I become that our deepest need is not for food or drink or sex - it is to love and to be loved. There is no substitute or alternate way. As Smiley Blanton says, "It is love or perish." A self-centered life that pushes away all others and builds no relationships is "soul suicide." For Jesus to say: "Depart from Me, I never knew you" is to be consigned to absolute isolation. This is Hell, the negation of God's purpose, the destruction of all meaning. It is the logical end of a self-centered life, but the opposite of what we were meant to be. To choose to sit "at a separate table" is to turn away from love, and to walk away from the Father of light is to walk into outer darkness. We fulfill our individual selves in love, not loneliness, through involvement, not isolation.

We need also to hear this principle as churches. If finding life through losing it is the pattern for individuals, it also holds true for corporate bodies. Southern Baptists realized this long ago, and today we are celebrating the Cooperative Program that grows out of this principle. By structure, each Baptist church is independent. We are bound to each other by no organic structure. However, it was realized that if every group went their own way and did as they pleased, ineffectual chaos would result. One church might send a missionary here or start a little school there, but no concerted work could be done in the area of missions and education. So they wisely decided on cooperative action. Each congregation voluntarily pooled their resources with others, and a master program was carried out by the denomination. Other more structured groups have looked with amazement at all our churches that are held together by "a rope of sand." But the guiding principle is sound; we have found ourselves by losing ourselves. The multimillion dollar operation that is carried on today around the world by Southern Baptists is a monument to the idea of self-fulfillment through self-giving. Our church should be grateful for such an effective channel of Christian service.

There is one other area where this principle should apply; we need to hear it as a denomination. For the first nineteen centuries of the Church's history, a process of fragmentation was at work. Groups split off from each other and went their separate ways. There were the schisms of the early century, the division between East and West in the eleventh century, the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and so on. But in our own century something remarkably unique appeared. Within the Protestant ranks there was a reverse tendency. Efforts were made to move back together and heal some of the breaches that existed. This movement did not strive for organic union; there was no attempt to form "a super church." Rather, it adopted the same form on a denominational level that Southern Baptists used on a church level; namely, the voluntary cooperation of independent entities. Out of this movement came the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948, the most significant event in modern church history. Only two major Protestant groups in this country have refused to join: the Missouri Synod Lutherans and Southern Baptists. This morning I simply raise the question: are we acting according to the Biblical ideal in such aloofness? It is baffling to understand why we have applied the principle so well on one level and refuse to do so on another. Could it be that we have not taken seriously enough our responsibility to other churches? We have a rich background of experience with the very structure that they are striving to develop. We could mean a great deal to the movement, and bear our witness at a crucial point. This is not a matter that we can settle this morning, but as Southern Baptists we should begin asking ourselves: "Is it right to go it alone, or should we voluntarily seek for a greater good by involving ourselves in this cooperative adventure?"

Let me make myself perfectly clear at this point. I love my Southern Baptist instrument. It is my heritage for many generations back and the means by which I came to Christ. Through it I am able to give my understanding of the Gospel. All of this I hold very dearly. But I would like on occasion to blend this instrument with the rest of God's orchestra. I cannot play all the parts or make all the sounds. There is a majesty in a symphony that cannot be attained in a solo. In this day when Christians are a minority upon the earth, I think we need to play together whenever possible, that the full melody of Christ can be heard. Who knows, these words may be as true for denominations as they are for churches and individuals: "He who would find his life must lose it."

This brings us back to that haunting question: why do we invariably sit down to the banquet of life at separate tables? Here is the answer: we do it because of the influence of the first Adam. But listen, we do not have to continue, for the second Adam has come. In His life He stoops close to us. In His death He spreads a new banquet table. In His resurrection He invites us out of our aloneness to sit together. Here we are around one big table. There is joy once again on earth.

How did it happen? You remember the words: "He who would find his life must lose it."