

Scripture Reference: John 11:1-10

In his well-known book called A Testament of Devotion, Thomas Kelly speaks of "the poverty of life that can result from an overabundance of opportunity." The first time I read that phrase I had to stop and go back over it, for on the surface it seemed to involve a contradiction. How can poverty result from overabundance, I wondered? However, the second time around I realized what he was saying, for paradoxical as it may sound, there is a way of responding to outward richness that leaves one inwardly poor, particularly when we try to embrace too many of those possibilities and overextend ourselves and wind up with so many irons in the fire that none of them glow with joy any more. Have you ever found yourself so involved in so many good causes that life turns into a frantic blur, and instead of finding satisfaction out of all of this effort, the sheer strain of everything makes you want to go out and scream?

I got some insight into just how real a problem this is several years ago when I preached a sermon here on the point that the good is often an enemy of the best. I suggested

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that our human struggle is not just with evil in all of its raw ugliness, but also with those 1001 "good" causes that can deflect us from our real best. Alongside the temptation of the demonic is this real temptation of dilution, of letting our strength get scattered out in so many directions that our lives become a putrid swamp instead of a direct, clear-flowing stream. The response to this word was fantastic, not because it was such a good sermon, but because it is such a I realized then that for folk like us, the real problem. problem of dilution is one of the greatest single threats to personal wholeness and well-being. If most of us are not careful, the very abundance of opportunities around us may become our downfall, and leave us with that poverty of spirit that takes the form of a harried, overcrowded, unfulfilled existence.

In trying to mobilize some help to bring to bear on this very real problem of overextending oneself, let me begin by fully identifying personally with it. When I speak of the agonies of a scattered, overinvolved life, I am not talking about some abstract problem you may have, but rather one that I have and participate in quite fully. I know what it is to get up in the morning as if the wind were already blowing in my face, and go through a day in which it seems I am pulled in eight different directions at once. Samuel Miller says that strain is a sin against life, and I both agree with this and confess myself to be the greatest of all sinners here. Let me admit that I have had and still am having massive difficulties with this problem of dilution and the struggle of the good with best.

I have tried to analyze just why this temptation to get overinvolved is so powerful for me, and I have isolated two particular problem areas that seem to be the root of my The first of these is a lack of realism about my trouble. For some reason, I have been reluctant to come to terms with the boundaries of my being, with that outward perimeter of self where my resources leave off and another begins. And because of this lack of realism I am always getting myself overextended and committed way beyond my Sometimes this takes the form of just not going capabilities. to the trouble to count the cost and figure up precisely what is and is not possible for me. If a person asks me to do something, particularly if it is several months in advance, I have this kind of vague "superman" feeling that somehow I will be able to work it in, but then when the time arrives, I am tragically overpromised and in a bind. At other times, the problem takes the form of a "giant killer" complex in which every problem that comes along seems to take the shape of my responsibility, and I must decide that I must do something about it. Jane Adams, the famous pioneer in social work in Chicago, used to have a motto: "If not you, who? If not now, when?" On first hearing that, I thought it was great, and I still see its truth. But to be honest, for a person with my kind of unrealistic self-understanding, such words can be quite dangerous, for they encourage one toward a false "messiah complex" that takes on too many challenges and winds up being effective at none of them. A failure, then, to accept the fact of finitude and to come to terms with my limits has been a massive contributor to my winding up poor within in the face of so much richness without.

And alongside this difficulty out at the boundaries of my being, there has also been a problem at the center; namely, in terms of where I look for my personal affirmation. I have spoken to you before about this persistent need of mine to be liked by others and to have the approval of my peers. If other people do not affirm my worthwhileness, I have trouble believing I have any at all, which means it is difficult for me to say "no" to people when they make requests of me, particularly if they are persons whose approval I desire. And, of course, this can get you overextended just as surely as not recognizing your true limits.

I remember quite vividly the night some years ago when a black minister friend of mine called and asked me to take a very significant responsibility in a project he was leading. I had heard of this endeavor before, and while I did not think it was wrong, I was not impressed with its practicality. I had some serious personal doubts about its being able to accomplish its stated purpose, and yet there on the phone I found myself unable to say this. Rather, I felt so personally obligated to this friend, and was so afraid that a "no" would make him dislike me, that I accepted and hated every minute of the experience. It not only took a great deal of time, but also burned up a lot of energy in frustration, because my heart was not in it. Here I was doing, something I had no taste for simply to earn a little approval from someone I was That episode is by no means the only afraid to offend. time I have let myself get involved like that. Again and again, because the center of my being was so insecure and I needed to bolster it by getting someone to like me, I have gotten involved where I did not want to be and in things I did not want to do, and in frustrated overextension have been poor, indeed, within.

In all honesty, this is how it has been with me so much of the time, and this is why at both my outward boundaries and at my inward center, I am in trouble. I am unrealistic out there, insecure in here, and as a result, I get overcommitted and overinvolved everywhere.

Now, as everybody who has ever been there knows, this is an uncomfortable position, and the question arises: is there any way out of such an agonizing squeeze? When one realizes that amid all the rich possibilities of life he has been utterly poor when it comes to having found any kind of wholeness or integration of self, where can he turn for help?

This morning I am glad to report that this sort of help does exist, and it came to me personally through the figure of the One who walks the pages of the New Testament; namely, Jesus of Nazareth. As I tried to encounter the mystery and reality of this One, two things have always stood out. One is the fact that He lived all through His ministry under this same kind of pressure we have been talking about. He had people pulling at Him, all kinds of options spinning up in every direction; yet in the face of all this, He seemed to cope with it so much better than I have.

For example, amid all the pressures that seemed to swirl around wherever He went, there never appeared to be any strain or franticness about Him. In the idiom of our day, "He kept His cool," no matter how provocative or intense the situation became. From all the different angles the New Testament lets us look at Him, we never see Him "flying to pieces" or running around like the proverbial chicken with its head cut off.

There is also a startling kind of independence and originality about Him. There was never any scarcity of people around Jesus to give Him advice or to try to pressure Him Beginning with His mother there in to do this or do that. Jerusalem when He was just a boy, right down to the thief on the cross telling Him to curse His fate, He was surrounded with external pressures. Yet without being arrogant or rude, He did not succumb to it. Amazingly, Jesus remained His own man and steered His own course amid all these winds, and always managed to respond to things in a way that was totally unexpected and yet in the long run so strategic and Take for example our text for the morning, which is one among many examples of His independent insightfulness. Word came that Lazarus, His friend, was sick in Bethany, and one would suppose Jesus would rush to his side. But He did not, and rather waited two days. The disciples finally figured it was because it was too dangerous for Him to go near Jerusalem, but then He exploded that supposition by proposing to set His face straight for there. One cannot escape the impression that here was a Man who really knew what He was doing with His life and was in control of His destiny. Amid all the pressures, Jesus was strong enough and wise enough "to do His thing" with conviction and purpose. He said as much Himself once: "No man takes My life from Me. The Son of Man lays down His life as He wills."

This is the kind of strength I see as I encounter the Christ figure, and this leads me to ask: what was the secret of this triumphant way of coping not only with the bad, but also with the good and the best? The answer to that question is not too hard to locate, for it is found in Jesus' relationship to God the Father. Say what you will about His social activism, His wisdom as a teacher, His warmth and winsomeness, Jesus was at bottom a religious Man. It was the

immediacy and reality of "I am in the Father and the Father is in Me" that accounts for the miracle of His strong life style.

I believe the key to understanding all this is to realize that Jesus accepted as totally and as utterly as one can the gift of the Father's love. He plunged down to those depths from whence all things come, down to where there is nothing but God, and accepted the fact that His very existence grew out of this Primal Love. What He was, why He was, that He was at all — this was God's doing and the outcropping of Therefore, Jesus could accept His limits, could His purpose. affirm His centers, and in freedom and joy could collaborate with His Father on how to live His life day-by-day. Just like the stars and the trees, Jesus came to see Himself as a Son of the Universe and a beloved Creation of the Almighty. He had a right, by God, literally, to be there, boundaries and center and all. He realized that by the grace of God He was what He was.

It was because He felt like this that He could share all things with God, not as an obligation but as a privilege. It is often pointed out that Jesus prayed a great deal, and this is important. But it was not just the time He put in on His knees, it was what He felt and believed about God and Himself and life that really mattered. Jesus coped as He did with existence precisely out of an immediacy of relation with Him who is the Creator of all things and the Father in heaven.

And the Good News is: what was possible for Jesus is possible for us too! He did not come to taunt us with a kind of relation to God that was unique only to Himself. Jesus came to show how all men could live with God and thus with the pressures, if we would.

What does that involve? First of all, it means pondering the gift of the Father's love, and accepting the fact that the way God felt about Jesus is the way He feels about every one of us as well. You see, if I, too, would go down into my own depth, there in the silence within is "the Light that lighteth every man." If I go down to where it all came from, to where there is nothing but God, and see that I, too, am what I am because of Him, what a change it would affect in my being. Remember what I said earlier: my problem has always been with my boundaries and my center and never fully accepting either one. Why was that, do you suppose? Because I was ashamed of them and dissatisfied with them. And this is why I kept overextending myself, trying to be a giant killer or a world messiah, because I did not feel my This also is why I was so real limits were good enough. unsure and needed to earn some affirmation by pleasing because I did not feel the center of personhood was okay as But here, in the depths of Primal Love, where it comes clear that what I am and that I am is God's doing and something He likes, lo and behold, I am given a reason for liking myself; and for the first time I can accept my limits—they're okay, and my center—it's okay, too. I can be myself in joy, and like the stars and the trees can say to myself: "You too, are a child of the universe. You too, have a right to be here."

And this is not all. Out of such acceptance of the Father's love comes the gift of collaboration, a way of sharing with this Light within, about what to do and how to cope. In the same book by Thomas Kelly that I mentioned earlier, he uses another image that I have found quite helpful. He said God sleeps within each one of us, just like Christ was asleep in the back of the boat that night on the Sea of Gallilee, and all we have to do is awaken Him and the collaboration toward the bringing of peace will begin. This symbol of God sleeping in our depths reminds me of the incredible humility of the Almighty. It does not mean that He is unconscious of us; it means He is unwilling to crash in on us and force Himself upon us. The image of being present, as if awaiting our call, is precisely the way a God of love relates, and when we invite His aliveness into our lives, it is not mechanical compulsion but genuine collaboration that results. I in the Father, the Father in me-this is the way Jesus described the give and take between senior and junior partners, and this is precisely the kind of dialogue that at once can free us from the pressures of life and then release us to do our thing within our limits and out of our true center. And this is when life begins to be rich within instead of strained and scattered and going to pieces in a thousand directions. When at last peace begins at home, and in accepting our limits and our strengths, we find our place and peace.

Let me say that I am relatively new at this way of accepting the gift of Love and trying to live out of the Light within, but I have tasted enough to know it is a reality and offers a genuine alternative to the old way of harried scatteredness. I still have trouble believing that my limits are all right and my center has worth by God, for you cannot spend decades immersed in the habit of despising yourself and running from yourself and trying to be another self and then shed this instantly. It takes time, but I see light down this path and recognize the strong Man Jesus inviting me to walk it. Whenever I am willing to be still, and "center down" as the Quakers say, and get in touch with why I am - namely, by the grace of God — from that experience comes the power to accept both my boundaries and my center. I no longer need to overextend or to please so much. And out of real collaboration with Him who made me and loves me comes the insight on how and where "to plug in" to life and do the thing for which I was intended from the foundations of the earth.

There is a poverty within that can result from the overabundance of opportunity. But it does not have to. There is a way to be rich within as well. If you will let Him, Jesus can show you how!