

Not Alms, But a Friend

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Scripture:

Text:

On the one hand we have our soul stirred to high emotions by some stimulus, whether it be the listening to music, the reading of a story or a poem, or that still deeper and more profound inspiration that comes to us in the real presence of God in our lives. We feel the tide of emotion, and noble purpose welling up in our inmost natures. It prompts us to resolutions of good deeds and consecrated devotion. We resolve that we rise above the commonplace goodness of the everyday life, and do some great deed of benevolence, something that shall seem worthwhile and enduring. We are even stirred to the highest hopes by the great examples of generous giving which we see about us everywhere. One has given the money to found a great university; another has given a library, which shall become the center of intellectual life of the town; another has built a hospital in which many a sick body will find relief and health. How wonderful all these gifts are. The rumor and the memory of them come blowing in upon the flooding tide of our emotions, and adds to the already high flux of emotion stimulated by our own thoughts and the inspiration, just as the mind flowing with the tide becomes one more force to lift the waters, even higher than usual. Thus force upon force of high purpose and noble resolution fills every bay, inlet and hidden cove of our natures, until it seems that the high pressure must break through the boundaries of our life and flood the whole world with the powers that we feel within.

But the incoming tide is checked, retarded and finally is forced to come to a full stop before the natural limitations of our life and conditions. We would build great institutions where every hungry soul may find that for which he has the greatest need, but we have not the money to do it with. We would lead every human soul out of

his sin and suffering, but hardly can we find the time to keep our nearest and dearest free from the same dangers. We would relieve all hunger and want, but only with difficulty can we keep the wolf from our own door. There they are, the stern rugged realities of our lack of money, and power, and time, as immovable as rugged and unconquerable as the rocks and beaches that line the coast of our New England. Against these natural boundaries, the tide of our noble resolve beats with the fury, and energy of a storm-lashed sea, but all to no avail. Slowly imperceptible the tide begin to ebb. Exhausted and beaten, our noble impulses slowly retreat, and leave exposed to our view all those limitations the nakedness of which, for the moment the high tide of our emotions had concealed. But now when the tide has spent its fury, and retreated back into the sea from whence it came, we can see only too clearly the firmness and the strength of our own incapacity, against which but so recently we struggled in vain. Discouraged by the high rocks and mountains that surround us and hurl us back as we try to do good, try to relieve the people of the world of their wants and satisfy their needs and desires, we almost come to the conclusion that for us with our limitations there is nothing that we can do, that in any way compares to the great deeds that public-spirited men who have wealth and power at their command do. Sometimes we seriously ask the question as to whether or not there is anything for us to do over and above the ordinary work of keeping ourselves self-supporting and to a certain extent independent. Is it really worthwhile to try to do anything to help the world along when men who have so much give so generously? In short what have we to give that is worthwhile?

The ocean, baffled and beaten back by the rocky shores, is still able to water the lands behind the shores, and in truth in a much more effective manner than by flooding the land. Responding to the heat of the sun it gives up its fine particles of moisture, which rise high above the rocks and precipices, and sailing majestically over all barriers fall upon the earth in gentle refreshing rain, the giver of life nourishment to the growing things of the earth.

There is still another way open for you and me to help men and women who are suffering, who are in need, who are in sin, and sorrow. We can respond to the subtle influence of the Divine within, and rising high above those limitations of our lack of money, and power, we can reach the human soul as a friend. If we find one in want, we can

say to him, "I bring you, not money, but a helping hand." If we find one in ignorance, we can say to him, "I bring you, not knowledge, but the help of a guiding hand." If we find one in sorrow, we can say to him, "I bring you not relief, but come to share your burden with you." If we find one in loneliness, we can say, "I do not give you a friend. I am a friend." If we find one in sin, we can say, "I come to you to walk with you out of the darkness into the light." The wealth and the power of such a ministration is open to every human soul, and rising above all other limitations, we can give, and give freely of this great gift of being a friend. Whenever there is a human soul whether he be in want or in plenty, in joy or in pleasure, he needs the help and inspiration of a friend, not a formal calling acquaintance, but a deep, sincere friend who feels and hopes and dreams the welfare of himself and those that are dear to him. Let each one consider the situation from his own point of view. If you were in straightened circumstances financially, would you want anyone to come to you with a large sum of money, and say, "Here take this." Would you want to accept it and settle back to live upon it? Or would you rather someone would come and say, "Here you are in a difficult situation. I will take hold to help you onto your feet, and give you opportunity to better yourself." It seems to me that anyone would rather accept the assistance from the friend, than the alms from the stranger. If you had a burden to carry, would you really wish to cast the burden off, or do you rather wish for the friendly assistance and encouragement that shall give you the greater strength to carry it. Have you a sorrow that is particularly your own, do you really wish to cast it aside by the alms of the lapse of memory. Indeed not; the sorrow is too precious to be thus disposed of. One wants only the friendly sympathy of his fellow man, and then he can stand under, and be brave in the midst of the greatest sorrow.

Or take a wider view of the question. Does not humanity in general treasure more deeply those great services that have been done not as large and magnificent gifts, but as the noble work of a soul consecrated to humanity as a friend of humanity? It was the money of the rich who could give as you and I cannot give that made and supported the great institutions of the Roman World in the days of old, when theatres, public games, and other devices were supported as a means of entertaining the public, and making their life more interesting and enjoyable. They were regarded as worthy channels through which men of wealth

might serve the people. It was the money of the wealthy that supported the magnificent temple worship of Judaism in those same days. But it was Jesus of Nazareth, who had not where to lay his head, that touched the real heart of humanity. Not that he had money to give to great institutions, but that he went among men as a friend, healing the sick, helping the poor, encouraging the sinful and bringing to them the light of the Divine life that shone from his soul.

The men who of their wealth gave alms to establish those great institutions have long since been forgotten, their buildings and temples have crumbled into ruin. But Jesus of Nazareth, the simple friend, who gave himself to men because he lived [with] them, is still spoken of in every household with the most tender and grateful worlds.

At the time of the Reformation great contributions were being made to increase the wealth of the cathedrals and monasteries, but the real work of those years was done by the poor, but consecrated souls of the reformers, who, out of their love for humanity, gave not alms, but themselves. Thus it has always been and always will be that the heart of man is reached and uplifted not by alms, but by the deep consecrated friend power that springs out of noble souls, and ministers unto the inmost needs of the human heart. Not alone our inmost natures, but the long history of human progress teaches us again and again that the heart of man, in whatever poverty, sin or sorrow it may be found, wants over and above all else the strength, in uplifting influence that can come only from him who loves a human soul, and ministers unto it by giving his own soul.

We are grateful beyond measure to see these great institutions of learning and education being established all over the world. We recognize and appreciate the momentous powers for good that they are prophecies. We rejoice in the hospitals and asylums that are at once monuments to great souls and the haven of rest for many in distress and pain. All the funds, and endowments that make possible the betterment of the condition of humanity we rejoice in, and are not tardy in expressing our appreciation of them. But of what value to humanity is a university unless its atmosphere is alive with the friendly spirit that exists among the students and instructors? Of what value is the hospital unless it is supplemented by a corps of doctors and physicians who are friends, comforters

to the sick and suffering. Of what value is a costly church, unless it is suffused with the spirit of warm cordial friendship which is forever an invitation to the distressed and the sinner, as well as the good and prosperous to come in and receive strength and courage among friends.

Thus, while we rejoice in all the good that men of wealth can do, it still remains for us, as well as for them, to do the greatest and most enduring by the simple acts of a friend. When the tides of our emotions rise high and still higher in our souls, and beat against the rocks of our limitations, and sink back again defeated, let us not be discouraged. A greater work remains for us than the giving of money to any cause. We can give of our strength and devotion.

In the world we live in, the world that you and I live in, there are plenty of souls who need our help. I take up the paper and glance over the items of news. I read of a young man of 21, upon whose labors a widowed mother, an invalid, and his small brother were dependent for their daily wants. Discouraged, because he was thrown out of employment, and unable to bear the disappointment of his mother when he should tell her of his misfortune, he takes his own life by jumping into the Harlem River. Does such a soul need alms, need simply cold cash handed to him by some relief organization? Indeed he did not, but simply wanted the strength and power that could come to him through a friend, who would just take a part of the burden and give him courage to take up his noble tasks. I read of a woman of eighty years found dead in a lonely room in one of the crowded districts of a large city. Did she want alms, or a friend? I read of hundreds of men and women who are living in the very mire of degenerate life. Do they want money to be spent in giving alms to them, or do they want a friend to go where they are, and lead them away from the degrading conditions in which they live and stand, side-by-side with them, and walk side-by-side with them until they are freed from the chains that bind them. We speak with subdued voice of someone who is a sinner, we half apologize for knowing a person who has been at times bad. We are not quite as strong-voiced and delighted when we speak of some person who has a seamy side to his nature. Yet when the tide of emotion rises within us we would help them all provided we had the money, and we become despondent and gloomy because we have not the money. But the very thing that they need

most, the only thing that will help, is the strength of a friend. That you and I can be.

One of the most pathetic and saddening bits of literature in all history is the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. That great soul who had given his life to the quiet ministering of the saddened sinning lives of Palestine, that great friend of all the sins of men, was looking forward to a death which the prejudice against him clearly forewarned him. He leaves behind him all those unto whom he had been a friend in sorrow and joy, in pain and pleasure, in doubt and faith. He leaves behind him all but those disciples who are nearest and dearest to him, and with them he goes into the Garden of Gethsemane to get the strength that comes from the companionship of near and dear friends, and the power that comes from coming into the real presence of God. Heavy at heart with the burden upon his heart, sad because he must give up the life that he loved so, he goes aside from his loved friends, leaving them to watch with him, while he sought strength and encouragement in prayer. Coming back to them, whom he believed to be watching with him, whom he thought to be as heavy with sadness of his approaching calamity, he finds them asleep. The care and interest in him, and his hardship forgotten. Here in this most trying time of his life, when he needed them most, he is left entirely alone. I can almost see him as he returned to them, whom he left to share this {???) of agony with him, and found them asleep. I can almost see him as he stood looking down upon them in the dim evening light, and thinking of the dropping away of all those who might help him to bear his burden. Can you not almost hear the tender voice, softened now by a modulation of half regret, and half loneliness, as he said to Peter, "What, could ye not watch me one hour?"¹

The story is so touching, and so appealing because it is so true to human nature. Everyday some human soul enters a Garden of Gethsemane, there to pour out to God the inmost secrets of a life, in a moment of supreme sorrow and pain. Every day the soul returns to the friends, by whom he thinks he is supported, and finds them sleeping. Oh, if you would only get away from ourselves for a little, and weep beside some sufferer in the Garden of Trials, and sin. What a power we could be to them. How we could help to bring sunshine and hope into their lives. They do not care for

¹ Matthew 26:40.

our coldly offered alms, they would spurn and reject them, but their soul longs for the friendship we withhold, and many a human being goes to death stunted, dwarfed by sin, and wickedness, simply because someone who might have been a Christ unto that soul, has proved only a giver of alms.