

God and My Neighbor

Earl Clement Davis

Lancaster, PA

September 21, 1919

Scripture: Matthew 11:1-19.

We miss a tremendous lot in life just because we do not interest ourselves in each other, we do not take the trouble to understand what we are living for and what wonderful flowers of life we cultivate in the little secret gardens. We classify men into groups. Some groups we swallow whole, and others we reject entirely. In the passage which I read earlier there was presented the opinion which the ordinary unthinking, stiff-necked people had of two great men. Jesus, the carpenter, was scoffed at as a winebibber and a glutton because he came eating and drinking, and was not ashamed to associate with the publicans. John the Baptist was quite different. He ate only the simplest food and was indeed far removed from the world. Him these same small-minded people called a fanatic and they declared that he had demons. Two of the most glorious personalities of the age, one whose name was destined to immortal glory, were simply cast aside by people as uninteresting, and not worth the time and trouble they caused.

These same people who condemned Jesus the carpenter as a glutton and a winebibber, also condemned him as a blasphemer and one who scoffed at the rites and sacred formalities of religion. They finally carried their prejudices so far that they killed him and cast him from them, preferring to have a thief live among them rather than this glutton and winebibber. These same people also spent their times protecting the law, performing sacrifices and saying prayers. In all this they were seeking God, if haply they might find him.

But history has given a different judgement of the importance of persons in Palestine at that time. The scribes, the chief priests, the sadducees and the pharisees are only names of groups of unknown men and perchance women, whose importance in history comes from the fact that they were fools enough to reject the carpenter, demand his life, and cast him from as unfit for their company. On the other hand, the rejected

carpenter is seen in the light of history to have been so important, that thousands of people have declared him to be very God.

I just mention this incident to point out the fact that we do not always know who is great and who is small among our contemporaries. He, upon whom future generations may look as the greatest man of the times may be suffering in prison. Or he may be working at some bench in a great factory, or he may be tramping the highways looking for employment, or he may be cradled in some hovel, to be carried by the grace of God through the deadly season in the great city. Who knows, who can tell?

We flatter ourselves upon our judgement of human nature, our capacity to find God, to know life, upon our ability to select great men and good men? What presumption. A hundred years hence people may laugh at us for our folly, for our conceit and our pride, our idiocy and our blindness.

The trouble is that we do not meet men as men. We meet them as types, as classes, and groups. "Do you know your neighbor," you are asked. "No, I do not. He does not interest me. He is not associated with the people whom I know. In fact, I do not think he amounts to much. I do not care to know him." But he is just an ordinary man. The associates are accidental. The colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under their skins. All of us are human under our skins. It is just barely possible that the uninteresting neighbor, whom you do not care to know is just the most interesting person in the whole range of your life. Try him out. I have known some mighty poor specimens of human life, at least I thought they were, but I never knew a person yet, however low he might be, from whom I did not get more good than I could possibly repay. Every experience with persons has netted me richness and values that have made life mean more for me. At times I have been irritated and often fooled, but all has given me an insight into the beauty, and the tragedy of life that makes every thing real and vital. Not at all do I feel that I have a mission of interferring with my neighbor, and directing his life for him. Far from it. That is his task. My only duty is to give him a chance, and meet him halfway in the intercourse of personalities, to give help if he needs and to receive help if I need it.

The essence of all this is the simple truth that the revelation of God in our times is in and through those very people whom we call neighbors. What we learn of our neighbor is just so much knowledge of God. All the knowledge we have of God is through this common experience of life in the interchange of human experience. The Gospel of John says that in the person of Jesus the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Wisdom becomes incarnated in life. That is the key to all. But the word becomes flesh and dwells among us not only in the person of Jesus, but in every human being that ever drew the breath of life. Every man is a Christ in possibility and many more of our neighbors than we realize are Christs in reality.

A picket frozen on duty,
A mother starved for her brood,
Socrates drinking the hemlock,
And Jesus on the rood;
And millions who, humble and nameless,
The straight, hard pathway plod,
Some call it Consecration,
And others call it God.¹

God and my neighbor are pretty much one and the same thing. If I do not know my neighbor whom I have seen, I certainly cannot know God who dwells in my neighbor.

¹ The final stanza of William Herbert Carruth's (1859-1924) poem, "Each in His Own Tongue," published in 1908 in Carruth's *Each in His Own Tongue and Other Poems*.