

What To Do

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Last Sunday I pointed out the two great principles in the living faith of the modern man. I said that the first principle is that of faith in the substantial integrity and reliability of the universe in which we live. This includes faith in the substantial integrity of man. The second principle referred to was that of a faith in growth and development in the universe, in man, and in all of man's interests and activities. The world is not made, it is being evolved. The process is now going on. Man is not perfect, nor has there ever been a perfect man, but man is growing towards the high standards of his possibilities. Society is not complete, and perfect, but through the long processes of history, it is developing towards perfection. Nothing is fixed. Growth, development, evolution is the natural order. Where growth is, there is constant change, constant variation, and the constant demand for readjustment. This is the point of view from which the modern man works in every department and activity of life. As a matter of fact, theories and philosophies to the contrary notwithstanding, this has been the point of view of live men through all the ages. It is only when men are on the defensive, only when they are playing a losing game, only when they feel the sands slipping under their feet, that they resort to any other method. At the present moment, we take the attitude of progressive growth towards the realization of a purpose. We are not here to bolster up an outgrown institution, or defend from the onslaught of developing forces of our time, any fixed system of thought, or any institution, however endeared it may be by all the associations of the past. However much the growing boy may become attached to his old clothes, yet the time comes when the demands of necessity compel him to wear clothes of larger dimensions. So also with institutions, with all men and things that are alive and growing.

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

We are here in this fellowship of men and women for a purpose. We believe that through the channels of this group, we are going to make a direct and valuable contribution to the life and growth of men. We stake our faith on the conviction that we can do something here that must be done for mankind, something that can be done here, can be done by us and those who shall join us, something that can be done by no one else, and in no other place. In doing this, we rely, not upon the magnitude of our institution, not upon the scope of our claims, but upon the unconquered and unconquerable courage of the human will, dominated by the overlordship of a great conviction and purpose. It is the call of the finite to its universal consecration, the ideal achieving hope of man stretching forward to the ideal achieving capacity of the universe, it is fulfilling the great and the true function of life. Our faith in the integrity of our purpose, our faith in the integrity of life and mankind, and the universe, is such that we dare to cast the whole body of that which we believe to be the truth into the great melting pot of human experience, into the seething and boiling cauldron of modern society, without reserve and without restraint, knowing that that which is false will be burned away, and that which is true will be purged from the dross in which it is embedded.

But when we wax warm over the idea of doing some great thing for the uplift of humanity, we are very much inclined to picture in our imaginations some dramatic scoop, in which we plunge into the rushing torrent of history, and rescue poor drowning humanity from its untimely end. We think of some Jesus, giving his life for the truth, of some martyr burning at the stake, we think of the heroic band that threw off the bonds by which they were bound to the mother country, we think of Colonel Shaw, marching to the front, leading a sturdy regiment of negro soldiers in the fight for the union and emancipation.² We think that if we were only living in those live and exciting times, when moral heroism was running so high, we should be at the very front, the noble work that makes those times sublime. Those are only the dramatic moments, and they become sublime to future generations simply because the men who did them did not know

² Colonel Robert Shaw (1837-1863) American officer in the Union Army during the Civil War. Shaw led the 54th Massachusetts regiment, a regiment of all-black troops. Shaw was killed leading the regiment in an attack on Fort Wagner, near Charleston, South Carolina, in 1863.

that they were sublime, but did them just as they did all the drudgery, and hard painstaking work of which these glorious incidents are but moments in the long plodding years of consecrated effort, the occasional shooting star that breaks the fixedness in the appearance of the heavens.

When we speak, therefore, of doing something to make the world that we live in better, of reaching and arousing the dormant impulses to nobility that lie buried beneath the burden, the hopelessness of thousands of human lives, we do not mean any dramatic splurge, but we mean the slow, deliberate work that must be done to realize that purpose. When we speak of uplifting human life, we do not mean that we are uplifted ourselves, and that we condescend and stoop to lift others. We mean that we shall do our part in uplifting the whole of human life, ourselves included. The world is the object of redemption, and we are all redeemers. When we speak of uplifting human life, we are not referring to the heathen or the inhabitants of the Fiji Islands, but we are speaking of the community in which we live, and of ourselves in that community. Jerusalem is always the place to begin. Growth, development, and evolution is the process. The fruits of the tree are the measurements of its worth and its efficiency. Underlying all is the faith in the substantial integrity of life, man and the universe, and its capacity to grow and to achieve its ideals.

Now I believe that the great purpose of human life is to achieve the highest possibilities of the human personality in ourselves and in all men. To grow in wisdom, to be forever penetrating and conquering the unknown. To be forever translating that wisdom into terms of everyday life. To be forever entering deeper, and still more deeply, in the richness and all the absorbing mystery of human life. To be forever growing into that deeper and more abiding peace and power and happiness, that enables us to absorb the pains of living and life, and feel ourselves each day bound the more closely to the purer and finer delights of honorable manhood and womanhood. I believe that all men can achieve this purpose, and achieve it too, without pushing and crushing, and destroying human life in the process. Rather, I believe that it can be achieved only in conserving human life, only in the cooperative effort towards nobility. That I believe is the purpose of our existence in this fellowship, to stir to action the inherent nobility of the human personality, and to make the world in which we live, and the

social order, which is the register of our real purposes, such as to nourish those noble characteristics all men recognize as the marks of true nobility and the essential divinity of man.

Now the field of our work is, first of all, the city of Pittsfield. What are the facts that we have to deal with? What are the situations and conditions, the base of supplies, the starting point? Is this city all that it should or could be? I am going to make some criticisms on the general life here. In so doing, I want you to watch carefully for any errors that I may make, for I do not want to make untrue statements. I shall, however, make these criticisms more by implication than by direct attack, for I shall make them in the course of suggesting some of the things that need to be done in the city.

In the first place, I want to refer to the mere physical aspects of the city. We are growing very rapidly, and are fast being transformed from a New England country town into a city of some considerable size. Some few years ago the city was spoken of as a city of homes. That is fast changing. The erection of flats, and apartment houses is growing apace. Small four-room tenements are in demand. With plenty of God's open country about us, we are congesting our population. The tendency is apparent to anyone. The proportion of those who own their own houses is growing smaller. We view the situation lightly, but if the history of other towns is any guide, we are sowing the seeds from which we shall one day reap but poor fruitage. The beauty of the city is being destroyed, the moral tone is being threatened, and the healthfulness of the city as a place to live—in short, Pittsfield, as a place for human life, is giving away to Pittsfield as a commercially ridden city, breeding poverty, viciousness, disease, and all its attendant ills. Some day we shall come to a consciousness of the fact, and shall repeat with Goldsmith, "These were thy charms; but all these charms have fled."³

Instead of planning long-lived policies for making this city a place physically beautiful, broad, free from congestion, a city of homes made beautiful by healthy self-respecting owners, we are allowing it to be disfigured by cheap tenements and flats,

³ Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) Anglo-Irish novelist, playwright and poet. This is a line from his 1770 poem, "The Deserted Village."

eyesores to look upon, a menace to health, destructive of the integrity and self-respect upon which the very life of a democracy is dependent. To speak plainly, we are sacrificing the interests of human life for the sake of commercial advantage, and in the interests of comparatively few people.

We should be interesting ourselves in the opening up of idle tracts of land for homes, and God's free air. We should be demanding the extension of our street railway systems so that, from larger areas of the outlying districts, there may be free and cheap transportation into the city. Money, which is going to the repair of inexcusable blunders in the management of city affairs, should be used in the beautifying of the banks of the river that flows through our midst, and making the waste land of the flats into a park. We should be extending the possibilities of healthy out-of-doors sports by providing places where men may play as well as places where men may work. The possibilities of making this a city beautiful and a city decent are limited only by our greed and shortsightedness.

But I pass from that phase of what I wish to say to what may be called the intellectual interests of the city. As a city, we are doing nothing in the way of stimulating the intellectual life of the city, except that which is done with more or less efficiency in the public schools and library. It is no excuse to say that there is no demand for such an intellectual life. The demand must be created. It is remarkable how rapidly the leaven of mental activity will spread. I know that there are many small groups that are interested in learning, in music, in art. Their influence is good except in those cases where these interests are simply used as the power to turn the stone for grinding some ax. I do not mean that as a city we should attempt to provide entertainment, but simply that we should spend money, and time and energy, in stimulating the intellectual life of the city, in stimulating the power of thought, in disseminating knowledge, and in holding men [to] a sense of their intellectual responsibility in the common life. One of the most remarkable opportunities for this kind of stimulation is offered in the political activities of the city. We have recently held caucuses for the nomination of men for various political offices. The town, as well as the state, and the nation, are facing large and serious problems. The men whom we shall send to these various bodies are to act in ways that influence us and our posterity. Yet how many of us know what these men believe about the

questions which they have to decide, and whether their vote, their influence, will be for or against the principles that we believe to be right? Not one word has been said. All has been done quietly, no agitation, no public discussion. We are sending men to the general court. They are likely to be called upon to act on the proposition of a federal income tax. How many men in the city of Pittsfield know how our representatives are likely to vote? In fact, how many men know how we want them to vote? A measure of the utmost importance, and yet not a word has been said about it. Yet this one subject might have been made the issue of an intellectual activity that would have elevated the whole intellectual life of the town. As it is, for all we know, we may be voting for men who already pledged to vote against the very measure that we wish to see carried through. I speak of this to illustrate the need of a more keen and active intellectual life in this community. As a city, as a democratic community, we ought to be providing for the presentation of, and the discussion of, the big broad live problems of the day.

I hardly feel able to analyze the social life of the town, for I am not sufficiently familiar with all the various activities to enable me to speak with any certainty. Yet even here, I am sure that we are not democratic. We move largely in class circles. Along the borderline of the so-called middle class there is a certain freedom. Yet in conversation, as well as in fact, I can feel the rather hard and fast lines between the so-called upper classes and the laboring class. The strikes during the past year but serve as a violent and pungent example of the actual conditions, and reflect the social distinction that exists. There is a conflict of interests. We may deny it as we will, but the fact exists, and the house divided against itself cannot stand. The conditions are not healthy, as every thinking man knows. Such conditions do not make for manhood and womanhood. They do not nurture and foster the kind of men and women, the kind of human life, that every man knows to be desirable. So, I say that there is a pressing need for work along this line.

These conditions are reflected in what we call the moral and the spiritual life of the town. The moral and the spiritual life of any individual or any community is the force that makes for unity. The moral man is the man whose life is dominated by a ruling moral ideal. The conflicting elements are all brought around to serve and contribute to the common end. There are no

antagonizing and warring factions. The same is true in a community life. The perpetual antagonisms of classes is vicious and immoral. It does not make for the realization of the possibilities of human life, and that is what we are after, if there is one trace of sincerity in us. We need, and we must, strike the right note here.

These implied criticisms are not violent, but they are true. Now what are we going to do? We believe in the substantial integrity of the universe, and in the growth and development towards the expression of the ideal achieving capacity of the universe. I said some time since, that we can do nothing dramatic. It requires the hard, but persistent, plodding of the unconquered and the unconquerable will. You know what the method of the modern man is. It is the method of science and the laboratory. In the first place, we find out just what the facts are. Then we find out just what the ends are that we wish to accomplish. Then we find out the conditions that are incompatible with our purposes. Then we trace back the causes that produce those conditions, and then we try to discover the remedies that will alter and change the conditions. That is our task today. The fruits of life are not satisfactory. Then, when we have come to the point that we can see something that can be done, we must do it. Education along the lines of life. Agitation and discussion, and out of the turmoil of the sea of honest inquiry shall spring the full-developed ideal, whose charms shall carry us through the hard work and unceasing toil. In it all, there shall be glorious and exhilarating happiness.

We are not here to learn how to make money, but how to live. We are not here for comfort, ease, luxury and self-indulgence. We are here to fulfill the function of human life in realizing its highest possibilities. Let us cease marking time, let us cease wavering, and quibbling. We believe in man, in justice and righteousness, let us march. The time has come to strike, and let us strike hard persistent blows for the truth and the life that makes men free.

You have aimed at an ideal of a world of justice and abundant living, as opposed to injustice and viciousness.

This ideal might be true somewhere, you say, for it is not self-contradictory.

It *may* be true, even here and now.

It is *fit* to be true, it *ought* to be true.

It *must* be true, something persuasive whispers.

It shall be *true*, you say, and in saying that, it becomes true.⁴

⁴ These last lines, starting with, "You have aimed at an ideal...", are hand-written at the end of the typed sermon. They paraphrase a quote by William James (1842-1910) American psychologist and philosopher, co-founder of American pragmatism. Davis ended the previous week's sermon, "Two Great Principles of the Modern World" (September 19, 1909) with the actual quote from James, found in his book, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909, pp. 328-9.