

A Carpenter in the Face of Danger

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I realize full well that in approaching this subject this morning, we are getting into deep water. It is not difficult to follow truth when it leads us into the paths of righteousness and maketh us to lie down beside the still waters, and restoreth our souls, and even spreadeth a table before us in the presence of our enemies. But when slowly and deliberately, a human being who loves life with all the tenacity of a full-blooded man, walks directly forward to a certain and cruel death for the truth's sake and for man, then we ordinary humans may well stop for a moment, and step lightly. The panoramic picture of human history is dotted with these highlight incidents. Thousands have done it deliberately, bravely, and nobly. These are the moments, when the shadows of skulking treason to human life recede from our view, and we become transfigured by the glory of that which is possible to the soul of man. Century after century men have witnessed this absolute integrity of men to truth, this payment of the last penny of a debt of honor that man owes to humanity and the Universal life. The constant witnessing of this spectacle of faithfulness is the mother of that great daring thought of mankind, that there is something in human personality that is not destroyed in the moment of death. We are therefore approaching the very acme of human achievement, the power to hold one's self absolutely true to conviction, even in the face of danger and death. We cannot understand fully the meaning, the feelings, the tremendous surging flood of thought and emotion that stir the whole being in such a moment. At best we can but climb the hill of imagination, and looking across the intervening fields of reality, get a glimpse of the sublime tragedy of absolute devotion. If, as a result, we only arouse emotions such as come and go like the waves of the sea, leaving no imprint upon the rock-bound shores of apathy, then it were better that we did not look into the tragedies of life. But if it will rouse us from our apathy, reach to the very depths of

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our being, and stir within those tremendous forces that make [us] alert to the true meaning of life, and faithful to its commonplace calls, then it will have been worthwhile. It is not an easy thing to understand the tragedy of life, and here in this incident we have the tragedy in its highest colors. For consider the great universal forces that come clashing together in this momentary incident of time. For this wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and against powers. On the one hand, we have this young high-minded pure-souled prophet. Stirred to the very depths of his being by his vision of the glory and the possibility of human life, and roused to the highest intensity of action as he saw the way life being destroyed, and ruined because men were led by, and held in obedience to, those who not only would not enter the kingdom of life themselves, but would not suffer others to enter. The hopes, the aspirations, the possibilities, the legitimate rights of men and women to life, and its fullness and abundance, were being destroyed and crushed by the overpowering authority of a gluttonous institution that sacrificed the souls of living men upon the cold stones of its dead altars. Here in this young man, and those who followed with him, we have the birth of new hope for men. That men might be free, he had given, and was giving, himself. It was the sap of eternal life rushing up from beneath the cold soil of conventionalism, into the red blood of a new world in one of the perennial spring-times of history. It was forcing the old, and the lifeless survivals of the past into the background with all the power of its wild young blood; it was the birth of a new nation, the spontaneous uprising of mankind, the dawn of a new day in the succeeding days of human history.

On the other hand, we have the jealous guardians of the past, who hold with all the strength and power of their might to that which is, and has been. The saving, the conservative instinct of society is strong. It must be. It would not be worthwhile to strive for the better, if we did not know that society would be conservative in retaining that which it has. Justly do men cling with the utmost tenacity to that which is. In human society, as in nature, it is very difficult for the new variation to appear and to establish itself. These Pharisees, and their followers, with whom Jesus had come into conflict, were the conservators of the old. Their eyes were turned to the past, they had lost their glimpse of the living vital God life, and could see the good and the true and the beautiful only in the remains of a dim dead past. All consciousness of a present, living presence had

departed from them. Religiously and morally they were as the dead leaves upon the ground, from which the vital force has departed, leaving only the forms.

There are the two great universal forces that are in conflict in this tragedy in the life of the carpenter. The dead are striving to kill, and the living are struggling for life.

Not let the personal element have sway for a moment. What is going on in the mind of the outcast and discredited prophet during these days, from the time when he entered the temple and drove the money changers therefrom? Up to that time he had kept true to his principles, the resolution of earlier days that nothing should come between him and his ideal, and its realization, between him and his God, had been faithfully kept. But now he, whom the multitudes had followed, was an outcast, a disturber of the peace, alone with his few followers. The people from all about the country were coming up to Jerusalem to celebrate the great feast of the Passover. He, whose heart bled for them, was spurned by them. The crowds, many of whom had followed after the gentle teacher, were now turning to the temple, and the priests, and the scribes. It was a time of great festival, joy, merry-making, good-fellowship, and care-free festivity. In the midst of it all, there was one soul that was lonely, that was care-burdened, and depressed. His people were making merry, and he, who more than anyone else understood them, and loved them, was shut out from their merry-making. While they were enjoying the feast of the Passover, he and his few faithful friends alone in an upper chamber were having their last meal together. Their common ideal, their common purpose, their common isolation had bound them together by ties as close as human beings can weave about each other's lives. The life of their leader was in danger, and the authorities were already seeking for him. So, the supper ended, and the group broke up, some to go with him, some to deny their intimacy with him, and one to betray him into the hands of the chief priests and elders. It's a picture so true to human life in every detail. The same kind of tragedies are going on in a less dramatic form every day that we live. It is just a breaking of a wave in the great life throbbing sea of humanity, as it comes welling up over the shores of reality.

From this last supper together, they go forth, the leader, and his three favorites to the Garden of Gethsemane, where again he

comes into the presence of his ideal, and his youthful consecration, to see if he has the power and the strength to still remain true to truth. In his devotion to truth he had sacrificed the esteem of his fellow men, he had stood the ridicule of the mob, and the jeering comments, and the insidious questions of the Pharisees. It takes some courage to do that. He had faced the angry mob, and now he was face to face with the problem as to whether that ideal of his, that picture that he had pointed to the God of things as he saw them, for the God of things as they are was still powerful enough to enable him to choose between a glorious death in honor, and an ignominious life of recantation. Can you not imagine, how many times he asked, "Am I right? What if all I believe is wrong? What am I that I should set myself up against the world? Is this worth life? Shall I die for the truth, or shall I live for the nearest approach that I can make to truth?" Try as hard as we may, we cannot enter the Garden of Gethsemane. But the truth wins. The youthful purity comes forth unsoiled, the ideal is still untarnished, and the living God still speaks in him, as he says, "Arise, let us be going, behold he is at hand that betrayeth me."²

Sublime moment in the life of a man, sublime moment in the history of humanity. The rest of the story does not interest us now. It is but the record of an infuriated mob, giving vent to its pent-up rage upon the temple in which the living God dwelt. The victory of truth is won. Were this the only incident in history where truth and honor wins in the face of danger and fear, it would [not] be the basis of undoubting faith in humanity, and human life. But it is going on all the time. All through the known history of mankind, has the essence of this scene been going on. That spirit is still in humanity today. Honor integrity, absolute fidelity to truth and to trust as still the cherished values of human life. Today they are making a new world for us.

In many churches there is observed a conventional ceremony known as the Lord's supper. I have never felt as if the experiences of most of us enabled us to understand the spirit that permeated that group of men on the night when the people were enjoying their feast day at Jerusalem, and the few outcasts were taking their last meal together. Those sublime moments of

² Matthew 26:46.

human life are too sacred to be dealt with commonly. But for a moment before we go, let us think together of that incident, and of similar incidents all through the history of humanity, and consecrate ourselves anew to the truth and the life that makes men free.