

ON DYING ONE'S DEATH

In the name of the Father and of the Son, in the name of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

This past week on Friday we had some guests from Uptown go through 5th City. They were mainly interested in the housing. It was fascinating. Carrie Neff gave the speech, and everyone was rolling in the aisles. They were impacted by that fantastic woman. Every time they asked a question, she was like Jack Cramer just receiving his opponent's best shot and sending it back over the net at 180 miles per hour. Then the visitors went to look at the rehabilitated houses. One woman showed them her apartment. Not only did she spiritize them, but she spun them and sent them out. By this time their eyes were completely out of the sockets. They went through the Health Center and there Miss Freeman took charge and gave them a spectacular lecture on the 5th City models of health care. Then they stumbled out of there and went to the Node and met Lela Mosley, who proceeded to take their lives like a lariat pulling in a doggie and away they went again. She ended by charging them. She said if they are to live their lives, they are to go back to their community and expend them. When she says that, you take it seriously.

Then after all that, we went to the Pre-school celebration. That was rather a fantastic event. All these young children marched in and at the proper time they went inside and had a great celebration. At the end of it, they had a rite and everyone walked out. By that time, the visitors were inundated. In the midst of all this, was one black man, who Carrie Neff characterized as a very middle class, bourgeoisie black. All the time we have known him, he rather tended to sit back. But on that particular day you could just see his life bubbling in him and you could tell he had something brewing inside him. He began to recount everything he saw. He said it was fantastic, he did not know this was going on. He said 5th City was the greatest thing he ever saw in his life and on and on and on and finally he came to his question. He said the one thing he wanted to know was "What do you get out of it?" You could look at him and see that was not really his question, yet on the other side of that, it was an intriguing question. It sort of stopped me. I never did answer it. I talked about something else. About every five minutes he found a way to corner me and it was always the same question. I found out later he not only cornered me he cornered Mike Jackson, he cornered Fred Hess, and anyone else he could find to ask the same question: "What are you getting out of it?"

You know, I did not know how to answer that. "What are you living your life for?" I thought of a lot of things. I thought of the other day when we received a letter requesting us to fill in a recommendation for the Illinois Bar Association for Wardell Brent so that he might become a lawyer. That was worth the whole show; Wardell was the first 5th City emissary. Oh, the 5th City visitors ran into Mrs. Robinson, and she had this to say: "You know I feel my life has been worthwhile because I helped start this thing and

I went around the world and saw, (she stretched this a bit, but it was pedagogical) and saw these 5th cities in every part of the world. And to think an old lady like me, my life is invested in that."

That night we went out and celebrated someone's twentieth birthday. I was curious for a lot of reasons and, finally, in the midst of a lot of beers and everybody having a good time, I turned to this 20-year-old and said, "What have you learned about life in these twenty years?" He really stopped me cold because he did not even have to wait. He said, "Well, I've found out that life is absurd...and that's good."

And then I recalled the Church lecture where we say that the "Rain falls on the just and the unjust, on the people of God and God's people and neither one get any more out of life than the other. Both get a six-foot hole." It suddenly struck me--that is what you get out of it: you get a six-foot hole.

But I think probably this gentleman's question was phrased wrong. The question of one's life is not what he gets out of it--everybody gets the same thing. Do you see that? It does not matter what you do, you get the same thing. The question really is: What are going to die your death over? What is it that you have decided you are going to die your death over? The issue is not what you get out of it, the issue is the cross. And it is always absurd to think that what alters life, what makes life life, is someone expending himself on a cross, of dying, pouring out his life in what may appear to be ridiculous to onlookers.

What is it you have decided to die your death over? Everyone is looking for something to die his death over and, to the best of my abilities, I have yet to find a death that is very glorious. Everytime I have encountered death it has been strange and frightening, but I would have to say I have not found anything that I would want to die my death over in terms of it being something. You are thrown into the minutiae. You die it over that which is grinding, into that which is daily, into that which is monotonous, into that which is unattractive, into that which is tiring, into that which is boring, into that over which, in some senses, you have no control. I thought Jesus' remark to Peter was right when he said, "You know, you get involved with this thing, I mean you take care of my sheep, you may be a young man, but when you are old, other people are going to dress you and they will take you where you do not want to go."

What else do you die your death over? Then, you see the weight of it is that everything you do after that realization is your death. I suspect that is really why it is difficult to wash dishes around here. It is not that dishwashing is dirty work. As a matter of fact, I am really glad when I am assigned to wash dishes so that I can just have some fun getting wet. But what is crushing about it is that once you have decided to die your death over something, over life, or over the future, it comes to you that everything you do is part of that death. It comes to you in the transparency of seeing your death and of living your death. What is required of you is that you take every moment you have and you compound it into that death. That you give the total. That you fill it full of meaning, full of spirit.

I can understand now why some people come and cry around the corner about this and that or the other. It is not because they do not want to do it, but the fact of the nitty-gritty work holds them before the reality of what they have decided to do with their lives. For to decide to renew the Church in order to renew the world means washing many, many dishes and typing many, many pieces of paper, and changing many, many diapers, and going where we do not want to go. And yet what we know in our deeps is that it is the breaking and pouring out of our lives into what we have decided to die our deaths over that is our life and that allows Life. And I suspect that is why we have to come here every week to just get awakened to the fact that all that life is ever about or ever will be about, is the breaking and spilling of life.

The Lord be with you.

George Holcombe

