

DATE: August 16, 1970

SUBJECT: "LIVE COALS CAN BECOME GRAY CINDERS"

The other evening I awoke to a strange apparition. As I opened my eyes in a darkened room I suddenly caught a glimpse of a faint light that flashed on and then disappeared just as readily. And then from another part of the room there came a light akin to the first, flashed on and then off. And then as though I was surrounded faint lights flashed all around me in the room. And then I realized what had happened. A fire fly had somehow gained entry into my bedroom and was flying around lighting his candle and just as quickly extinguishing it. It reminded me of an experience that happened not too long before. When my family was visiting friends, they invited us to spend the night. Their family was rather large and theirs being rather large too there was some shuffling about to find space for all of us to sleep. And so I was given the bedroom of one of the smaller children. The lights were turned out and as I lay in bed waiting for sleep to come. I suddenly became aware of stars shining overhead almost as though there were no ceiling to the roof. I made out the faint outline of familiar constellations. And as my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, I realized that the little child that had slept in that room had placed luminous stars on the ceiling, they glowed in the dark.

The other evening as I was walking under the stars I was reminded of that incident. And there was a thought born then that carried over into my thinking. The fire fly that flitted about in my room creating its own light as opposed to stars on that ceiling that simply absorb the light of the day and simply reflected that light in the darkness. As I looked up in the stars I became aware of that same principle in the heavens. Many of these stars were burning brightly from their own energy, giving off its own light. It was a live star. But numbered among those stars were stars equally bright that only reflected the light of other stars. Dead stars, no burning energy, only a reflection of the light of something that was alive without. What a parable for men living in these days.

As we move among the crowds of friends and strangers at random to bring one's face into focus and look into the emptiness of those eyes to search his soul. How often his life is only a reflection of truths and values that have come from other people, second-hand concepts, no first-hand reality. Truths that are taken only by others who have expressed those facts. A portrayal as we have mimicked in the lives of others. And in those faces who come to focus whose eyes are alight with radiant interest who comes from his own being. And you are immediately aware that here is someone who has been there, whose life reflects that vitality and the growing power of something vital within. You and I fit into the category of one of those. Reflecting only that which is discoverable within the lives of others or projecting that which is happening within our own experience.

Albert Schweitzer said, "One of the real tragedies in life is for something in a man to burn out while he is still alive." Allan Patton's delightful book, "Cry of a Beloved Country," tells of an incident where an old village minister coming to the end of his life has been faced with an obstacle that he can't overcome and his faith becomes momentarily shattered. Visiting in the home of a friend, his friend McFray asks, "Where can a man go and to what can a man turn if his faith is gone?" And Stephen suddenly shakes his head and answers, "I don't know." There do come times in each of our lives when the flame burns low. Perhaps flickers. Tragically in many of our lives there comes that time when the flames burn out.

But somehow we need to discover the source of that flame, that energy. Feed it with the fuel that makes for brighter more powerful exhibition of energy within our lives. A more adequate portrayal of the mysteries that surround us constantly as we have interpreted them in the light of our own experience.

I read about a young minister who as he was serving as an early pastorate came to the point of a nervous breakdown. He had been approaching it for sometime and his ministry was losing the edge of effectiveness. He knew that what it was that had held him in the beginning was beginning to flag and lessen and now he was more or less acting from rote and not from some inner conviction. One of the most delightful experiences that he shared with his wife was to attend concerts and on one particular evening as they returned home from a concert he brought with him an emptiness that had not been satisfied that evening. He discovered that he had lost interest in everything that was at one time meaningful to him. He stumbled into the room, in desperation he fell on his knees beside his bed and he began to urgently pray. And after a few moments he lifted his face and his wife terror stricken as she saw what a terrible ashen color it was and the dead coloring of his eyes. She saw the shape of his lips form the words, "There's nothing there."

There's got to be something there. Even when times and circumstances rise up to prove the inadequacy of our faith there's got to be somehow a handle to which we can hold to convince ourselves that there is an orderliness of wisdom and power beyond ourselves that will make meaning out of that experiences in life that have no meaning beyond themselves. If there is nothing there, anything goes. If there is nothing there, then whose to say that a Hitler has no place in life. But there's no value standard by which is life can be measured that he can be found wanton. If there's nothing there, then we being a part of the animal kingdom might well dwell upon the lower aspects of life as animals dwell upon and find justification for that kind of existence. For to create a fantasy by which to live that has no rootage in truth is not to bring life closer to its proper place. It may only blind ourselves to the true emptiness that we are not willing to accept. We can't live with that kind of experience. We've got to convince ourselves to be aware of that presence that prevades all of life that sets the standard by which our lives might move and be gaged, around which our lives can develop and become significant. The relationship that we have with that kind of order is represented in our faith. Faith must prepare us for good times. As taking the

promises of Christ at face value we conform to the standards and the instructions that he set. Knowing full well that we having kept our bargain will receive from him all of the benefits that he has promised in his teaching. Yet that same faith that prepares us for the reeking of joy must also be significant in the times of want and degravation. When it seems that everything upon which we have stood solidly suddenly collapses beneath our feet and we fall in to an abise. There must be a faith that will accompany us in times such as these as relavent if not more so in the face of good times. Faith is the confidence that we express in the intervection of God's love and meaning into our lives.

There are at least four obstacles that intrude into our lives. That seek to destroy our faith. The first of these is criticism. Historian will look back upon this period of history and near the top of the page must be written that this was a cynical age. We have become cynical about truth. Relagating truth to a level based upon the circumstances and the times rather than upon some eternal scripture that will exist through all times. Moving into a realm of ethical morality that we simply equate the rightness and wrongness of things depending upon the attitudes of people and not upon some value system beyond that which we structure ourselves. We are cynical in our understanding of morality at attime when we ought to be seeking a greater moral relavence in life. Because of our sensitivity to the moral needs that we are trying to satisfy around the world, we are loosing our understanding of morality. Calling it outdated, refusing to adhear to it because it stand in our way of what we think is a good time and the complete freedom to express ourselves. And over and over again as we read of incidents taking place throughout our country we find that there is a lack of morality that is marking the relationship of people and there grapling for maeningful experiences. There's a cynicism about the church, about religion. There's an evidence of ~~xxxxxxx~~ a deceline of concern of religion in our land. Manifest in statistical surveys that various religious and churchs compile from time to time. But apart from that in our relationships with people at large we discover that there is a cynicism about the church and religion today and we are looking more and more in the direction of secular groups and organizations to provide the things that once the church did out of compassion. It is now done by force, forcing the general papulus into doing things that he does not do out of his love for people and his compassion for those that have less than himself. There's a cynicism that religion has the answer today as weilook in other places. And cynicism erodes the faith that binds us to that eternal order.

Another enemy of faith is fear. How often Jesus talked about fear - "Fear not," "Be not concerned." For he understood as modern psychologist understand that fear becomes an obstacle that even the most intellectual personality will stumble upon. Moving into regions that simply do not exist because of some force of fear that makes cowards of us all. Oftentimes we fear those things that may never materialize, but by our fearing they do materialize. Sometimes they rise up to destroy us. We ought to have a relationship with Christ that will enable us to respond to that which will harm, perhaps even destroy. But accept it with a confidence and trust that when we are planted in that relationship of trust that he offers that nothing can hurt, nothing can destroy, nothing can close out. And though we might be momentarily set apart from the

true course that we have chosen for ourselves, that we cannot be defeated when our feet are planted firmly upon the ground and promises of Christ. But we do fear. And there's an emptiness in all of our lives that is packed with fear, some imagined, some reasoned. But when fear exists - faith falters.

Another enemy of faith is aimlessness. It ought to be the responsibility of every man mature in his thinking to determine what values and qualities in life will enable him to become and achieve what he has set out to be. We don't accidentally become personages marked by certain qualities and traits, rather it is an accumulation of the fiber that we bring in the making up of our lives that determines what we are. It is the accumulation of each days experience, the accumulation of each days ~~experiences~~ decisions that ultimately determine the person that we ought to become. We must have a faith that will enable us to stand securely where we are and look knowingly into the past to see where we have been. We can't relive it. We can't go back into the past as though history had not yet been recorded and change the facts. But to simply erase the past out of our memory is simply to deny ourselves the opportunity of learning lessons to see in the lives of other civilizations, in the lives of other individuals what is the ~~procedure~~ fruits of certain procedures, certain choices in life out of our own to see wherein we have failed by the errors that we continue to make over and over again. The empty corners into which unwise decisions have carried us. We must be able to look into the past and find life for tomorrow. But we must stand at the moment for here only is creative activity. Though we may dream of what is to come in days yet un-lived, we cannot dream them into reality. We can only manifest in this moment, in this hour. Utilizing the forces that are at our disposal making the choices that are ours to make we can determine here and now the quality of what tomorrow will become and only on the instant of action can tomorrow be created. Having done that we can move into the future confidently, meaningfully, hopefully. For today well-lived makes every tomorrow a ray of hope. Aimlessness destroys faith.

And then an enemy of our faith is feebleness. How feeble we become in times of great need, in times of crisis. When everything about us moves confidently easily as we would want it to be, no demand upon the inner resources of our lives. We have a feeling that everything is well within if everything is well without. And as long as fate accomodates our needs and brings into reality the things that we would have then we have no cause to test the medal of our faith, to call upon those deep resources oftentimes untested. Yet when those moments do arise and they arise in all of our lives at one time or another we feel the feebleness of our faith, just how shallow our roots lie. We understand just how incapable we are just by ourselves to face up to the challenges and the demands that life has laid out before us. It is in such moments of feebleness that our faith flags and oftentimes dies. In such a time we call upon the will to be. We determine that what we want will come into being. By the power of our positive thinking we are determined that we are going to bring it into focus and let it live and let it become a living reality. And yet the force of our being cannot bring into being that which will not exist otherwise simply by our willing it to be so, refusing to acknowledge a negative factor that would keep it from being. Oftentimes we use our minds to achieve our needs, to reason and rationalize into being what is

needful for the well being of our spiritual life. And though there is a high premium put upon spiritual intellect there must be an embracing of truth to undergird the things which we believe, we cannot live emotionally alone. There must be a element of truth that threads through all of our being. And yet through logical loads we cannot restructure a dying faith. And when we are encountering these forces that destroy our faith, the very deepest of our spiritual resources must come to the surface of our lives.

I was telling you a moment ago about the young minister who knelt beside his bed and cried out, "He's not there." He got up from his knees with a realization that he was on his own. I told you the story just recently as to the events that took place in his life shortly after that night. Things grew worse, experiences failed insignificant. He came to the point of determining that he was leaving the ministry all together. That he had forced himself to believe in something that did not exist. Then one day his life came face to face with a crisis in the life of another person. Forgetting himself, meeting the need of the person suddenly the glow began to flicker again. After he had left the home in which he had been ministering, he and his wife were riding the dirt road there. Suddenly he began to sing an old familiar hymn that she had not heard himsing in a long time. He had gone through the valley of the shadow of death, of the death of the soul. But in a moment while he searched, while he waited, while he refused to give up, that glimmer of faith began to glow brightly once more. Until he came to the close of his ministry, he stood as one of the greatest men of his conference. God slips quietly back into our consciousness, not when we have affected it but when we have permitted it. By forces that are always known to us yet a constance reliance upon his faith and truth in his love.

When John Wesley came to America as a missionary to the Indians, he lacked that conviction, he lacked that faith. Peter Moore cautioned, "Preach it as though you believe it and then you will believe." Perseverance for the truth that is in Christ, to search and to remain constant until the soul can flicker once again. Put your life moving in that crowd of faceless images of humanity. Does your life glow with that inner confidence and trust, or does it only reflect that which others have told you to be true. The choice is yours alone.

Let us pray.