

September 8, 1968

"On Mistaking Pebbles"

Who needs another pebble? That's really the title of my sermon this morning. The other day I read a very startling statement. It read, "The people are unable to see any difference between religions. They are ready to say that one religion is just as good as another one is just as true as the other. And since we are essentially trying to gain the same thing in our religion, then we ought to make no distinction between one religion or the other." Now what's startling about this statement is that these were words of Edward \_\_\_\_\_ describing the status of people in their religious life, one of the contributing factors to the fall of the Roman Empire. I say this is startling because this is a contemporary observation as well. We have long recognized this trend. We see it more clearly every day. This idea that one religion is just as good as another so long as we're trying to achieve the same thing and gain the same ends. A few years ago, the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to have devotional exercises in the public classroom. Immediately there was an outcry from every corner of our nation as offended. People rose up to say, "What's happening in our country?" That we are denying the opportunity to learn about God and to worship him?" But this was short lived. Soon we began to accommodate one another with this observation. "Well after all, what right have we to force Christianity upon a non-believer?" Doesn't a person have the same right to be Jewish as Christian? Doesn't a person have the same right to be a Muslim or a Buddhist? As to be a Christian? Doesn't a person have the same right ~~as to~~ <sup>to</sup> be an Atheist as ~~to~~ to be Christian? What right have we to impose our beliefs upon other people? Doesn't the Atheist ~~to~~ have the same right to impose his belief in the classroom? And so feeling ourselves benevolent and magnanimous in our tolerance toward other people and their beliefs we have begun to move head long into that area of thought, after all, on e religion, one belief i s just as good as another. So long as we're seeking the same ends.

But now wait a minute, this isn't what Jesus said. Jesus said, "One is a pearl, and the others are Pebbles." So what right have we in our contemporary minds to announce to the world that ~~all~~ <sup>all</sup> religions are pearls or all religions are pebbles. Let's take a look at Jesus' description here. It was on an occasion when he was trying to interpret to his hearers the thing that he had come into the world to do and that was to reveal the kingdom of God. And this was beyond their ken, they just couldn't take hold of this concept it was so far beyond their ability to understand and so he tried to express it to him in a number of ways and here he used a number of different analogies trying to depict to them what the kingdom of God really is. And finally he came to the point of saying, "The kingdom of God is like a pearl of great price, so that when a merchant of pearls discovers this one, he is willing to go and sell everything that he had in order to go and to buy that one pearl." Now if I take this concept of the kingdom of God and its likeness to a pearl and the church itself, I don't think I'm stepping out of reason here, although the church and the kingdom of God are not one and the same, but at the same time the kingdom of God ~~exists~~ on earth is incorporated in the church, for the Church is the body of Christ. Christ is the herald of the kingdom of God. And so the Church today facing up to the task of interpreting the Kingdom of God to the limited minds of all of us, ~~and~~ we have come to a point in our growth, to a seeking for revelence, if we can imprint the Church today with one stamp that would best describe its current venture, I think we would be safe in saying that the Church is attempting to become relevent. There are great changes that are taking place in the structure and the outreach of the Chruch today. We incorporated it within the United Methodist Church when last Spring when we chose for our quadrennial emphasis a new Church for a new age. And this is facing up to the fact that the Church must become unique. It must relate. It must not stand apart from ~~the~~ what is happening in the world but it must become involved. And yet the very thing that will make her ~~so~~ great that will impregnate her with new strength and purpose, at the same time can



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"Let us extend our abilities to the limit, and then let us find ways in which to spend it." Instead of constantly saying, "As we grow more and more affluent in our own lives, 'How can we cut back in our contributions to God?' 'How can we draw in the breadth of our service so that we do less and less?'" Instead of growing and flexing our muscles and saying, "Give me a greater task to do, so that more can be done." There's not a real sense of expectancy in the church today because we have little faith that God will enable us to do what needs to be done. But we're saying to God, "You draw in the horizons of your will to fit my willingness to serve." These things are missing in the Church today. And because of it people are with drawing from the Church and they are with drawing from the Church. Not any denomination has escaped this, back at the beginning of this decade, we said, "The Church is at her height." Then we began to see a decline of interest in the Church. And I think it might well reflect one attitude; on the part of people who are sincerely trying to discover the will of God, they may be saying, "Who needs another pebble? Show me a pearl." For that's what Jesus was talking about. He said, the kingdom of God is like a great pearl that one has found, so beautiful, so valuable, that one is willing to take everything that he has and give in exchange of that one thing. Now, we can realize that in the beginning that ~~the Church~~ as we talk about the Church being the pearl, in a world of pebbles, let's not think that we found our way home simply by acknowledging that because the troubles here have just really begun. If I were to go to a jewelry shop and buy a pearl necklace for my wife, there are three things that I could buy. I could put down a few pennies and I could take home an imitation pearl, I could pay just a little bit more and I could get a cultured pearl, or I could dig deep and I could get the real thing. And chances are, on the surface, when I took it home, my wife wouldn't know the one from the other, because I'm sure I wouldn't, on the surface. But the value differs greatly. Now there's a lot of imitation in the world when ~~we~~ we talk about the Church and Christianity. Chad Walsh said that there came the time in his life when he was repudiating classical Christianity. He did not find the virility in the Christian faith that represented what it claimed to be. And he outgrew, intellectually the religious forms of his youth and ~~so~~ so gaining maturity, he simply turned his back upon the established Church altogether. And it was while he was in graduate school that he a group of his companions came together in the evening and each of them, being one who had repudiated Christianity, began to talk about philosophy, they began to experiment. He said, "We came one evening to the point in which one suggested, well let's create a church of our own, let's forget about all the concepts that we once held to be true and be completely original and unique that would fit our needs but not be encumbered by these superstitious beliefs," and so they did. It started out simply as a joke, something to do, but he said, we found that as time grew that we began to rely more and more upon this expression of our needs. Ultimately, he came back into the Church and became an ordained minister in his denomination, but it was by first building up a superficial Church, an imitation of the real thing and wherein he grew out of it, there are a lot of us today who have not grown out of it and who are still living in the imitation. Talk about the movements upon our college campuses today, in a sense this is a groping for a religion by by-passing the authentic thing and trying to restructure something to take its place. And that's why hippie-dom today is in essence a religion, because here is a strivign a groping for something with an unwillingness to let the Church take that place. Both then it doesn't just our off groups or our fragmented groups of society that falls victim to this thing, some of us ~~do~~ do the same thing. We who are deeply spiritual at the root of our lives, many times ~~express~~ express our convictions and spend our energy in community and social organizations which are not the church, but which we let take the palce of the Church. For Jesus taught us if he taught us one thing, there is only one genuine article and everything else is an imitation.

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"I am the way, the truth and the light and no man comes to The Father except by me." Last week at Kiwanis, we had a guest present who announced that he had 23 years of perfect attendance at Kiwanis. That's wonderful, but how far would you have to look to find someone who had 23 years of perfect attendance at Church. Many of us are boasting constantly about the contributions that we make to the world through the various organizations to which we belong, and one man who belonged to a fraternal group said to me, "If we were to live up to ideals of this fraternity, it would be equal to the church". No, by no means, because Christ is not at the center of that fraternal agroup. When can we realize that that which is structured upon anything other than Christ, no matter how good it is is simply an immitation of the real thing. Jesus said, "Whosoever doeth it in my name", you see ther is a difference. So when we try to build up immitation Churches in our society, were playing around with pebbles, overlooking the real thing. Well, there's the cultured pearl and once again we fall victim to creating a church that conforms to our standards and not the standards of Christ. We need to rediscover what Christ said about the Church and what is demanded of us ~~and~~ in order to be a part of it rather than our taking a preconceived notion and our concepts of ~~k~~ what the Church ought to be and imposing that upon Christ. One of the real spokesman of this problem Diedrick Bonhauffer and ~~in~~ the book of his writings entitled, "The Cost of Discipleship" begins with this statement, "The most deadly enemy of the Church is cheap grace. Now, cheap grace comes simply from our watering down the real thing ~~xxxxxx~~ to satisfy us in what we really want it to be." He went ahead to enumerate ways in which we have cheapened costly grace and made it satisfy our own needs, He said, "we substitute intellectual assent for remission of sins." If intellectually we can embrace Christianity, then we don't go all the way ~~and~~ to be absolved of sin, he said, "we substitute justification of sin for justification of a sinner." A man himself needs to be caught up and transformed and not simply to erase sins, individually ~~of~~ perse, but the sinner, one who is drawn and captivated ~~xxxxxx~~ by sin. The third thing that he said about cheap grace was that it preaches forgiveness without repentence. Well, now Jesus said this about the Kingdom of God, he said, "It's not cheap, it's costly." Well, if we have grown beyond the immitator and one who cultivates, who cultures the Church to suit his own needs, that brings us to the one pearl, the true thing the pearl of great price and what is there significant about that that we must recognize if we are to achieve it. Well, when an oysters manufactures a pearl, it begins by a foreign object finding its way into its shell. And then the oyster begins to build up portective coverings in order to shut off the irritation of that foreign object. And then when the shell is opened, out drops a beautiful pearl, of the making of the oyster itself. I don't belief that we woudl offend Christ if we were to take this story of the pearl and projected it just a little further than he did, if we were to say that the Kingdom of God is like a pearl because it begins with and intrusion, and that's what happens when he becomes a Christian, a follower of the way. If there is no intrusion in a persons life, then he has not been converted to the way of Christ. This one thing we know, ~~k~~ it has to begin with something specific, an intrusion from outside ourselves., to take hold of ourselves from within. Or might we say simply, to have an encounter with Christ, to meet him and to admit him into our lives and the second thing is that it builds up as we put ourselves into it. We can't drain ~~xxxxxx~~ upon the energies of the Church and upon the Kingdom of God without putting something back into it because real growth takes ~~xxxxxx~~ place by our putting in equally to our taking out I like to think of it this way, the irritations of the soul ~~that causes to produce and to project ourselves~~ for it is the irritations of that foreign object in the shell of an oyster that causes it to build up, it is the irritations upon our soul that cause us to produce and to project ourselves into the world at its point of needs. John Wesley had an irritation of his soul, when he looked upon a complacent and uninvolved Church.

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Albert Swietzer had an irritation of his soul when he thought about the poor, forgotten people of Africa. Walter           enbush had an irritation of the soul when he was confronted with man's inhumanity to man. And surely our souls are irritated today when we look out upon the world and to see the frailties of man and man's disregard for the rights and the feelings of others. Well, the thrid thing about the true pearl is that its value is dependent upon two things, its size and its flawlessness. The size of a Christian is dependent upon his rate of growth, the way in which he becomes involved and gives more and more of himself to the kingdom of God. In the scripture that we read a moment ago, Jesus said, "Unless one is willing to give up everything, his father, his mother, his sisters, his brothers, everything that he has, ~~he is~~ unless he is willing to give ~~over~~ give all of that up, he cannot be a part of the kingdom of God." Now this disturbs some of us because we cannot understand how Christ would want us to give up things that we cherish this much. He hasn't ask anybody to give it up and he's not going to ask anybody to give it up, but he says if you are unwilling to give up even something so dear as that then you have not come to the place where you can accept the kingdome of God. And the flawlessness of the pearl, is the flawlessness of the Christian life.