

DATE: June 21, 1970

SUBJECT: "THE TOWEL IN YOUR LAPEL"

I'm a lapel watcher. Now you've heard of bird watchers and girls watchers, and I'll confess that I enjoy those too; but I'm a lapel watcher. That doesn't sound very exciting on the surface, but it is exciting. You can tell an awfully lot about a person by looking at his lapel. Usually when I meet a person for the first time, I glance at his lapel because it tells me a lot about him. It may be a membership pin in a service club. It may designate that this person has served as a high officer in this club. It may tell me that he belong to a shrine organization, a fraternity or sorority at some college university. Recently I've seen an awfully lot of minature American flags in lapels.

A few weeks ago there was a man who came to our church, a visitor who wore a sunday school pin on his lapel with at least a dozen bars hanging beneath it. It was for perfect attendance at sunday school. There's so much that says just on a lapel.

Last week I was coming into the church and two young ladies were coming out and as we engaged in conversation, I noticed a minature Ox goat on their dresses and immediately identified with them because I was an honorary member of that group, for a number of years. When it comes to the Christian church there are symbols that we wear in our lapels. The most familiar one is the cross, the tiny lapel cross. And this immediately says to anyone that I purpose to follow the way of Christ. Sometimes it's a little fishhook and that person is saying I'm trying to have a unique experience in following Christ. Occasionally there is a tiny fish and I have one myself that I wear on occasions, that says I have a deep appreciation for the early church and the deep traditions of the church and I remember that this is how the Christians first identified themselves, and it becomes an identity for me. And of all the symbols I have seen representative of the Christian faith, I have not yet encountered the one that best represents Christian discipleship above every other symbol and that would be the representation of a towel.

Unglamorous, yes of course. Imaginative, ah, yes; extremely imaginative. Because this represents what discipleship is all about. The towel. We are all familiar with that occasion in the life of our lord when the towel became symbolic. Jesus was nearing the end of his earthly ministry. He had had his moments of triumph, he had had his moments of disappointment and he had come to the place where one ~~didn't~~ really didn't know in which direction to go. Just a short time before he had great multitudes following him and suddenly they had fell away as though they had become disallusioned. Jesus had been to Jersaulem on a number of occasions. Now he brought his disciples to observe the celebration of the passover. There had been rumblings that Jesus ought not come to Jersaulem because there were many there who wanted to do away with him. But he went instead. The disciples had braced themselves for any eventuality. They didn't really know how Jesus would be received, whether stoned or embraced and it caught them by surprise as they entered into the city to discover that there were great crowds awaiting his arrival and when he ~~kept~~ came they kept shouting to him as though he were a king. The acolytedes represented the arrival of a king. And suddenly their breath began to throb with excitment and anticipation. At last, Jesus was being recognized as the person that he was

the herald of a kingdom. Soon the empty throne of David would be filled, the King was here. At dusk, as Christ and his disciples left the city there was an excitement that couldn't be stilled, as the disciples must have talked among themselves as to what lay ahead in the days to come. But then little happened. Jesus returned to Jerasalem but there were no great displays of loyal subjects receiving a King. The days grew out into a week and the disciples didn't really know what was to happen next. And this was the eve of the Passover meal. Jesus called his disciples together and said we will all go into Jerasalem and eat the passover meal.

Dusk was falling and the shadows lengthened over the narrow streets they become marked with light and darkness. The group was somewhat silent as they approached that house in which a room was prepared for them. They climbed the stairs and they entered into the room, it was empty except for themselves. And this was significant because it was expected of them before they sat down to eat their passover meal that they be accorded the right of washing their feet. It was socially acceptable in all of Palestine. The roadways were dusty and when a traveler had walked for great distances, his feet were uncomfortable from his open sandals that had collected dust. And any host embracing guests, would as the first act of hospitality, bring in a servant to take off the sandals from the feet of the visitor and wash their feet and towel them dry and then make them comfortable for the rest of the evening. And the disciples of Jesus had entered into the room but there was no servant there to wash their feet. I'm sure each one felt a little uncomfortable as he looked over to the side and saw a basin of water prepared for that very thing but no one to perform the right. For you see if there were a number of servants in a household, it was permitted to the very least to do the washing of the feet for this was the most menial of all tasks and only the lowliest servant was asked to perform this one deed. As the disciples waited, Jesus walked over to where the basin of water was. He picked up a towel and draped it over his arm and then he approached each one of the disciples, kneeling down as though he were a servant, he removed the thongs from the sandals, lifted them from the feet, washed the dust away and toweled them dry. And then he moved on to the next. This was an unaccustomed act, the disciples didn't know really how to respond. Peter blurted out and said "You're not going to wash my feet Lord." And Jesus said, "If I don't wash your feet then you won't be able to receive what I have to offer you." And then Peter said, "Then wash my whole body, not just my feet." Then he finished. Then turning and looking full-face into everyone of the disciples, symbolically he handed each one a towel. "What you have seen me do, you go out and do."

There are a great many interpretations of this incident and most of them insist upon the fact that Jesus was symbolically preparing his disciples for a particular roll. I don't quite believe that. I believe that Jesus loved his disciples. He felt a responsibility and a kinship and he saw a need that needed to be met. His relationship with his disciples was such that it did not seem out of place for him to kneel down and wash their feet. And once it had been done he saw that this is a way to impress upon them what discipleship really means. That's why I saw that symbolic of Christian discipleship ought to be a towel, because Jesus is saying something very significant. He is relating to us two aspects of Christian discipleship. One of these is the quality of being and the other is the quality of doing.

The quality of being is what we usually think of as humility. We ascribe humility as one of those aptitudes of a Christian that ought to be embraced by everyone who is a Christian. And this is well and good except that our concepts of humility often is inaccurate. We think of humility often as an attitude. We think of humility as often debasing oneself and one ought never to be debased. There's a hymn that has oftentimes been sung in our church that I just love singing, the phrase in which it says 'for such a worm as I'. Not one of us is a worm, the very least stands tall by God's own gift. Not one person has been born into the world that is unimportant. So there are qualities that come into every life at birth that if each were to mature, he would be a giant among all men. These were the qualities that were impressed upon his being by God through his creation down through the ages. Not one of us is to likened as unworthy, for we are all of great worth.

But oftentimes we step out apart from our fellow man and we put a false importance upon ourselves. It's natural for us to look out for our own interest. It's a matter of survival. If we didn't do it we wouldn't be able to survive, yet many times our concept of self becomes so exaggerated and so glitid that we overrun the rights of other people in order to get for ourselves what we want for ourselves. But we can't really be dis-associated from the larger ~~kingx~~ group. John Donne said, "No man is an island unto himself alone." Only a part of the greater, once removed will shrivel up and die. But there's a false pride that oftentimes we surround ourselves with. To exaggerate our worth and our importance.

Remember the incident that Rufus Jones told about a little new England girl. She was from an extremely wealthy family and on one occasion her mother sent her to a crossroads grocery store, to buy some groceries. Making conversation with the old shop keeper was talking to the little girl and in the vanicular of the interest of the country said, "Well are your hens laying well these days." The little girl brightened up and said, "They could but we are in such a financial position, they don't need to." We have a false pride so often about us that takes out of proportion our true selves.

Remember Jesus told about two men who went into the temple to pray. One was a pharacy and one was a publican. One was proud, an exaggerated pride in himself and there was a spiritual pride not in a materialistic sense but in a spiritual sense and he opened his eyes wide so that he might embrace all of the glow of God's contenance. He said, Lord I'm proud that I'm the man I am not a shriveling human like this little publican over here. Jesus said the publican didn't even lift his eyes because he felt so unworthy by the great God. His simple prayer was a prayer, "Lord be merciful to me." And then Jesus asked, which was the worthy prayer, we know immediately. We've got to be cautious about exaggerating ourselves beyond our true worth and that's humility. Humility is not debasing oneself but being aware of the fact that everyone else is just as important as I am and that God is reponsible for everything that I am and everything that I would be. I can't go it alone, I can't do it alone. Everything that I am is by God's grace and God's love.

An ancient King was small in stature, he felt that he couldn't really challenge his people because many of his countrymen were larger than he. And so he commissioned a artisan of his country to fashion a marmor that distorted his image, to make him look broader through the shoulders and taller in stature. So that everyday when he walked out to meet his people he looked at himself in the mirror, exaggerated and it gave him a sense of confidence and he walked out to meet his people confidnet because of what he pretended to be. So long as there is pretense the true self cannot embracethe gifts of life. So it's a quality of living a sense of humility, that Christ offers.

But then there's not only a quality of being but a quality of doing. To be preferred the towel is to be called to involvement. I've been a guest in many homes for dinner on many occasions and I'm shown the bath to wash my hands before I come to the table and I'm always in a quandary as to where to dry my hands. Now there's the towel that the people who live in the house have used and it looks tempting because no one can see where I've dried my hands. And then there's that beautiful guest towel, hanging there, so pretty it doesn't look like it has ever been used. I know that it is supposed to be used by me, but I'm always wondering whether or not the hostess knows that I am supposed to use it. Many times we look at Christianity as something to be admired. Jesus hands us a towel that is rumpled, damp to be used, to become involved. I dare say that if one was to study the struggle of Christianity from a philosophical standpoint, to evaluate the worth of the statements that have come from prophets and priests, writers, one would say that this is a classic philosophy of life. There's very little weakness to be found in it as such. And there are many of us who simply look at it from an intellectual standpoint and say, this is it. This is a credo by which ~~men~~ all men ought to live, but then we walk away and we deny its very precepts by the way that we act. We admire it but we don't become involved with it. The towel motivates us to become involved. Many times we shy away from many of the important areas of life that need to be resolved and we have the answer or at least we have a portion of the answer. Everyone talks about peace. I saw a car the other day, only yesterday, that had two fingers extended in a shape of a 'V' and under it the words 'spread the word.' Now we've talked a lot about peace and we know what makes for peace, but we haven't yet practiced those ideals that make for peace. That's how peace comes, in involvement.

We talk about brotherhood, we say everyone has equal rights. Yet we deny them personally. We say that's alright for everyone else and as long as these are exercised in their places then that's fine, but now don't intrude upon me. Intellectually we embrace the fact of human rights but we deny them oftentimes by the way that we live. The real troubleplaces of life where we ought to become involved are the places that we shy away from, retreat into those inter sanctuaries where living according to the standards that we profess. This above all, we need to become involved in those standards where needs are manifest.

I'm a lover of essays. I have a number of books in my study of essays but I have a half dozen volumes essays of Frank Boream of Australia which I love above all else. He's such an interesting writer. There's one that he wrote after an evening of walking out into the country. He said that he came upon a strawberry patch surrounded by a fence and out in the middle of that strawberry patch was a scarecrow. He described it, a strange hat over the head of straw, ragged gloves hanging from outstretched arms, and bibbed overall forming the shape of a body and it stood in the middle of the field guarding the strawberries. But what amused him was that on each extended arm there sat a crow. And every moment or two, a crow would fly down from the ~~xxxxx~~ arm and eat a strawberry, enjoy it and fly back down again. And outside that fence there were dozens of birds chirping, wanting those strawberries but afraid to venture in because of the scarecrow. While the two crows sat comfortably on his arms and ate the strawberries.

He said, you know if I were a crow you know what I would do. Every day I'd go out and I'd soar just as high as I could, maybe to the top of a steeple of a church. And I'd look out across the countryside and I'd search out other scarecrows and I wouldn't waste my time going to other place, I'd just go to the scarecrows because everywhere there's a scarecrow there's something valuable and I'd find it. At the end he slashed with an application of that truth. He said, we too ~~have~~ are faced with scarecrows, places where we are afraid to venture. Incidents with which we are afraid to become involved and here are the places that need us most of all. He said if I was the man I ought to be I would search out the scarecrows and there I would offer myself. Christ prefers the towel of motivation to become involved, and imaginatively. Too many times we stop at the concept of the towel as simply servitude, looking at it as representing the fact that one ought to become enslaved to the menial tasks of life. But Christ opened up the fullness of life and said don't become submerged at any level of life, embrace it all. He used imagination in his own life, over and over again he was discovering new insights. The out of the common place that other people had seen and ignored. It thrills me to see something discovered in the common place. That's one thrill about living in Gatlinburg where so many are artists and craftsmen. At one time I thought that just about every craft that had been devised had been bought up and then someone's coming up with something new. Getting little river rocks and painting obscure facial expressions, characterizing people and things on little rocks. Chipping away stones to give a likeness of animals and people and things. Exciting to discover in the common place something that someone else has overlooked. There have been men in history that have been characterized by that ability.

Remember when Michelangelo went to Florence and he came upon a piece of marble that had been chipped upon. He inquired and he was told that many artisans had come to the city and the city had given them use of it and they had chipped away to make a monument and nothing ever became of it and now it had been so chipped away that it was useless. Michelangelo went the city fathers and he got permission to use that piece of marble. He built a fence about it and day after day the passersby could hear the chipping away of his hammer and chisel against the cold stone. And then one day he broke away the fence and there stood the magnificent statue of David. One of the great art treasures of all times. Scores had looked upon that marble and they saw it a piece of wasted stone. But Michelangelo saw David in it and he shipped it away and David came to life.

There's a poem that I like to quote that is reminiscent of this sort of thing. It goes -

A road, a tree, a hillside
And a white cloud floating by
Ten men walked down that road and all but one passed by.
He looked at the tree, the road, the cloud with an artist mind & eye
And he put it down on canvass for the other nine to buy.

There are some of us who can discover in the commonplace the real excitement of living. And others wait for it to be revealed to them. The way that Christ has taught us to live is to become aware of the commonplace. To let our imaginations take hold in our lives so that we simply do not follow the forms that others have envisaged, but that we discover a uniqueness and individuality within ourselves and so

we embrace and we become apart and we awaken those concepts within ourselves that have lain undiscovered. The Christian life is not that only a segment of life is awakened, but that the entire body becomes awake to the world and plays upon many strings. To be handed the towel is to become involved in every area of growth and not just one way alone.

A little lad and his mother were visiting an arm museum. And as they walked down through the corridor looking at the various works of art they came upon a statue of Christ with outstretched arms. Come unto me. Just a few moments before the little lad and his mother had come to the statue, a caretaker had passed by dusting off the works of art he had dusted off the statue of Christ and he had laid the towel over his arm, the arm of the statue. And so the little boy looking up at the statue said mother come here, here's a statue of Christ. He's handing you a towel. Exactly. That's what Christian discipleship is all about. This one symbol comes closer to the heart of Christian discipleship than any other. A quality of being, a quality of doing. And he handed him a towel.

Let us pray.