

WHERE THERE IS NO VISION -- THE PEOPLE PERISH

Sermon

Eugene Sparrow

1957

May I say at the outset what a great pleasure it is to rejoin you in worship. The affect you had upon me last time was such that I wanted to review somewhat the nature of our last occasion.

I remember the difficulty getting time to collect my thoughts sufficiently to say something of some significance. At that time my constant pre-occupation was with an impasse between the teachers of Plainville and the Board of Finance of Plainville, which, by the way -- because of change in public opinion, was resolved in favor of the children by adequate increases in salary.

History has repeated itself, for again I find myself assuming a new position, laden with different responsibilities and consequences. I recall that I reviewed my ordination sermon of 1949, for I felt the need to talk with someone relative to my indecision as to whether or not I was fulfilling my objectives as far as what small contributions I might make toward furthering the things in which I believe.

I must say -- that you challenged me to step out again beyond the veil of security to less known fields but with a renewed sense of purpose. I am presently with the Urban League of Springfield, and, as I have become more acquainted with the many tasks involved in this position, I feel I am very close indeed to the Unitarian Ministry. I feel that I have the opportunity to work -- that I shall do all in my power to tap that which I believe, as a result of my Unitarian training, to exist in the hearts of many men, the desire to live in peace and fellowship with all mankind.

In defining the job, as I see it, what becomes obvious immediately is that one must have Help, in abundance.

At the time of each invitation to preach from a Unitarian pulpit I have a few moments of indecision. I am an ordained Unitarian minister -- as such -- what are my responsibilities to this new group. Religiously speaking without doubt I am a Unitarian in thought and in deed. Should my sermon therefore delve into some theological or philosophical evaluation of this dynamic system

of thought? Reality then breaks through -- I am not a Unitarian minister to a congregation because I am a Negro. This fact I cannot escape -- would it not be more beneficial to put aside my ministerial qualification which in the main is that of graduating from Harvard Divinity School, being ordained in the Ann Arbor Unitarian Church and remaining on file in the Office of Ministry at 25 Beacon Street -- put aside this and share with you my work -- invite you to help with the problem of our time - human dignity for all.

My work with people in the area of human relations and my experience dictates the dissolution of the conflict and I speak to you as a Negro who co-incidentally is a Unitarian minister.

In reviewing the responsibilities placed upon those of us who adhere to Unitarian systems of thought, I shall ask you for help. Before being specific, I would like to make a few observations relative to some of the problems man must solve before there can ever be real visions of peace.

The role of religion down through the ages has been one of aiding the individual to adjust to the environment in which he found himself. In the earliest stages of human development, man had little, other than his physical strength and his mental potential, to aid him in his battle for survival. Although there were struggles between groups of people, the greatest struggles were protection from forces of nature. Unquestionably, man's ability to remember, to communicate, aided him in evolving methods of control -- primarily psychological -- over the powers in the universe. Man, seeing the splitting of a tree many times his size and strength by a tremendous flash from above, would have been utterly disorganized if he did not feel there was some way he might protect himself from this force.

To live in fear of such power would have left man helpless in the battle against constant threats against his mere existence. Using his greatest power, the mind, he constructed a mental defense against the frightening force. How simple it is to recognize this power as greater, pay homage, do the unseen powers bidding, and thus -- be protected from harm! Then, began the erection of entwining, complicated, intricate systems of worship -- directed toward control or subservience to forces feared by them. Many of these systems of protection from the unknown remain with us today even though the need for fear has been greatly reduced by the greater understanding of that which surrounds us. The primitive used himself as a guide to his quasi-understanding the unknown, for there was not much else

upon which he could draw. His ruler must be powerful or have qualities of spirits -- supernatural.

Human sacrifice, animal sacrifice, sacramental fruits of the vine, with many diverse forms of ritual peculiar to a specific environment or historical accident, evolved. Through these ceremonies, man enabled himself to live with a sense of well-being and harmony with the universe despite his fears and lack of understanding. Although the visions, the systems, invented by the primitive have been later repudiated, those purposes were fundamental and necessary.

Today, if we would look behind many of the modern practices of ritual, we can see traces of the past needs creeping through although the scene has changed completely. We can see that religion today is often used to buttress fears related to ignorance or the unknown. The task of survival, in the primitive-sense has passed, but the survival of man in his own image is the task. Unlike the primitive, man has little fear of the universe but, as the primitive, he fears. He too fears the unknown which at the present moment appears to be -- man, himself. This, of course, is not to suggest that there is not available to all men sufficient knowledge of "man" and his being. It is rather to suggest that perhaps modern man has not made as adequate use of that which is present for his use in terms of his survival. Man can unleash energy of infinite power from infinitely small unseen particles. He has now ventured into outer space. Man relatively little fears the wrath of a powerful God -- but rather fears the wrath and often irrationality of his fellow man.

I am so very often amused when I hear modern man so glibly sing the praises of progress which he may not long enjoy if he does not use the "milk of human kindness" soon enough to allow himself to evolve a system for continued life of his own specie.

The primitive served Gods out of fear and reverence. This was completely understandable, for it was visible that there was a very powerful force which every so often expressed displeasure by creating situations of discomfort for its servants who might have some way or another displeased the Master.

When I think of the present day Master and the tolls we pay in sacrifice to them, I wonder. Time is one of our masters -- eg. 1,500,000 persons injured on the highways, 38,000 killed; the increasing deaths due to diseases relative to tension; the many who are socially ostracized in institutions due to an inability

to cope with the many fears and inadequacies induced by the complexity of the fast approaching age of push-button existence; the civilized man of Germany who became a Nazi, or -- a Blackshirter of Italy or an Emperor worshipper of Japan, or the money-worshipper of today -- the gadgeteers -- the many Jones families. Fortunate again for the human specie, among us has always stepped forward, a man, or an accident of history which has revealed a vision as far as taking man a step further toward a greater ideal of "Peace on Earth and Good Will toward Men". We are acquainted with Hammurabi, Jesus, Paul, Martin Luther, St. Thomas Aquines, Mahatma Ghandi, Jefferson, Lincoln and presently Rev. Martin Luther King or the Negro families of Little Rock [and] Nashville. In scanning the world today, I see little of as much significance for our way of life as the bravery of Mrs. Counts of Charlotte, her father who watched [her] walk through a crowd of 500 -- jeering, spitting and throwing debris, who has sent her children to school in the face of such an overwhelming, violent feeling on the part of the people of Charlotte, N.C. There are many others at the present moment in different parts of the south, but recognizing the minuteness of her child against the possible fury of a whole town, I feel that her sacrifice, for the promulgation of an ideal, is paramount in terms of the present world situation. I wonder what I would do if it were my child, and an ideal was involved. I hesitate, in all honesty, before I answer. The ideal -- the American ideal, of equality of opportunity for all -- when thought of by well-meaning individuals or groups in terms of "gradualism" in relationship to the problems that are prevalent in the world today -- is a negative consideration.

The unrest in the world today is greatly influenced by the refusal of heretofore politically & socially passive people to remain passive. It is the coming to the fore on the part of different groups determined to experience human dignity at all costs -- which has influenced this unrest. It is a form of force combatting another form of force which up to now was well controlled. That the powers of the world have been unable to forecast this realistically and work for greater co-existence with the many different cultures and racial backgrounds is another case of "where there is no vision, the people perish."

Being more specific, just what has all of this to do with Unitarianism and more specifically us, here today! As I indicated earlier, I have a problem which I would like to share with you and, if you will, invite your help. I have in connection with my duties as Executive Secretary of the Urban League of Springfield, a secondary position as Director of Camp Atwater.

Camp Atwater is a camp steeped in the tradition of the past decade. It is a beautiful camp located in East Brookfield, Massachusetts. Camp Atwater was the first camp in the United States owned and operated by Negroes. Rev. William N. DeBerry of Springfield -- familiar with the lack of opportunities 35 years ago for Negro youth -- set out to provide an excellent facility for youngsters from all sections of the United States where they might come together and enjoy themselves away from home in a friendly congenial atmosphere. For years, youngsters from over 26 states gathered in East Brookfield for the summer. After the death of Dr. DeBerry, many of the benefactors of Camp Atwater discontinued their help and the Urban League became administrators of the camp. As the Urban League is, however, supported by the Community Chest the work with Atwater, then, had to become a week-end responsibility and vacation job for the executive because many of the services provided were for children from the South, in large proportions. (Community Chest funds are for small, local geographic areas) Here was a place where parents, in the South, felt secure in the knowledge that, their children might feel relatively free of fears and social pressure. Through the years, the entire economy has expanded, cost of living has soared, and our need has continued without the financial resources to maintain the camp at its previous high standard. Our facilities are still, as far as the basic camp is concerned, equal to any camp in New England. That much needs to be done to many of the supplementary facilities is unquestionable. In viewing the future of Camp Atwater, it become obvious that it must and can serve a new need in our present world of crisis.

At the present moment, in our country, it is the one and only camp in the United States which can contribute greatly to the field of inter-group relations in a very meaningful way. We have children from all of the plantation southern states. Up to the past summer, on a voluntary basis, the camp has remained basically segregated although the registrations have been open to all for many years. The vision for the future is an integrated camp, the possibility of a workshop of integrated living for those who know little other than distrust, fear, and insecurity from other than their own group. With a continued direct program, Atwater can begin to move with the times and continue its long history of satisfying needs.

Why do we need help in this venture? As you know, prejudice is not restricted to any one group of people. There are many of our group who have resisted this new necessary role of being full

citizens, violently. Many who have worked at Atwater for years feel it should always remain a "Negro Camp" dedicated to "Negro Youth". Last summer 8 of our staff from over the years resigned their positions because we began a program of integration. The present demands that to serve Negro youth is to have them live in freedom and with a sense of security. That America, if she is to regain the prestige lost all over the world, must become an integrated society is unquestionable. To serve the Negro youth and all youth, is to expose them to the things which will better equip them to live in the future society.

Our financial base at camp is so insecure however, losing a certain number of campers prove to be financial burdens. That many, to block this program, may suggest that campers do not return was a real possibility. On the other hand, that many in the south hoped that we would provide an atmosphere of inter-group relationships is a fact. This is a case where one cannot fail if one ventures forth, for there is too much at stake. We would like to improve providing of an atmosphere and invite at our expense some of the children of Little Rock and other parts of Tennessee to camp with us in an integrated camp. To do this correctly we must have extremely competent staff -- many trained in recreation; in inter-group relationships and willing to work for an ideal. We at Atwater would like to offer our services towards the eventual dissolution of the psychological need for segregated living both North and South. We need children from all groups in order to establish a correct climate; we need additional staff from all groups. We would like to afford more foreign counsellors from the foreign counsellor pool for which one must pay a stipulated sum toward their travel costs. To reclaim our beautiful buildings and grounds, we need volunteer help in the Spring -- people who can understand the possible significance of such a camp season next summer -- the summer of 1958. We would like to have people of the North, who feel that they would like to have an active part in the problem of the south -- individually sponsor a youngster from one of these troubled areas of school integration. We would like average American Citizens -- North and South -- join hands and show the way on a volunteer basis -- without threat of force. This is America's strength! -- DO WE HAVE IT? We would like some of your children registered for Atwater next summer! Is this asking too much? [*Tell something of the summer -- Vermont, Paul. Unitarian Work Group.*]

It has often been asked of me -- how can we in the North help -- These, my friends are some of the ways -- find something in which you can personally become involved and in that vision will

you become more active in the bringing about of a richer life for all. "Where there is no vision, the people perish" -- Where there is a vision, the people prosper!

Unlike the primitive -- our religious convictions remove the veil of fear. Often though, one could ask what replaces the fear. It is my feeling that the desire to reach greater understanding is our answer. To fight Gov. Faubus from this distance is important -- but to provide rich experiences is great positive. We must then dedicate our own lives to greater understanding which can come through actual experiences. I feel secure that, given the opportunity, the Unitarians will be an active part in widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower.

Intolerance in our society has been allowed to develop and remain as an ill for too long a time. This intolerance is not only along racial lines -- but bitter among nationality & religious lines. Brotherhood work is an attempt to meet this illness that is insufficient. Much of our text books in schools which could do a fundamental job in teaching the true American scene have been stunted toward one phase of American life. This of course is because books sold in the South must favor the area of life where there can be little controversy raised. The ideal family, the ideal life, are the main tools of teaching. The elementary school is the former of the nation's conceptual scheme as well as the foundation builder of skills. Until there is a consistency of the theme "Love thy Neighbor," youngsters may hit or miss -- if we cannot afford to miss a love of country -- we cannot afford to miss its concepts of life "Love thy Neighbor".

There is much to be done everywhere and with a seriousness and personal involvement in all areas related to greater understanding.

In conclusion I would like to site just a few wonderful experiences from our summer at Camp Atwater.

- I. Our program.
- II. How we set it up. INTEGRATE - EXCHANGE + CAMPERS.
- III. REACTIONS TO IT
- IV. ITS SUCCESS.

Benediction:

By desiring what is perfectly good, even when we do not quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the power against evil, widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower.