

[This is the opening of the second presentation of this sermon]

“SO VERY SENSITIVE”

Eric Ericson – the psychiatrist – speaks of maturity in terms of strength and sensitivity. One of the French biographers of Jesus called him “a very strong and a very sensitive man.”

We ourselves are quite accustomed to think of strength as an essential element in character and personality – we all want to be strong – not weak – but we are inclined to forget sensitivity as the hallmark of a full grown man, a fully mature woman. Actually the insensitive man is not a complete man. He’s truncated. He may think of himself as normal, matured, sensible, hardheaded, practical. But the truth is he’s sick. Ours is a callous culture – so afraid of weakness – it emphasizes the tough – the two-fisted – strenuous life. We carry around in our heads stereotypes of the macho male – Burt Reynolds – Bella Abzug types as the liberated woman as hard-hitting, go-getting varieties—we wean our children on mighty doses of TV violence. I had a likable fellow tell me all about the “Dukes of Hazzard”- but he didn’t a thing about “Peter Rabbit” or for that matter The Baby Jesus. “Who?”

“Blessed Are the Sensitive”

We live in a callous culture – to be tough is a middle-class-middle-age American ideal. The gun-totin’ two-fisted – hatched faced – muscle bound cowboy is obviously still a-riding and a-chawing and a shootin’ his way into the heart of millions. I have already told you about the four-year-old – who—upon being informed that her grandmother had fallen and hurt herself – innocently inquired, “Who shot her?” It was a natural question for a child who had been weaned on Westerns – to whom saloon brawls were more real than bedtime stories about Peter Rabbit or for that matter, the Baby Jesus. “Who?”

And as our children grow older we teach them the aphorisms of in-sensitivity, toughness – “You gotta be thick skinned in this world, old boy.” “Look out for number one, honey bun.” “The almighty dollar is your only friend.” “To get ahead you gotta be tough.” Etc.

Come now, as Christians did our Lord teach us to be loutish or loving? Did he teach us to be tough or tender? Who did he say would “inherit the earth?” The aggressive? The harsh? The self-assertive?

Oh you know what he said. Well enough – “Blessed are the meek” he said “for they shall inherit the earth.” And who believes that? Well, it is not a part of the popular culture now is it? We might get the real sense out of this if we truncate it to read “Happy are the very sensitive for the whole earth is theirs to enjoy.”

Now we do not mean by the “very sensitive” those whose feelings are easily hurt –those who so quickly take offense and pout and wear a chip on their shoulder – are grievance collectors – no – these people are never happy – rather they whole earth is theirs only to be absolutely miserable in –

No – we mean by sensitive – those who are 1. aware of God’s great creation round about them – those 2. who are in touch with the needs of all God’s creations and 3. those who have a finely wrought sense of duty to the Creator in an unfinished world, to be creative themselves.

In the first place, therefore, “only truly happy are those who are so very sensitive to – who are aware of (responsive to – meek before) God’s great creation round about them – for the whole earth is theirs to enjoy.” They may not be able to buy a drugstore philodendron but they have the whole created earth as an inheritance. Can the religious man – the Christian – blunder or swagger through the created universe so wrapped up in his rhinoscerousness he cannot see the wonder of God’s world? No – the man of faith stands open-souled and meek before the mystery of all created things, full of awe and joy. Like Francis of Assai, he looks at nature through the eyes of God, and like God finds that it is very good. Like St. Francis a sense of identity with all created things.

Some years ago – a boy who had just read Genesis – stood on the beach waiting for what Job called “the eyelids of morning” to open – and just as the ball of the sun rose from the water – he said very softly like the Pharaoh Akmaton “let there be light! And there was light” – and his sensitive spirit rejoiced to see the miracle of creation repeated again. This moment at sunrise was to him what the Scots once called a “wee glory.” A brief moment when some bit of truth or beauty enters the soul. It was what Deborah (of the Old Testament) felt when she saw really

how “the stars in their courses” – what Job heard when “the morning stars sing together”. It was what warmed the soul of the wisdom writer when he remembered, “There be three things that are too wonderful for me, Yea, four which I know not. The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the perils of the sea; and the way of a man with a maiden.” (Proverbs 30:18-19) It was what Isaiah experienced when to his senses the autumn trees clapped their hands and to the Psalmist when the little hills skipped in the wind and overhead the sun was a champion runner. You see life is full of small glories to those sensitive enough to be aware that “the heavens do declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork (Proverbs 19:1) That sort of sensitivity creates scientists, poets, artists, saints.

Who could be bored? How can life be ho-hum – how can days be cramped – how can opportunity be limited – for the sensitive spirit, for the whole earth is theirs for an inheritance. They are as aware of God’s great creation as was Jesus walking the hills of Nazareth. Into our Lord’s open life flew birds of the air, into his receptive being came lilies of the field, sunlight and dry grasses – who would have dreamed any man could have found so many fragments of beauty along common Galilean paths? Where God’s creation was concerned, Jesus had a seeing eye and a receptive spirit. Our Lord was right – “Happy are the very sensitive – for theirs is the whole earth to enjoy.” What better thing could mothers and fathers give their children than eyes that see and spirits that are receptive to God’s created world? A child taught to find fragments of beauty in every path will find some happiness every day that he lives.

Happy too are those in the second place who are very sensitive – not only to God’s creation but to the needs of all God’s creatures.

Can the religious man, the Christian, be insensitive to the cry of pain? Christ taught us that God’s heart aches when a sparrow falls – when one lamb is lost, not to mention one lost boy.

William Blake, my favorite poet – though like his wife – he is “oft beyond me” – was voicing this delicate sensitivity to all God’s creatures when he wrote:

A Robin Redbreast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage
Each outcry of the hunted hare
A fibre from the brain does tear.

And another poet, James Stephens was so very sensitive before the hurts of all little things when he prayed for:

Little things that ran and quail,
And die, in silence and despair!
Little things that fight and fail,
And fall, on sea and earth and air!

It is their tenderness – this sense of touch – this feel – for pain – in all created things that one sees in the “very” meek,” i.e. the very sensitive Christ. He felt blinded before a blind man – his heart withered for all withered hands – he was indeed “touched with a feeling of our infirmities” as the Book of Hebrews says.

Our Lord discovered that happiness does not come to those who harden themselves to the world’s pain – to those who refuse to hear the cry of all alienated things – but to those who hear the crying and come close to care and to comfort.

For example, who are the secure families? Those who pretend they are beyond hurt? Those who make believe they can buy their way out of all pain? Those who lie about their need for sympathy, for help? Those who say, “We’re O.K., always fine! Ha Ha! Always on our way to the next fun scene! Always jolly!” Are the happy families those who say, “We’re too tough to hurt?”

No – the secure families are more likely those who are what the New Testament calls “tenderhearted,” sensitive to each other’s needs, quick to know what hurts, what grieves, giving warm sympathy when it is needed (not just sharp rebukes), giving a shoulder to cry on when the time demands it as well as a steady guidance, being just plain kind to one another, forgiving one another, “as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” You see, St. Paul was no fool.

How sad it is when a child has to tell his woes to strangers – when he fears his father’s muddle-headed anger or his mother’s indifference or hysterics. These children all have eyes alike – like the little animals hunted – uncertain where to turn – or who loves them – frightened they are at first – but later on belligerent – mean.

Happy is the family, in touch, very sensitive to and in touch with one another’s needs – this old earth’s life for them is very good. And blessed is the child who has grown up nurtured with parents who have taught him to be sensitive to the needs of others beyond his own kin. You

know, when the children come to the church – they bring their family atmosphere along with them just as they bring their shoes or caps. And there is all the difference in the world between those children who have come from atmospheres that are tense, tightfisted, hard toward the world, haughty, bitter and those who come from warmhearted, generous backgrounds, sympathetic toward all folk, open-minded, humble before differences in race, culture, education, believing in practice that we are “all one in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Yes there is a difference in families.

There is a legend concerning the Apostle John that when he was too old to preach to the Churches any longer and too feeble to stand – his friends carried him to the meetinghouse on a litter and that his sermon on his last Sabbath was just one sentence. “Little children, love one another.”

No amount of tough sophistication can sweeten life and make it happy – as an obedience to that one injunction: “Little children, love one another.”

And already we have spoken our third point:

Happy are those who have a sense of duty to the creator himself in an incomplete world – to be creative themselves – for they shall inherit (come by) a full life on this earth.

Albert Schweitzer in his jungle hospital in Lambarene’ was a near perfect example of what I am trying to say –

He was God’s very sensitive man

Aware of the world of creation

In touch with the needs of all created things and also

With a sense of duty to the Creator to be a source of healing himself

It is this third sensitivity that delivers the sensitive soul from maudlin sentimentality – from meaningless emotional outbursts over life’s beauty or pain – and sets him to work to interpret or to challenge, to change, to comfort.

So –the poet, the musician, the teacher, the scientist, the physician, the saint is born – each one takes up his particular cross to create a new world with and for God.

Now – we cannot all be Albert Schweitzers – but

- Whenever a father interrupts his schedule to be his boy's companion for a day – a whole day – “my Daddy gonna be with me a whole day!” –
- whenever a mother puts aside her profession –or her bridge game – her church work to comfort and guide a child –
- whenever one human being braves the rest to help an outcast, befriend the lowly, fight for the rights of the downunder –
- whenever a teacher takes special pains with one backward student –
- whenever any one gives of himself to another –with generosity and grace – asking nothing in return
- There you find a small reflection of Christ on his cross – the Christ who said: Blessed – Happy are the meek – the very sensitive – those who are aware of and responsive to the wonder of Creation.

Those who are in touch, in close contact, with the needs of all created things – those with a sense of duty to the Creator himself – happy are they, I say for life on this earth is for them a never ending source of joy.