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CONFERENCE SERMON

THE MESSAGE OF RELIGION TO SOCIAL WORKERS

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Text: "Now abideth faith, hope, love." 1 Cor. 13: 13.

My subject is the message of religion to social workers. Were the occasion different, I might reverse the theme, and speak on the message of social workers to religion, to the church,—on the message which the people who are striving to make the earth a more decent place to live in have for the people who are striving to prepare the people of the earth for a more decent habitation.

I am not only willing, but eager, to admit that there is something for the church to learn from the agencies at work in the world today for social uplift. As a minister, I hail any help that can come from anywhere toward solving the problems which have to do with lending a helping hand to our brothers and sisters who have become lamed in the struggle of life. At other sessions of this Conference we preachers, whose work is chiefly spiritual, and incidentally social, sit at the feet of trained and experienced leaders in the field of social redemption, and listen to what they can tell us of the best ways to help humanity.

But is there not also something for the agencies at work for social betterment to learn from the church, and should not any toiler for the common good, any friend of the man who is down or out or wrong, any apostle to the underfed and underclothed and underpaid and under-taught, any evangelist to defectives and dependents, any reformer whose work is chiefly social and only incidentally spiritual, hail any help which may come from anywhere that will make easier and surer the passing of the slum, and the lifting into health and happiness of the hurt children of our race? And this is the particular session of the Conference at which the church may give its message, at which social workers sit at the feet of religion to listen to any word of encouragement and advice it may have to offer as to the best ways to perform our common task.

For let us not for a moment imagine that in any sense our word is different. Let us not proceed on the theory that the preacher or church worker in his distinctive sphere and the reformer or social worker in his distinctive sphere are dealing with hostile problems,

or seeking separate goals; for they are not. Both are trying to save the world, if you will put into salvation as big a meaning as He put into it Who died to save the world. When the Son of Man said: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me", he wiped out all sectional and sectarian and national and class and creed and color and age lines, and pronounced for the sanctity of our common humanity. When He said: "Whosoever shall give a cup of cold water to a disciple in my name shall not lose his reward", He tore to rags every veil priestcraft would hang between the common life and religion's holy of holies, and made everything that is secular spiritual, and so everything that is spiritual secular. Social workers are religious leaders, and religious leaders are social workers. Let us recognize the divine solidarity of our mutual task; for the God Who leads us is one God, and He is in all life.

Nevertheless, while our goal is the same, the tools we use are different, and our vision of the common task which confronts us varies; so that, as we work away, it may be helpful for us now and then to pause in our toil and look up and salute each other, and listen to what our brothers who labor on another part of the work may have to say about efficiency; for efficiency is the big purpose in a Conference like this. The annual Conference of Charities and Correction is vastly more than a pow-wow of sentimental altruists. It is a gathering of scientific specialists, in which each, from the angle of his personal training and experience, gives to all the others his estimate of the best ways to reach the common goal. The sermon of the Conference is the message of religion to this end.

What, then, has the church to say to social workers? What contribution can religion make to the forces which labor to destroy the social evil and the drink curse, to secure better laws and kinder conditions for childhood and womanhood and wage-earners, to institute a saner treatment of drunkards, drug victims, prostitutes, and criminals, and to open a door of hope to all the defectives and dependents of the race? The message is threefold. "Now abideth faith, hope, love."

Faith

It is first a message of faith. It declares that you cannot save the world without God. Faith stands for the recognition of the spiritual forces at work for the world's redemption. It declares that there is something beyond good laws and just wages, beyond eugenics and environment, heredity and health, fresh air and recreation centers, and well-cooked food, beyond charity and philanthropy. It is worship. It is the soul's passion for God. It is the hunger of the human heart for its Heavenly Father. This is the deepest cry of human nature. God made us for Himself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Him. Man has forever, and no program of human betterment is adequate which leaves the eternal out of the count.

You must go further back than social conditions for the causes of social unrest. You must go deeper down than the dirt of a slum to find the explanation of the ruin of a soul. Why do certain people yield to certain temptations and get into trouble? Why are some of the members of our human family in the penitentiary this morning, and other members of the same family here in the church? It is no answer to say that it is because some of us have succeeded in not getting caught. Why are there defectives and criminals and paupers? You say that it is because of heredity and environment, but your theory breaks down before you get three steps from your front door. Many with the best heredity and environment are traveling the lost trail. You must dig deeper. You must get down to personality. If the patient is ever cured, the remedy must reach not merely his surroundings, but him, his inner life.

Man is essentially a spirit, and incidentally a body. He is a soul, and merely has a body. While his body reacts tremendously on his soul, only a soul can lift the body. During the recent past, we have swung away from this, and our theories of life, our methods of education, and our schemes for human betterment have been dominated by materialism; but the pendulum is swinging the other way now, for we have found that no scheme of salvation really arrives which stops short of the spiritual center of man's being.

Since man is essentially spirit, any permanent betterment of the individual and of society—for society can never be better than its constituent units—must be more than skin deep. It is not enough to clean up the environment, and give the man a better house and better wages and cleaner diversion. All this must be done, of course. But we must make the man who lives in the house better. We must change him, regenerate him. You cannot cure appendicitis with the color of the wallpaper. Let us write down as an axiom in our work that any effort to improve society which leaves out of account the improvement of the individual is doomed to failure, and that any effort to improve the individual which leaves out of account the spiritual part of his being is already a dismal failure.

All future progress for man must be in the spiritual realm. If there is to be any further evolution, it must be of the soul and character. There is no sign that man is growing a better digestion, better blood, better taste, smell, sight, but there are abundant signs of soul-growth. You can see him climb up when the spiritual is quickened, and take on God-like qualities.

Therefore, an atheistic social worker is an anomaly. "The fool hath said is his heart, There is no God." The man who starts out to save the world, and who begins by throwing the church on the slag dump and relegating everything religious to the scrap heap, will never get anywhere. He is like a man who tries to run a street car, and who begins by severing all contact with the power-house.

"And now abideth faith—." Faith is here to stay. We can never get along without it. We can never save the world without God, for to save the world, one must do more than throw up a dirt-bank against a yellow peril. He must conquer the flood of pauperism, vice, crime, and suffering. Society needs more than a shelter. It needs a lift.

Hope

The message of religion to social workers is also a message of hope. Hope is the assurance of victory. It is the confident certainty of success. It is a glimpse of the heights while you are away down in the valley. It is a sight of the goal while you are still weary miles from its radiant rest. Indeed, hope is more than this. It is a glimpse of the heights while you are away down in the valley, and living in the valley as if you were already on the heights. It is a sight of the goal while you are still weary miles from its radiant rest, and living as you will when the goal is reached. Hope is nursing in your heart the quiet courage and the serene confidence which come from certainty of success. It is seeing how things are going to be, and living as if they were that already. Hope is standing in the thick of the world's woe and want, in its shabby tumbledown tenements, amid its squalor and filth, its famished and wronged people, with a gibbering idiot at your side, with a man in prison stripes under your eyes, with a dead child in your arms, with the din of human wrong in your ears and the seething woe of human sin swarming before and sickening your soul; and there singing a song, and looking past it all to where the shadows lift and the everlasting morning breaks. This is glorious hope, and it is the second word in religion's message to social workers.

It is the declaration that we are bound to win. Evil is only temporary. Nothing that is bad has any future but a grave. We are saved by hope. Religion declares there are no hopeless cases. No matter how bad the individual may be, he is not all bad. There is something left in him to work on. I believe in original depravity, but my creed does not stop there. It does not even start there. I believe in aboriginal divinity. God made us, and somewhere in every life, however much in ruins, there remains the tracery of the Maker's hands.

Religion is a message of hope because it is a message of life, and life is stronger than environment. If religion could promise us nothing but an improved environment, the prospects would be poor; but life creates its own environment. Watch that river grind a channel for itself through the solid rock; watch a snow-drop crack wide a stone pavement. Life is invincible, and the Savior of all that is lost said: "I am come that ye might have life, and have it more abundantly." The hope which religion offers surpasses our sublimest expectations. Christ's dream is world-conquest, and this conquest expresses itself in a kingdom "of whose increase there shall be no end", in a state of society where things are to keep on getting better forever. And so the church

says to the social worker: "Paint your fairest picture, sing your sweetest song, climb to your highest summit, and know that the reality is all this, and more."

"And now abideth hope—". Hope is not a mirage, a mist, a fog-bank topped off with shimmering moonlight. Hope has foundations. It abides. So gird your loins afresh. We are not in a losing business. The good is bound to win. God is the force which makes for righteousness, happiness and redemption, both social and personal, and He is on the throne. The new heavens and the new earth are coming, and every slum must go. Hallelujah!

Love

The crowing message of religion to social workers is love.

Love is the constructive force of the world. Love is the redemptive influence of the race. Love is the transforming power of society. Love is the regenerating touch in the individual. Love is the civilizing spirit of mankind. It is love that works miracles, miracles of healing, of comfort and courage and inspiration, of reformation and redemption. The victory of love is the perfect victory.

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I am not unmindful of the value of system and organization. I am not pleading that social workers be maudlin, sentimental, and unscientific; but we must not worship our tools, nor be so tenacious of our system as to make the people we try to help its victims. There are social workers all of whose altruistic impulses run to machinery. They want society saved scientifically, and they are sometimes so obsessed with the scientific method that they forget poor people have feelings.

The Savior came to love us into greatness. He has compassion. It was something to Him that people were in trouble, sick, poor, oppressed. It all broke over His great heart. He shared it all. This was the very heart of the atonement. The atonement is not a dogma, but the Son of Man showing the world that God has a heart. No one can ever be so bad as to forfeit the Savior's love, and the sole and supreme qualification for service which He demanded of Simon Peter that fateful morning by Galilee was "Lovest thou me?"

If we are to help people, we must care for them. "Write me as one who loves his fellowman." Deliver me from a man who is a mere professional in anything,—from a preacher who is a professional soul-saver, from a social worker whose interest in people is like that of a biologist in his specimens, whose concern for the world is purely academic, who goes down into the slum for materials for a magazine article as a sociologist, to pick up the rags of the poor wretches who tenant those haunts of misery and hang them out on the literary lines at twenty dollars a page! The world is hungry for love. When we love people as Christ did, we will be able to do for them what He did. "And now abideth faith, hope, love, and the greatest of these is love."

Such is the message of religion to social workers. Faith is the

recognition of the spiritual, hope is the assurance of victory, and love is the constructive force in humanity. Our work is vast, but we are not alone. Our task is hard, but it is not impossible. Our duties are difficult, but love will find a way. There is much to do,—thank God there is! Life need never be stale. Thank God for the chance to do something for somebody, and for the sublime example of Him Who still stands in the midst of the world's servants, Who "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister", and Whose word to all the social workers of the world is, "Whosoever loseth his life shall find it!"