

BE IT EVER SO HUMDRUM

[Address at the Annual Youth Workers Conference, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana, February 24, 1965]

This, by contrast with my first paper this morning, is the light-weight paper of the two, though this one too still tries manfully to conform to the conference theme, “there’s no place like home.” In fact, as I warned you this morning, we shall now take that theme quite literally and without any effort at de-mythologizing it. By “home” I mean just that, the life that is enclosed within the four walls of my home-address. Really, I shouldn’t say “my” (anymore than I should say “your”) home-address, for that makes the whole piece sound too embarrassingly autobiographed. To preserve some measure of anonymity in the confessions which follow, therefore, I have cast the protagonist in the person of the lady of the house. These four make-believe, yet slice-of-life, episodes from her house are really intended to ask – as I hope you will, in the discussion which follows – how does she, as a woman who is at home in Christ, succeed in transforming her place of residence into a home? Is the ordinaryness of it, its humdrum-ness, a deterrent or an asset?

The kingdom of heaven is like a certain housewife who conspired with Christ against her family, to love them – to love them with a love that would show, as Christ’s own. But isn’t that humanly impossible? Exactly, and that is why her love showed, not just as her love, but as Christ’s. In fact, that kind of love was so beyond her own ability that usually it seemed to happen in spite of her. Often it came out looking more like a struggle than anything else, and sometimes like downright defeat, as though she were the loser. Still, isn’t that also the way the life of our Lord looked, and especially his death? She looked as though something of her had to die in order for her to love like that. Yet it was through this very struggle of hers that her love came to life and showed as Christ’s, like resurrection from death. At least, so it seemed to those who had eyes to see. In shore, the more The Conspiracy, this intrigue of love, succeeded, the worse the obstacles seemed to become – and the more her love showed for what it was, and Whose it was. She got more (and so did her family) than she had bargained for.

Case #1

One day in a warm disagreement with her husband over the budget, he had the upper hand and could have had the last word, but he chose not to. She found it impossible to love him for this. Her first impulse was to gloat over having silenced him. But then, to make matters worse, it occurred to her that perhaps she had been the loser after all. She wanted to retaliate and say, acidly, Are you trying to heap coals of fire on my head? Instead she just sat there, crushed, not by him but by her own lovelessness. All she could do was to retreat to the kitchen and, five minutes later, come back in with, "Would you like a cup of coffee" – barely realizing, though her husband did, whom she suddenly resembled.

Case #2

One evening at family devotion she was aware of being watched by her eight-year-old as she and the rest of them were making the sign of the cross. His glance reminded her uneasily of how only an hour before she shamed him into tears with a scolding, how for a long time now she had not given him the needed attention, or the needed example, and how poor a substitute it now was, what a hollow and hypocritical gesture, suddenly to hide behind the sign of the cross. And yet, for her eight-year-old, that sign said something more unmistakably clear than any other sign in the house – clearer even than folded hands, perhaps even clearer than maternal affection. The sign told him Whose cross it is that even mothers have to hide behind.

Case #3

Her teenaged daughter, who in a rebellious moment had seriously misjudged her mother, later had second thoughts and came downstairs to apologize: "I'm terribly sorry, Mom." But there they stood now, the girl clinging to her mother for some word of reassurance and the mother struggling to find that word. Why not just say, "Oh it wasn't so bad?" Yet they both knew it was bad. That, after all, was why the girl was sorry. Perhaps it would be enough to say merely, "We all have our bad moments." Somehow that would sound more democratic, more humble than setting oneself up as God and

saying, "I forgive you." Still, come to think of it (which the mother did) that was precisely the sentiment which The Conspiracy encouraged – sentiments like these:

Upon this your confession, I by virtue of my
office as your called Christian mother announce
the grace of God to you, and in the stead and
by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I
forgive you all your sin in the name of the
Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Alas, that was far more than the mother could bring herself to say. She had all she could do finally to whisper the three words, "I forgive you," still wishing though that she had had the courage to add "in Jesus' name" or something of the sort. However, when the girl replied, "Mom, that's wonderful," the mother took the cue and agreed: "Isn't it though!"

Case #4

The last incident, unlike the first three, was not a conflict situation at all. It was her Thanksgiving dinner, and the whole family – including the in-laws, also the vicar and his wife – were reminding one another of how fortunately things had been going for them all. "So well in fact," said the mother-in-law, "that it was enough to make one worry whether it could possibly last much longer." To which someone else added, "It all reminds a fellow of how ungrateful he has been." "And how undeserving," intoned the vicar. "So what" -- said the housewife, in words that were bolder than she really felt – "so what does deservedness have to do with it all?" She could hardly believe she had said what she did. Her family was shocked, and so were the vicar and the mother-in-law. Only her crusty old father-in-law smiled, as he said to her with a wink, "Thank you, ma'am." And what he was thinking was "Thank you, Lord."

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