

TRAGEDY OF SLEEPING

by Lester J. Start

Undated

Text: Matthew 26: What, could ye not watch with me one hour? (v 40b)

It is always hard to know how to talk to a double congregation such as the one we have this morning. If I talk only to the children, then the older ones become bored, and if to the older ones, then the children become disinterested. We will compromise then, and speak first to the older ones and then to the children but with the hope that there will be enough of interest in both parts to merit the attention of all.

My theme for this morning might be called the Tragedy of Sleeping, for I want to point out the acute danger that lies in not being aware of one's responsibilities in relation to what is going on, in sleeping when there are important things to be done. By this I do not mean to deny the necessity and the good of sleep, which refreshes and renews our strength and spirit enabling us to undertake things which seem impossible when we are tired, the sleep which "knits the raveled sleeve of care". I am thinking more of it in the figurative sense of being asleep to one's responsibilities and function in life, the sort of sleep which is symbolized by the famous story of Rip Van Winkle. You all remember the story. Rip Van Winkle lived in one of those little towns in the Catskill mountains at the time when this country was very young and not yet a nation. Rip was an easy-going sort; his only worry in the world was his wife, for he is one of the best or worst examples of the henpecked husband there is in all fiction. His favorite pastime therefore was to go off in the mountains with his flintlock musket and a dog to hunt, way off in the mountains where things were peaceful. On one such day after a long tramp he felt very sleepy and lay down for a few minutes rest. When he awoke, it was with the strange feeling that he had slept longer than he had intended. In the first place his clothes were all ragged and worn; he felt a long white beard that he certainly did not have when he fell asleep, and his musket was all rusted. He went back down the mountain to his old town and found everything strange: the people were strange, even the town had changed with many new buildings. Then he finally found someone who remembered him, he discovered that he had been asleep on the mountain for twenty years, and had slept through all of the important happenings of the American revolution. This is just a story, of course; there was never any person who slept so long. And yet how many people sleep through their lives; how many can lead long and useless lives without ever wondering why they are alive, without ever considering that there are things they might do, there is a purpose and a destiny they might fulfill. And the greatest world shaking events can leave them undisturbed, and unaware. And what is worse, they are ignorant of the responsibilities they have toward the world about them.

We find the same lesson as we look at that instance from the life of Jesus which was read in the scripture lesson. Jesus was facing the greatest trial of his career. He knew he was about to be betrayed; he knew the torture and death that such a betrayal would mean, and so he went to the garden of Gethsemane to prepare himself in prayer for what was to come. 'This is the chief function of prayer, to fortify oneself to face the tasks that are before him, - to seek to learn the will of God, and finding it, face the future with confidence, knowing that with God's help there

can be no task greater than the power to carry it out. And so Jesus went into the garden. And he took with him three of his disciples, Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John. And he told them, "my soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death. Stay ye here and watch with me". And then in agony and travail of soul he prayed, that he might be spared the bitter cup he had. But then he prayed that great prayer, "not as I will, but as Thou wilt, let it be." And when he came to his disciples he found them, not praying with him, seeking to help their master, but sleeping peacefully. "Could ye not watch with me one hour?" he asked. And again he went into the garden to pray, and coming back found the disciples asleep again. Finally, after a third interval of prayer, Jesus came back and told his disciples, "Ye may sleep on now and take your rest, for the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners". While Jesus was praying in the garden at the most crucial moment of his whole life, his disciples whom he had taught to pray were asleep.

It is a disturbing thought to think that men so close to their Master as the disciples were could be so lax in their responsibility to stand with him. Perhaps it is not to be wondered at that so many of us today fall short in our responsibility to live those principles which he taught us, which we pretend to stand for. Gould ye not watch with me one hour? Jesus asked his disciples. And he asks the same thing today, whenever we think of our responsibility toward those about us. But too often we are asleep when the great opportunities and great events of our lives require our watching and acting. The tragedy of sleeping leaves as its epitaph of remorse the plea, "if only I had known". And so we sleep and fail to watch what is happening. And because of our sleeping we allow evil conditions to spring up and destroy those things we value, forgetting that Jesus warned us always to watch and pray that we enter not into temptation. Just as garden pests will attack and destroy our crops whenever we relax our watch, so evil forces come into power and destruction when we are asleep to their presence and reality. So the whole world could sleep while the conditions for a war were breeding; so we may sleep when the need for a new world based upon brotherhood faces us. So we sleep when we have the opportunities in our own lives to improve and grow. And we sleep when a world full of confusion and instability puts a bigger responsibility upon us to guide our youth in paths which are good, to teach them values that are enduring in a world spinning in confusion. The alarming rise in juvenile delinquency makes us all agree that something must be done, but so often we are asleep to the first responsibility which begins in the home. Those who work with delinquents are unanimous in the opinion that very little of it is caused by viciousness; it is all too often caused by ignorance and by the fact that the young are not being guided into constructive activities. In the industrial cities especially young people run wild because their parents haven't the time or the interest to watch over them. In the everyday interest of earning money for a living, an interest which has grown greatly recently, because of the many opportunities to earn big wages, all other values are neglected, and the people sleep. They find no time to cultivate an interest in what the world has come to consider the enduring values; they have no time to seek God in an effort to improve their lives according to the standards taught by Jesus, standards we acknowledge are right and then are too indifferent to follow. And so we worry about juvenile delinquency while seventeen million children in the country are not taught to attend Sunday school.

Once Dr. Klossen a minister now at Cleveland, impressed with the fact that his people were too indifferent to the demands of religion contrived an effective way of showing them they were

spiritually dead. He is a minister who is always thinking up new ways to put over an idea, and his churches are always full of people who come to hear him if only to see what his next trick will be. His morning service was in the nature of a regular funeral service. There was even coffin in the front of the service. At the close everyone was invited to come down and “view the remains”, but the inside was lined with mirrors so that everyone looked at a reflection of himself. It’s one way of getting across a point, I suppose.

There is this important point, however, that there is an acute danger of becoming indifferent to responsibility, in the general rut and routine of ordinary living. Being a Christian means something more than professing certain beliefs; it demands a constant watching and working to live those principles which we say we believe. We must not sleep as did those disciples when the great crisis of Jesus’ life was at hand; we must be alert to support what he stands for in all that we do.

There is a great parable of Jesus which teaches us the same important fact, that we should be alert to our responsibilities in life. It is the parable of the talents. The story goes like this. There were once three servants whose master went away into a far country on a long journey, before he went he divided up his goods among the servants to care for the while he was gone. To one of them he gave five talents, to another two and to another one. A talent meant in those days a certain sum of money, quite a large sum, for as near as we can estimate it amounted to something between 1600 and 1900 dollars in our own money. Today we speak of talents as certain traits of ability which one may have; this use of the word comes directly from the parable, because the lesson of the talents applies to natural abilities. The first man was a shrewd businessman. He followed the markets closely, noted the prospects of the crops, kept informed on the movements of caravans, and on the basis of the information invested the money wisely and well so that when the master returned he had earned a 100% profit and returned to his master ten talents. The second man with the two talents was an honest and hard worker and by the sheer fidelity of his toil he made the two talents yield four. The third servant was of a different stripe, however. He hid his money in the ground, the ancient equivalent of a bank, where he would run no risk of losing it, and so when the master returned, he had the one talent to return to him. To the first two men the master gave praise: “Well done, good and faithful servants”, he said. And he gave them even more talents to supervise. But the third man aroused the anger of the master because he had hidden the talent and not used it to gain more. And so he took the talent away from him and gave it to the others. Now this is not intended to be a guide to how we should manage our money matters; it is not intended as such; it has a deeper meaning to show.

We read that the lord gave to the servants varying amounts of money, different talents. This seems to be a clear statement of the inequality of human endowments. As we grow older, we see that certain gifts and talents are ours but that others which we may wish very much we had, seem to have been denied us. Thus certain people have great talents in a particular line. Shakespeare has five talents in writing, Edison five in inventing etc. Most people have only mediocre talents, perhaps two, and others, handicapped with only one. We like to think that God created all men equal: he does give all men an equal opportunity to prove themselves. But men are not equal either in ability or opportunity or advantages. But there is the comforting fact we learn from the story that men with different talents are not expected to show the same results. The first two

servants received the same praise from their master although one had earned five talents and the other only two. Just to the measure in which a person is gifted is he held accountable. And the greater gifts, the greater the talents we have, the more there is required of us. We often wish we had another's superior talents and we forget that those superior talents involve greater responsibilities which balance the advantage. We should note too from the story that no one is left without a talent at the beginning. The man who had only one talent lost it not because it was small but because he did not use it.

The rewards that these men received give us a new system of measurements, when we see that the man who earned two talents received the same approval as the man who earned five. It reminds us of the story of the woman who put all she had in the box at the temple, and it was only a mite, the smallest coin there was. Jesus observing this act said that she had given more than the rest because she gave all that she had. So here the question is not how much have you gained but rather how much in comparison with what you had. What have you done with what has been intrusted to you? There is no penalty for having small talents, nor is there any reward for having superior abilities.

The third man was blamed by his master because he failed to put his talent to use. He lacked imagination and he failed in courage. His talent was small, and the anger of the master may seem strange. But this points out the great truth that no talent no matter how small can afford not to be used; every talent even the humblest is needed in the order of life - that is why every life is precious in the sight of God. The great cathedrals of the medieval world required the many talents of great and gifted men to build the great arches, to make the carvings and the paintings. Only highly gifted and skilled hands could have done it. But other hands equally faithful were required to dig the foundations and lay the masonry. Every man's gift is necessary in the rearing of the temple. And so in a great orchestra - each man is important and vital to the work of art that is being performed. The tuba may only play a few bars during the whole performance, but its part is as important as any of the others. When we realize that every man's talent is necessary, the distinction between great talents and small ones becomes somewhat stupid and false. The failure of the one talent man is just as bad as that of the ten talent man. After all it is doing the best job out of what you have that counts; it is making the most of whatever opportunities and talents you have that determines your success in life. It is the single voice that sometimes makes important decisions in breaking a deadlock; there are opportunities where even a small task can affect great events'. "There is waiting a work where only your hands can avail; and so if you falter, a chord in the music will fail."

This third man failed, then, because he was asleep to the value and importance of the talent which was entrusted to him. He failed to see how important his little gift was. And, more important, he failed to show courage in using it. He did not want to risk this talent and so he buried it in the ground, forgetting that nothing is ever gained without risks. This is the real reason for the man's failure; this is why his master treated him so harshly. He did not realize how fruitful this world is for talents. If we use a talent, it grows in power and usefulness. And when we fail to use our talents we see how fatal the world can be to them. If we neglect our talents, they vanish. If we try to save them by hiding them in the ground, they rot away. Take away the talent from him, said the master. This is a sober statement of the law of life. A talent used with

discretion results in increased talents; if left stagnant it will disappear. Feed a capacity for music or for mechanical invention and it will grow with an ever deepening root; neglect it, and it will disappear like a morning mist.

This seems a hard lesson for us to learn because we are all too prone to keep our talents to ourselves and not risk them by spending them. We are asleep to the possibilities of their increase and count only the possible cost. We can not bury our talents in the vain hope that they will last; it is only in the risks of using them that they can grow. As we use them, and as they grow stronger we will find that they can open up to us more and more possibilities for progress. It is only as this country uses its great talents in a wider cooperation after the war that it will survive as a great power.

This is perhaps one of the best messages we can find in the teachings of Jesus for the attention of young people. Neglect not the talent that is within you. Do not be asleep to your talents and the need for using them to possess them. And as we do so, the sky will seem full of stars of limitless possibilities.