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After Seven Years

A SERMON PREACHED NOVEMBER 15, 1968
IN THE
FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
BENNINGTON, VERMONT
BY
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COMMEMORATING THE COMPLETION OF SEVEN
YEARS AS PASTOR OF THIS CHURCH

This sermon was prepared as a familiar talk of a pastor to his people and was not intended for publication. The author consented to its printing only in the hope that it might be an encouragement and incentive to the members of the Church which he has served these seven years.

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"I expect to pass through this life but once, if, therefore, there is any kindness I can show, or any good I can do, to any fellow being, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."



Gen. 29:20.—¹And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.¹

Thus from the borders of the desert four thousand years ago, there comes to us the secret of enthusiasm and joy in the midst of life's drudgery. We think it strange that a primitive civilization, like that of old Haran on the Euphrates, should have discovered principles of life which are just as applicable to the age of the steam plow, as to that in which men turned up the unwilling soil with an ox and a crooked stick. When we study the thoughts of God's children of antiquity and compare them with the thinking of this modern world, we are amazed that civilization and culture should not have done more for man in the higher altitudes of his soul's life. We marvel that Jacob, trudging after his solitary ox and forked stick, or herding his cattle about Laban's watering trough, might be one of God's joyous freemen, while the rider of the steam gang-plow, or the stock-yard cattle broker, may be only a drudging slave.

There seems to be an eternal justice operating in this world of ours, which brings compensation for the seeming deficiencies of every age of history. We live in "celled houses" with rooms warmed to our convenience but the writer of the most popular hymn ever sung by man, kept watch over his flocks by night in the open field, made them to lie down in green pastures, led them beside the still waters, and when they walked through the death-infested valley put rod and staff, yea, his very life itself, between them and the stalking beast that made their very innocence his easy prey. Better live in Mesopotamia forty centuries ago and know the wild joy of service for love's sake, than live in this modern world of convenience, if

we be tossed and buffeted by carking cares, or slave-driven by the multitude of the things which we possess.

Be not dismayed. The mainspring of Joy is the same in every age. An overmastering Love filled Jacob's heart! Not for the joy that was set before him did those seven years of drudgery seem but a few days, but because of the love he had for Rachel. Love takes the sting out of drudgery. Love lightens the burden in mine and in factory. Love makes service a joy. Love sustains where physical prowess falls in weakness. Love never fails!

This was a great discovery that Jacob made in this strange country when he rolled the stone from the well and watered the sheep of Laban, his mother's brother. Love then began to lighten the burden he had carried since hurrying away from the enraged Esau; and while he dared not return to claim the birthright which he had fled from his brother, Love led him to earn what was more precious to him. For seven years, yea, for fourteen, he toiled; and the years seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to Rachel.

Hence Love not only takes the sting out of toil; but it makes days as hours and years as days. It is a long night watch for the mercenary soldier as he paces the battlements and looks out into blank space for an imagined foe. But the hours seem to fly when we watch the signs of returning life in the peaceful sleep of a recovering loved one. Twenty years is a long time to slave for the child that was not wanted and is never loved; but twenty years of infancy and opportunity are but a few days to a true parent.

As I have thought of the completion of seven years as pastor of this church I have wondered how far Love has been the mainspring of my service. Again and again these words have come to me: "Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days for

the love he had to her." These seven years seem, as I look back upon them, more like months than years. The first year and a half was given with a singleness of devotion such as I may never be able to give to any other church. The succeeding two and a half years were an almost constant struggle with physical weakness, which made impossible the most aggressive and courageous work. But in these years I learned the capability of this church for deep sympathy and abounding generosity. Not only were the burdens of a long illness lightened but the opportunities of the ocean and lands beyond were added for uplift and renewal of strength. The past three years have been a period of ever increasing physical vigor, making possible continuous activity in both the community and the state, and have brought a satisfaction in certain accomplishments, which will, I believe, give assurance to all my future ministry. Because these years seem so short, I am led to think that their service has been rendered for the love of it and because they form such a happy memory I believe they have been generally well used.

Let me remind you what we as a church have accomplished in these seven years. The achievement is not what it might have been, had we followed the oft quoted motto: "All at it; always at it; for all that is in us." But comparatively speaking these years have yielded a worthy harvest. The first task we undertook was the enlargement of our social and educational facilities. The seven and one-half thousand dollars thus expended have been a joy and a blessing.

To some of us the most satisfying memories associated with those rooms are the hours of study, when we have honestly faced some of the great problems of the Kingdom of God and honestly sought a solution so far as by thought or act we could discover such solution.

For four terms of about ten weeks each we made excursions into the contents of Old and New Testaments and practically covered the whole Bible in outline. We studied for two terms how we might become personally useful in winning others to Christ; and some who are now bearing with us the burdens and sharing the joys of the church fellowship are here because of those studies! For three terms we studied the method and management of the Sunday School and the art of teaching religious ideals to the young; and some of us have so enlarged our conception of the Sunday School that we shall always have un-realized ideals!

The Young People's Study of Missions has been one of the finest openings of thought which a church is capable of giving to its younger members. For two periods of eight weeks each China was the subject of study; once India was the subject; once Japan, once Africa, once "Home Missions Under our Flag," once "Aliens or Americans," once "The Challenge of the City." In addition the women of the church have pursued in a more general way a series of text books covering the History of Missions, India, Japan, China, Africa, and Islands of the Sea. Such systematic educational work in churches is practically new with this new century and its full power will best be measured after a score of years.

Another means of religious education which we have made use of is the Enquiry class for young Christians of those who are seeking Christ. Since 1907 the pastor has reserved Friday afternoons from 4 until 5, and usually Friday evenings from 7:30 to 8:30, during the first five months of the year for these classes, and has given definite and systematic drill in the fundamentals of the Christian life to about one hundred who have united with this or other churches, besides a considerable number who are not yet in church membership. The converts who have

spent most time in this class have caused, least anxiety out of it and have been foremost in the advancement of the church at home, in fidelity to the Sunday School and the Young People's society, and in aggressive mission work in outlying districts. In these years we have purchased and made available a modern Sunday School library of 400 volumes which we believe will pass inspection by any modern educator. An expenditure of from \$25 to \$40 annually will keep it fresh and up to date for years to come.

Some of our educational aims appeared to detract from the weekly service for prayer. But in comparing notes with other churches, in other communities, we find that our week-day services may have suffered from the general trend away from the prayer-meeting quite as much as from emphasis upon the educational side of church work. And the young people who have followed our educational classes most faithfully have made larger contributions to the prayer-service on account of the enlargement of their religious vision.

Statistics are not always exhilarating; but they often show the influence and permanent value of consciously directed and persistent effort. The addition of 115 persons to our church membership by baptism has been the most satisfying fruitage of these seven years. The chief business of the Church is to make disciples for the Master and to lead them into fellowship one with another for mutual uplift and for the advancement of God's Kingdom on the earth. It is heartening to remember that 74 of these new members have come to us during the past three years under the influence of our more aggressive methods. Forty others have joined the church by letter and experience. Thus there has been added to this church another church of 155 members, more members than comprise the average church in Vermont.

In these seven years our losses by letter numbered fifty-three; two members were dropped. Some of the letters have been granted to young men and women whose training in this church has enabled them immediately to assume positions of responsibility and leadership in the churches to which they have gone. Thirty-one members have been transferred to the church invisible. One of these was the revered pastor of more than half a century ago, who while among us as a layman enriched the life of this church for nearly two decades and gave inspiration and sympathy to present pastors which will always be a fragrant memory. Three deacons of the church have been called to larger service,—two of them in the fulness of their manhood, the other in ripe age. The church has lost a company of noble women; some in the prime of life, some in their fading years. The memory of these honored dead is ever an inspiration to the pastor who has been privileged to share their hopes and ambitions, their doubts and fears, and has in the end said the last words by their open graves.

The records also tell an interesting story of Christian stewardship. For our local work there have been gathered and expended \$80,500. Of this \$11,000 were used for the extension, re-finishing and maintenance of our property; and \$19,500 for paid leadership in pulpit, choir, teacher-training, community visitation, the maintaining of the Sunday School, for lights, fuel, care of building, printing and the expenses incidental to carrying on such an institution as a church.

There is one item in this expenditure that fills me with chagrin. The expenses of the Sunday School were only \$1051; and yet four-fifths of our new members come to the church from the Sunday School. Exclusive of the \$350 for a "teacher of teachers" in 1906, we have appropriated barely \$100 per year for maintaining the most produc-

tive activity in all our work.

The study of missions has affected our giving to missionary enterprises. I note the willingness and ambition to give self to Christian work in the district communities surrounding our village; to give time to the winning of friends and acquaintances to Christ, just as we expect the converts in mission lands to become missionaries themselves; and finally I note an increasing willingness to give money for the advancement of the Kingdom of God in all the world. In 1902 we reported \$715 in benevolences. There should be added \$250 which did not appear in the treasurer's records; making a total of \$965,—possibly \$1,000. Last year our benevolences were \$1,605.

The total giving of the church and Sunday School,—nearly all of which went through our great denominational agencies,—amounted to \$9,268,—enough to have maintained a missionary family on the foreign field for this whole period. One item in this table of giving is very instructive in that it reflects the interest that study begets. The Sunday School benevolences in 1902 amounted to \$23; in 1903 to \$22. Since then they have increased annually to \$38, \$44, \$62, \$74, and \$86 in the year just past. It will be a surprise and disappointment, if the coming generation of younger members does not show a fuller appreciation of the claims of God upon them as stewards of His property.

In the seven years we have gathered \$39,800, or an annual gathering of the interest at 6 per cent on \$93,000. The church therefore, aside from its spiritual activities, is a financial institution of considerable proportions, comparatively, in the life of the community.

As I look to the future a vista quite different from that of seven years ago meets my vision. I was a stranger then. And as I looked into strange faces and pleaded for the things of God with those who needed Him, often

hearing pleasant words of commendation but finding none to avow their new-born faith in Christ, I felt something as Wesley remarked in the early days of his preaching to the Cornish miners: "Huge approbation: and absolute unconcern." For a year and three months no one moved forward to unite with the church.

How different now! I look into faces whose spiritual history I know in part, whose longings and aspirations I have shared. Where seven years ago I knew of none, I know of half a hundred now who seem near to the Kingdom of Christ and membership in His church. It may be that the prayer suggested to the young people in January for fifty Confessions of Faith by baptism this year may be realized ere December shall close. Already twenty-eight have come. The spiritual atmosphere of this church has warmth enough to foster the life of many new-born children of God. The sympathetic fellowship of the united churches of our community is as sure a promise of spiritual fruitage as balmy summer days are of autumn harvest. Go forth with the sowers and the reapers. Fear not the drudgery; for love of the noblest work which God has entrusted to man takes away the pain of toil or rebuke. It may be that in the far-off years another generation may discover the secret of Abounding Joy as it lingers over the simple story of some worker here:

"For fifty years he served his Master;
And the years seemed unto him but a
few days for the love he had to Him."