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MEDITATIONS ON A VACCINE

A Sermon

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in

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Scripture Reading: Psalm 98



Meditations on a Vaccing

Only infrequently do I feel impelled to break the schedule of sermons which I plan several weeks in advance. Yet there are momentous occasions in the life of our world which ~~are worthy of and indeed~~ require our meditation. Over a week ago the long awaited announcement was made that our scientists ~~have~~ are on the verge of conquering the dreaded scourge of polio. This achievement is so full of meaning and so vast in the range of its implications that it ought to stimulate our thoughtfulness while evoking our prayers of thanksgiving. I shall try to devote this sermon to that end.

One of the strongest indictments which I think can be made of our present age is that we live so constantly in the midst of miraculous happenings that we take them all for granted. Indeed we seem to assume that all of the wonders which have been conferred upon <sup>us</sup> belong to us by right. This, I believe, is terribly wrong. We ought to stop our <sup>blase</sup> ~~casual~~ acceptance of our blessings and ponder their meaning. Certainly we ought to do this with regard to the ~~amazing~~ polio vaccine. What does it really mean? Out of my own reflection of these past two weeks I would like to share <sup>with</sup> you a number of considerations which have ~~been~~ stood out in my mind.

-I-

For one thing I think this astounding achievement ought to compel us to realize how greatly we benefit from the disciplined thinking and hard labor of those who carry on scientific research. The tremendous blessings we enjoy are the results of their dedicated lives. It is because of their dedicated intelligence that our children in the future will be spared crippling paralysis.

This must be confessed in ~~the~~ full recognition of the fact that ours' is essentially an anti-intellectual age. We have been cruelly contemptuous of the man who makes a ~~profession~~ vocation of thinking. We have been far more admiring of the "go-getter", ~~and~~ the man who makes a display of furious physical energy. We have employed choice terms of derision to convey our contempt for the intellectual. We have scorned him by calling him an "egghead", "an ivory tower dweller", ~~or~~ a "double dome." Actually we have unwittingly revealed our fear of the man who uses his head. We distrust him and fear that he will think too much. Hence teachers and professors as a group have become largely suspect of treason



and disloyalty. Some have been gored in full public view. Politicians have been especially brutal with those whose power and authority are solely intellectual. They have been accused of wrong thinking and admonished to think the way politicians think, or else. The most serious minded people in our nation have been deeply disturbed by the mounting threats to academic freedom.

Superficially we tend to think of assaults upon intellectual freedom and brain washing <sup>as</sup> occurring only in fascist and communistic countries. ~~This is~~ We remember that the great Albert Einstein fled from ~~Germany~~ Germany because the Nazi tyrants could not tolerate his brilliant mind. He would not think as they would have him think. But even after Albert Einstein ~~was inspired~~ by the sheer brilliance of his genius had inspired the beginnings of the atomic age ~~the brilliance of his mind~~ <sup>his</sup> independence of his mind <sup>was</sup> ~~was~~ found distasteful to many Americans. When Einstein counseled certain professors not to testify before Congressional Committees a ~~prominent~~ New York newspaper <sup>printed</sup> ~~had~~ an editorial in which it told Einstein in effect to keep his mouth shut. One of the other great minds of the atomic era, Dr. Robert Oppenheimer, has been dismissed from ~~his~~ his position as Director of the Atomic Energy Program which he supervised from the beginning, not because he was found to be disloyal but because he was regarded as a security risk. The suspicion was left with many that certain politicians and administrators could neither tolerate nor trust his brilliance.

The unbelievable irony of this anti-intellectual age is that our common blessings, like the <sup>wondrous</sup> ~~wonderful~~ saving power of the polio vaccine, have come from those who have been its victims. The brilliant minds, which must operate in an atmosphere of freedom, have <sup>provided</sup> ~~developed~~ salvation for our children. You may despise the man whose profession is intellectual but it is he whose dedication has saved your child from deformity and paralysis.

It is so hard for the world to understand and appreciate great scientists like Dr. Jonas Salk who developed this polio vaccine. Already <sup>a</sup> ~~some~~ studio in Hollywood has begun preparations for a movie of his life. But Dr. Salk seems singularly uninterested. When asked by reporters about this movie he ~~turned~~ turned away, anxious to return to his laboratory, saying, "Am I supposed to conduct scientific research or become a movie star?" That's hard for many of us to understand, for most of us would like nothing so much as to be movie stars. Dr. Salk is not even interested in profiting from his blessed discovery, and this too confounds the world, for it is unthinkable to so many of us that a good idea cannot be turned into <sup>cold</sup> ~~cash~~.



There will be profiteering, to be sure. But the profiteering will be done by goons and barbarians ~~like~~ whose minds have never been disciplined nor devoted to truth. Someone else - he who is without consecration - will profit from Dr. Salk's love of truth. So few of us understand that the values of truth and the seeking for the truth carry their own rewards - rewards which Hollywood and the market place ~~can~~ <sup>cannot</sup> even approach, let alone surpass.

The tremendous blessings conferred upon our world by men who devote themselves with diligence and discipline in their laboratories also causes me to reflect upon the relation of religion ~~and~~ <sup>to</sup> with the world of science. Traditional religion does not have ~~an~~ <sup>a</sup> ~~enviable~~ <sup>good</sup> record in its attitudes toward science. Indeed its reactions to science have often been ugly and sinful. When the same scientific ~~methods~~ <sup>methods</sup> which produced this polio vaccine were first applied to the study of the Bible, cries of rage and condemnation were raised in almost every church. Though this has largely passed there are still those who would protest religion from the rigorous methods of science. But many of those who will violently condemn the scientists ~~who use~~ <sup>for using</sup> the same ~~methods~~ <sup>methods</sup> in making our Bible more clear and understandable, must be ~~gratefully~~ relieved to know that their children will not suffer from polio.

And yet what has religion to fear from the methods of science when ~~scientist~~ ~~like Dr. Salk~~ it may be said of a scientist like Dr. Salk, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy"?

-II-

The discovery of this polio vaccine has provoked another consideration in my ~~own~~ mind. During the ~~past~~ <sup>much</sup> past week I have been thinking ~~a great deal~~ of the great company of broken-hearted parents and families ~~in the past~~ who have raised anguished cries to God against the seeming heartlessness and meaninglessness of their children's crippling paralysis. Now all of these anguished ~~cries~~ cries must be considered over against the fact of the future in which no child need be stricken by polio. And parents need cry in anguish no more. What does it mean? Was God the same God ~~before~~ <sup>now</sup> the polio vaccine? Has there been so great a chorus of parents beseeching heaven that God's heart has been moved?

I think I see in this saving vaccine at least a partial answer to the mysteries of suffering. I do not believe that God was unmindful of the suffering of so many parents and children. I do not believe that God's heart has been changed - it did not need to be changed, for it has always been full of love and compassion. I see rather in this scientific



discovery a revelation concerning God's relation to his children and their problems. I see God in His mighty creation toiling to bring mercy and healing to His creatures. This He cannot do without their partnership with Him. Through all of the ages God has been seeking to help His children help themselves. He has given them minds and tools and inspiration. Where do you suppose the truth about this vaccine came from? It was embedded in nature by God. Where do you suppose the scientists got the minds <sup>with which</sup> to unravel this mystery ~~with~~? They came from God. This achievement, this salvation, is the result of man working with God for the discovery of truth. God never forces His truth. In the freedom He has granted man man must want and seek the truth. But the salvation of the polio vaccine is evidence that God does help His creatures, that He does not leave them to suffer endlessly and meaninglessly. Indeed now there is meaning in the suffering ~~xxxxx~~ of every child in the past. Had they not suffered and died there would have been no occasion for this vaccine. God does not leave us alone. He has given us a mighty answer to our perplexities and ~~xxxx~~ anguish. It is a hint of further revelations which can come if we work with Him, *obey His laws, and seek His truth.*

Now no longer, in this instance, will a parent have to cry out of bitter suffering and mystery, "Why did this have to happen to my child?" The answer is plain: it does not have <sup>me</sup> to happen. Now it need never happen again. I used to ask that question long ago, for my father died very quickly and very young from a sudden attack of pneumonia. Now I know that it was not necessary, thanks to penicillin. Yet I find meaning in my father's death. Had he and many others not died penicillin would not have been.

No, our children in the future need not suffer from polio. We will never ~~ask~~ ~~xxx~~ need to ask God why. A great area of spiritual anguish and mystery has been removed. God has revealed Himself and one of His wonders has been performed. ~~It~~ This is a harbinger of even greater hopes.

### -III-

This leads to another reflection in which I think we must consider the possibility that we are receiving so many blessings in our modern world that we are in danger of becoming vaccinated against the awareness of their most ultimate source. I think there is evidence to show that we have received so many gifts that we have become almost wholly ~~un~~aware of the Great Giver. There is the possibility that God has been so good to us that we have forgotten Him.



Most parents recognize the hazards of giving their children too much. When gifts and advantages proceed in uninterrupted flow the recipients usually take them for granted. They receive them not as privileges but as rights. And the constant receiving of gifts does not inevitably result in the improvement of behaviour and character. It is the same with our relationship with God. When we live in the midst of ~~plenty~~ and too much we take God ~~for~~ granted.

In the summer of 1950 I was with a group of 50 people who had the harrowing experience of viewing the horrible devastation of bombed-out Berlin. The destruction was simply indescribable and unimaginable. It made one feel sick at the pit of his stomach. It seemed a travesty that after we had been carried by lurches and jolts about the debris of Berlin in a rickety old bus we <sup>should</sup> come back ~~to~~ to sit down to a meal on the terrace of our hotel. The meal <sup>was</sup> ~~and~~ sumptuous and entirely too much. We were emotionally sick from what we had seen. The amount of food piled upon our tables seemed to constitute a crime. Most of us declined second portions on the first course of fish. I remember what the waiter said to us: "You are not hungry because you come from a rich country." He was right. When you have so much you really don't get hungry, you don't even know its meaning. And when you have so many blessings you don't understand what it means to be without those blessings. My fear is that in the future the value of our polio vaccine will have lost its meaning because we will have forgotten ~~what~~ how tragic life <sup>can</sup> ~~could~~ be without it. The danger of being ~~so~~ rich is that we will appreciate so little. You have to be hungry to really appreciate even a little food. For a long time we have desperately prayed for this polio vaccine. How long will we remember the anguish of those prayers?

Chad Walsh suggests a different kind of vaccine: "If a man travels far enough away from Christianity he is always in danger of seeing it in true perspective and deciding that it is true. It is much safer, from Satan's point of view, to vaccinate a man with a mild case of Christianity, so as to protect him from the real thing." (EARLY CHRISTIANS OF 21st CENTURY, p. 11) (I think we are in danger as well of being vaccinated by so many blessings which we take for granted that we will be prevented from appreciating anything.

Norman Cousins, the Editor of the Saturday Review, writes in a recent editorial (~~April 9, 1955~~) of a project undertaken by his publication. It has to do with some two dozen girls ranging in age from 19 to 24, known as the "Hiroshima Maidens." The



At the time of the atomic explosion in 1945 most of them had just arrived at school less than a half mile from the center of the blast. These girls became trapped in the debris of the holocaust. All of them were badly burned or irradiated or both. There was no medical care available. When these girls reached marrying age they were so badly scarred and disfigured that they felt self-conscious about appearing in public. They withdrew almost totally from community life. But Norman Cousins discovered them and under the sponsorship of the Saturday Review has arranged to have them flown to America for plastic surgery. More recently Cousins reports that they have lost some of their self-consciousness. Once a week they ~~would~~ go to the moving-picture theatre to see American films. "We like to see the pretty American girls and imagine that we are they," one of the girls said. I wonder if it has ever occurred to you American girls whose faces are lovely and unmarred that your beauty is something you take quite for granted. Have you ever compared it with the misfortune of those who might have been as lovely as you? And where do you think you got your loveliness? Did it not come from the Creator who made you in His image? There is, ~~and~~ ought to be, I believe, a ~~direct~~ link ~~line~~ of understanding between the lovely lines of your faces and the ugly scars on ~~those~~ the faces of those who happened to live in the wrong place. ~~Does~~ our blessing vaccinate us against gratitude?

And twenty years from now will the polio vaccine - which will still keep us from suffering the ~~dark~~ scourge of this crippling disease - mean any more to us than the iodine we pour upon a scratch?

Will you students whose children in ~~ten years~~ will never live under this threat be truly thankful for a blessing <sup>routine/y</sup> conferred <sup>?</sup> ~~quite casually~~ upon them?

-IV-

But finally, in all of my ~~knackings~~ ~~knackings~~ meditations concerning the advent of this vaccine there has loomed a large question. I am driven to it by my religious heritage. Something within keeps asking, Are you really worthy to receive so much? What have you done to deserve such relief from apprehension? Have you really merited this blessing? And honestly within my heart I know that I am not worthy and that I have not earned it.

Running like a chorus through my mind has been a refrain of holy scripture, from the words of Jesus: "God sends his ~~rain~~ rain upon the just and the unjust." And this polio vaccine comes to you and me whether we are just or unjust, worthy or unworthy. Indeed



there will be those among us who will be so sullen as to demand for ourselves and the protection of our children what we did not ourselves produce. There will be no sense of gratitude for that which comes by grace alone.

It was rather significant, I believe, that within a short time of the announcement of this miracle of science another of the great minds of the modern scientific world, Albert Einstein, died. He who had revolutionized the thought of modern man was not in a formal sense religious. He was committed to ~~no~~ institution of organized religion. Yet there was about him a mystical awareness ~~which~~ touched profoundly upon religious feeling.

There ~~was~~ <sup>is</sup> wisdom and insight in these words of His: "The most beautiful and profound ~~emotion~~ we can experience is the mystical. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed." This insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, also has given rise to religion. To know that what is ~~impenetrable~~ impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their primitive forms - this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong in the ranks of the devoutly religious men." (NY Times, 4/19/55) May I say to you that ~~I~~ I

had ~~was~~ something ~~of~~ like that feeling ~~I~~ had when I learned of the Salk Vaccine. I wanted to pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe. My first impulse was to want to worship Almighty God for the wonders He never ceases to perform. I suppose that part of this was due to my realization as a father that my children would be relieved of that which I dreaded so much. But even more I believe I was overcome by the sheer wonder of a new revelation God had made to man, for I do believe it is another of His ever recurring revelations ~~unto us~~.

During these past few days my memory wandered back ~~back~~ across the years to a day in August when the news came that the war with Japan was at an end. I remember that I came immediately to open the doors of this church so that those who wanted to express their thanksgiving to Almighty God could come before His altar. I remembered the people who came at once to kneel here. I have been wondering this week if anyone wanted to come and thank God for this blessing to our children and generation.

This week I learned of a mother and father who have taken over the support of a Korean child orphaned by war. Why did they do this? Their own little daughter had suffered a severe attack of polio, but had survived, and they wanted to express their thanksgiving to God.



You know, you could do something of the same.

Do you think you are worthy of receiving blessings so great? I doubt that deep within your heart you can count yourself worthy. I know that I am not. Doesn't ~~it~~ it seem quite strange that we live in a world dazzled on the one hand by ~~the~~ a new revelation of God's mercy and ~~love~~, while on the other men are using God's gifts to assemble ~~an~~ arsenals of atomic power to destroy each other? It is all very bewildering and painful, but there is still meaning if we will search for it. We can accept this wondrous gift of grace with awe and thanksgiving and we can make some changes in our lives, knowing that we are not now worthy. We can never hope to be truly worthy, but we can be ~~xxxx~~ better than we are! May I suggest what you might do?

Do you know that Dr. Jonas Salk is a Jew? Does it strike you as strange that you shall have to accept salvation for your children through the genius and devotion of a man whose background you may have formerly despised? God can use a Dr. Salk, you know, to produce a vaccine to keep your child from being deformed and paralyzed, but as things presently stand Dr. Salk might not be welcomed in your club or fraternity or community. But what Dr. Salk has done is for all children, not just Jewish children. You see your prejudice against other people is wrong, and if it is wrong in the case of Jews it is wrong in the case of Negroes and all others. Why don't you confess that you are wrong as you stand overawed in the presence of God? Why don't you repent and <sup>Yow</sup> ~~xxxx~~ that in God's holy presence you will ~~change~~ remove this dark shadow from your heart? Can't you see that just as God sends his rain upon the just and the unjust His mercy ~~xxxx~~ goes out to you when you are wicked and wrong! The mercy of this vaccine ~~which has come to you~~ is evidence of God's love for you even when you mistreat His ~~creatures~~ whom He meant to be your fellows. Do this now and determine that this sin shall be removed from your heart before you die.

And there is another specific thing you can do: in this community there are many little children whose bodies will now be saved from distortion and paralysis but whose hearts and minds need to be fed the ~~knowledge~~ Bread of Life in the holy fellowship of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you have never felt that your service was urgently needed here. Perhaps you have never known the inner warmth of gratitude as a propelling force. I want you to know that your services are needed here - they are needed badly. If you have any emotion of thanksgiving and awe, why don't you come and tell us that you would like to teach little children of the



wondrous meaning of God's radiant world! Why don't you give your life in interpreting the moral and spiritual meaning of this vaccine, so that they shall not grow up unaware, unknowing, not caring/

The ancient man who first sang the 98th Psalm must have been rapt in the awe of a mighty revelation of God's presence in the midst of His people. I think his words bespeak the meaning we can find in the latest wonder and blessing of God's mighty work, and the singing of it can change our lives, as <sup>it</sup> must surely have changed his:

O sing to the Lord a new song,

for he has done marvelous things!

His right hand and his holy arm

have gotten him victory.

The Lord has made known his victory,

he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness

to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.