

WHOSE STRENGTH IS TO SIT STILL

Some time ago there appeared in Harper's Magazine an article entitled, "They Stayed in Bed." It called attention to the fact that most of us have been brought up to admire people who are called "really ~~xxx~~ energetic." "We were assured that the only way to fit ourselves for achievement and success in life was to get up early, walk often and briskly, and never, never indulge in something most of us liked very much indeed, called a little rest. 'Get up,' stern voices told us, 'you will never get anything done by lying in bed.'" (by Cecil Woodham-Smith, June, 1956).

The article went on to recount the lives of four famous persons, all of whom spent much of their lives on sofas or beds. These four were Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the poetess, Florence Nightingale, the nurse, Charles Darwin, the scientist, and Harriett Martineau, the writer. The article concludes in this way: "And yet not one of these people was looking merely for an escape. They were looking for something very different, a climate in which they could work. Work was their object, work, not self. And, most of all, they all belonged to a very rare class of human being, those who can flourish only in silence and solitude, the people whom the prophet Isaiah described when he wrote, 'Whose strength is to sit still.'"

This writer, I believe, has pointed ~~xx~~ to a very great lack in the lives of most of us. Despite our acclaim for the "man of action" we ought to be reminded that real strength does not belong solely to athletically inclined people who run to and fro. There is great strength in silence and solitude. People utterly lacking in physical robustness may be incredibly strong. There are different kinds of strength, and this morning I invite you to inquire ^{with} me into the nature and resources of those persons "whose strength is to sit still."

-I-

For one thing being a thoughtful person requires the strength to sit still. The reason so many of us lead thoughtless, unexamined lives is that we lack this strength.

Actually to be a truly human being is to be thoughtful. Many of us have become dehumanized by our failure to sit still and think. We would rather be entertained, or going some place and doing something that is active. Hence ~~xxxxxxx~~ though we run around a great deal we are easy targets for every kind of pitchman who has a bill of goods to sell.

We react to stimuli without thinking. We never know what hits us or what happens to us.

Don't think for a moment that you are growing the kind of strength I am talking about because you sit still for long periods of time before your television set. That doesn't take any real strength at all. In fact the weaker you are the better the television producers like it. They don't want you to think. They pitch their programs and advertising at the lowest levels of your intelligence. They discourage thinking.

The capacity to reflect upon one's experience by sitting still is a mark of a mature person. This week I rode a train from Cincinnati to Columbus on which there must have been several hundred school children on their way to Columbus for a visit to the state Capitol, the governor's office and the Ohio State Museum. They were assigned seats on the train but they hardly sat in them. They ^{were} running all over the train at once. Now I really enjoyed their youthful enthusiasm and vigor, but I am not sure that they all knew what they were doing and where they were going. You see, they were children and they could not sit still. They had not developed that capacity yet. But if they are ^{to} grow into mature persons who are capable of reflecting upon their experience they will have to acquire the strength to sit still - and think.

I know that this is not an easy thing to do. It is a much greater test of my own strength as a person to sit quietly in my study each morning and apply myself to intellectual labor than it is for me to be up and running around performing my part in a thousand activities. Yet I know that if I do not acquire and maintain the strength to ~~sit~~ sit still in my study and work at intellectual tasks ~~that~~ you will soon grow weary and fed up with my preaching. ^{simple} I won't have anything to say.

This same thing is true for students. How much easier it is for a student to become a big wheel on campus, running all over the place getting himself thoroughly enmeshed and entangled in extra curricular activities while letting his studies go hang. When it comes time to graduate he may be thought of as a big-man-on-campus but if sometime during the four years he has not developed the strength to ~~sit~~ sit still and study he will be an also-ran in the graduation lists and he will have missed the most essential purpose of coming to college in the first place. Not long ago I talked to a student who told me that she just dearly loved the activities of the campus but that she despised studying. She had no strength to sit still.

The other day I had a conversation with a ^{Joe Varner} true scholar, a scientist rapidly

gaining distinction in his field at Ohio State University. He is also, I am proud to say, a member of this church. He told me that he had long since decided that ~~xxx~~ what he wanted to do more than anything else was to teach and do research. He had no interest in the thousand and one extra things he could do and which many people do do. He had decided that he was going to do his work. And it can be pointed out that this is precisely what is needed in the academic field. This man has great strength - to sit still, to think, to research.

How much different our lives would be if we had this strength! Almost everyone has had the urge ~~at~~ some time to get married. It has become almost funny the way people get married, almost by reflex. A man sees a pretty girl, likes her, and decides that he ought to marry her. Very little thought is given as to whether this is a well-advised marriage. People don't think much about getting married: they just act! The Apostle Paul, who ~~xxx~~ seemed to have no recorded success as a husband, recognized this tendency long ago. He advised the people of his churches that it is "better to marry than burn." Apparently ~~xxxx~~ it was no different in that day: people were burning to get married. But I can't help appreciate the thoughtful young couples who have been coming now for the last three weeks to my class on Sunday morning for preparation in marriage. I think they know what it means to burn too, but they are also acquiring the strength to sit still and think about their marriages and to study their meaning. I would bet my life on their endurance and effectiveness.

Being human requires time to be thoughtful about life, and being thoughtful requires the strength to sit still.

-II-

For another thing I should say that the capacity to stand up in the storms of life requires the strength to sit still. No one can absorb life's toughest blows without this strength.

There is no gainsaying the fact that life does deliver some pretty tough blows. Not to all of us, alike, to be sure; nonetheless, no one of us can count on escaping. A minister is a kind of a specialist in observing the ways in which human beings deal with dark days. He sees them close up, as it were. Some fold up completely under a stiff blow. Others grow ~~xxxxxxx~~ bitter and cynical after a hard knock. The really great human souls seem to grow strong - a strange and inexplicable kind of strength which is as inexplicable as the blow which was dealt with them.

Perhaps we have seen a demonstration of this strength this past week in the trials and tribulations of our Vice President, Richard M. Nixon in his trip through Latin America. Seldom has an American official so high as he been treated to greater indignity and offense. Yet I am one who admires the way he responded to this mistreatment. Spat up from head to foot, cursed and stoned and jeered, he kept his temper and tempered his courage by sitting still during the molestings. Surely our Vice President has returned to the United States a wiser, stronger leader because he learned to sit still in the midst of ~~fiery~~ a ~~if~~ fiery ordeal. That this ordeal should have been visited on him seems unjust and uncalled for, yet it was. Instead of denying that it happened or of pleading his innocence, he took it, sat still and grew strong.

Literally speaking, you know, a "patient" person is one who suffers. This word patient is related closely to the word "passion," which means "to suffer." Great patience is always the capacity to endure suffering. Ask a hospital nurse who the best patients are: they are those who suffer quietly and with great strength.

In our quite human moods most of us feel a sense of outrage in the midst of suffering that is very intense and quite unexplained. And yet we see it every day. If only it could be explained, we say, we could accept it. But so much suffering seems cruel and senseless! In my daily rounds as a minister I am often called upon to "explain" sorrow and suffering. Often I cannot explain it. I know no explanation. But this I do know: the greatest souls on this earth are they who endure trouble and rise above it because they acquire the strength to sit still.

John Knox, one of our great New Testament scholars and theologians, writes in his latest book about two experiences he had in a single day. ~~One~~ In the morning he read Sir James Jeans' book Mysterious Universe in which a great physicist cites evidences of what he calls a ~~xxx~~ cosmic mind. "I recall still," writes Knox, "the elation with which I laid the book down. At last science, which had seemed to many in my generation the great enemy, was upholding the hands of faith!" But on that same afternoon Knox went to visit only two blocks from his house an old man who was blind and lived completely alone. His dwelling was a basement room not eight feet square with a single broken chair, a tiny stove and a narrow cot without sheets and covered only by dirty and threadbare blankets. Nailed over the bed on the wall was a container holding some scraps of soiled bread. "My elation vanished," writes

Knox. I realized that here was a more eloquent argument against the love and justice of God - and therefore of his existence in any sense that mattered - than ever was written in a book or spoken from a platform, and an argument which no scientist or theologian could adequately answer. What mattered the cosmic mind if there was no cosmic heart?" (The Death of Jesus, p. 166-167) Yet Dr. Knox tells this story to validate the necessity of believing in the cross of Christ. The cross stands forever as a symbol of the suffering which cannot be explained but which, under the grace of God, can and must be borne.

Recently I called on a man ^{Max Neville} ~~Max~~ who was in the hospital with an ailment which had not yet been diagnosed. He was very dissatisfied and critical of the doctors. He had no patience with their probing of his condition. He demanded that they do something positive or tell him they didn't know. He declared that he was not going to lie around the hospital and serve as their guinea pig. He wanted action, or nothing at all. If they were going to ~~max~~ experiment on him he demanded that they pay him for his services. He had no strength to sit still and wait for an answer. But in another room I called upon an elderly woman with a most beautiful soul. She too was in suffering, and the doctors were not sure they could explain her case. Yet it was all right with her. She had suffered before and she could suffer again. She spoke movingly of her trust in God and her willingness to go if that was the way it was to turn out. She spoke kindly and in faith, and her words were evidence of her strength to endure and to sit still, even though surrounded by the mystery of the unknown. In the truest sense she was a patient person. She was mature and unafraid. And she had the strength to sit still.

-III-

This really carries us into a third realization: knowing God also requires the strength to sit still.

~~max~~ Most of us might honestly admit that we have a great deal of difficulty in obtaining an assured experience of the presence of God. ~~max~~ God seems so remote and

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unapproachable. "No man hath seen God at any time," as the Bible avers, and he seems therefore so far removed from the dailyness of our own lives. We grow easily discouraged and disappointed in our quest for God, and we give up. God is not immediate and close enough to us.

At **P**recisely in this situation ~~that~~ we need to have the strength to sit still, for God reveals himself to those who wait upon him. *They who wait upon the Lord shall receive their strength*

Commonly we have a most erroneous notion about Job of the Old Testament. We speak ignorantly of the "patience of Job." Job was not a patient man in the sense that we usually apply to that word. On the contrary he was exceedingly impatient. He complained bitterly and blatantly against God for what he regarded as the injustices of his life. He was not content to accept his many sufferings. He strongly resented them and condemned God for them. Only when the "impatience" of Job was ~~skipped~~ ^{quieted} and he learned to sit still did he acquire the strength to endure his sufferings. Then he trusted God even though he lacked yet an understanding, an explanation, if you please, of his sufferings. Only then could he say: "Even though he slays me, yet will I trust him."

We turn to the great 46th Psalm for our spiritual guidance here:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
.....
Be still, and know that I am God.

Only when we are still, when we quiet all of our strivings, when we wait upon the moving in of his presence, can we know God. God cannot give you strength to endure or knowledge of himself until you learn to sit still.

This is the purpose, the reason for our habitual worship, for our prayer life and our service. Those who spend their lifetimes in search for God, those who pray without ceasing and who worship without weariness are they who gain the strength to bit still and be content in whatsoever circumstances their lives place them. How desolate are the lives who never search, who never worship, who never pray!

Maude Royden tells of a Quaker friend, greatly annoyed and baseing God in the calmness of a Quaker meeting. She was demanding that God manifest himself to her spirit, until at length came the answer of the inner voice: "Yes, I have something to say to you, when

you stop your shouting." (Ball, Christianity, p. 177) "Be still, and know that I am God." In that stillness will be your strength for every circumstance and situation of your life.

at times God must say to us, as we say to squawking children: "Sit still!"