

## THE LIBERAL VOCATION

by

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I raise with you this morning the question, "Who is a liberal? What is liberal about the liberal church? About this liberal church? Is there a distinctly liberal attitude toward religious and social questions by which one may identify liberal persons?" This question is one to which a minister must continuously address himself, not only in order to keep his mind free of cobwebs, but also in order to respond freshly to his congregation, including the newcomers to his congregation whose particular liberalism adds new dimensions to the existing pattern of the group. You will find, I believe, that the question, "What is liberalism?" is one of the most frequently discussed in liberal pulpits, and properly so.

Now the synonyms for "liberal" are those words which have rallied the human race for millenia: free, independent, delivered, emancipated, unfettered, spontaneous, self-possessed. They signify the upthrust of humanity, the progress of individuality, the smashing of chains and the release of the human spirit to fulfill its eternal destiny of self-originating action.

Perhaps the best image of the liberal mystique is a man at the height of his powers, a man (or woman) who by virtue of his sensitivity and strength incorporates the distinctive energies of his world in fruitful combination. Not tyranny but sovereignty is the touchstone to liberalism thus regarded: President DeGaulle saying: "I am France;" Professor Meland saying: "I am the University of Chicago Divinity School;" Ralph Waldo Emerson saying: "I am God"--these are not the pretensions of vanity so much as the perceptions of vital interrelationship to the deepest processes of life. No one would have accused Winston Churchill of egotism, if at the height of the air war in 1941 he had declared: "I am England;" for in that crisis he was England--his genius pervaded the populace, his spirit secured the victory.

Liberality as self-possession is not, however, limited to the great and powerful. Some of you have read in the press recently about the New York groceryman who came to the aid of a policeman in a gang fight, a policeman who was being kicked to death, only to lose his friends, his business, to lose, that is, everything but his self-respect. This man was liberal in that he acted from his own principles and bent circumstances to his own determination, even though subsequent circumstances forsook him. It now appears, incidentally, that the publicity attending this man's plight has brought him employment once again.

Liberalism, then--and I shall be defining liberalism cumulatively during the course of this sermon--liberalism is action from oneself, whether in grand or modest ways. It is the opposite of conformity, mechanization, habit.

A corollary to liberalism thus defined is a sense of openness--openness to experience, openness to new truth, openness to the deepest and best impulses which the universe displays. This sense of openness is perhaps the most conspicuous characteristic of the liberal religious personality. Dissatisfied with

arbitrary doctrine and constraint of spirit, he makes his home under open skies where he can respond on his own terms to the promise and the peril of being free. The liberal is willing, this is to say, to undergo the risks of uncertain fulfillment, or even the risk of non-fulfillment, because he prizes the journey toward fulfillment so highly. For the liberal, openness is itself a fulfillment, a release from bondage, and he savors liberty as an experience transcending all others.

Liberalism, then, is the philosophy of self-originating action pursued in an environment of openness. As soon as we invoke the principle of openness we must affirm also the principle of diversity, because liberals begin from different points and arrive at divergent destinations. The American philosopher, Morris R. Cohen, from whom I read this morning, once defined himself as "philosophically a stray dog." Martin Luther once said of his theological opponents, "They are trying to make me into a fixed star; I am an irregular planet." Now, whichever analogy we choose to apply to ourselves, we understand the principle of diversity, being ourselves exemplars of it. No two of us present today adhere to the same faith, or express ourselves in quite the same way. We rejoice in our differences rather than feeling threatened by them. Our differences are, in fact, the evidence that the members of this congregation take religion seriously.

The alternative, of course, is a hypothetical, hypocritical unity, such as Dr. Meland demolished in his sermon last Sunday. Our unity, my friends, lies in the spirit of mutual aid and cooperative inquiry in which we come together. The unity we seek is that of inner integrity rather than of outward conformity. And if this be heresy, we are prepared to make, indeed we are making the most of it.

Our diversity is not, however, oriented only inwardly. It exists and matures and is perfected in controversy. The collision of principles, the clarification of goals, the contest of methods that constitutes constructive controversy is taken for granted in a liberal institution such as ours, but it is a dimension of glory. I would have us more controversial, not less; more involved in each other's ideas, not less; more alive intellectually, not less.

If there are some among you who regard controversy with distaste, preferring the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, I remind you that our church is historically and in principle committed to the pursuit of truth by dialogue rather than by decree, and that dialogue becomes controversy when issues are vigorously joined. Without the possibility of controversy this church would be empty, its pulpit would be vacant, its roster would be clean. With this possibility, on the other hand, we seek out each other's company, and by the quickness of our thought and the largeness of our field rally to our ranks those with whom we disagree. Am I not right in surmising that there is more happiness in this congregation when someone of a diverse and original and interesting point of view chooses to join our ranks of membership than if one joins our ranks of membership who has done very little thinking for himself, who has framed few conclusions in the realm of religion, and who brings little save himself to our body? We embrace those with whom we disagree and glory in our differences.

In Shakespeare's Julius Caesar the emperor dares Brutus and Cassius to swim the angry Tiber, with himself taking the lead.

The torrent roar'd, and we did buffet it  
 With lusty sinews, throwing it aside  
 And stemming it with hearts of controversy.

So we, my friends, with hearts of controversy, stem the torrent of frozen tradition and throw aside the stream of formal knowledge to gain the far foothills of understanding which lead to the shining summits of experienced truth.

Liberalism is an approach to life rooted in self-originating action pursued in openness, committed to diversity, enhanced by controversy. But liberalism is more than these. Anarchy is all of these, but we are not anarchists. We eschew the path of anarchy, fanaticism, chaos.

The "more" is responsibility. The liberal, while seeking to be free of unjust restraint, recognizes the need for just restraints upon his action and upon his interaction with other persons, including those who deny every principle he espouses. Responsibility is the obverse of the coin of freedom, the corollary of liberty. It is - have you not found - impossible to be free without being responsible, for freedom survives only in a climate of mutual, voluntary, self-imposed discipline. Freedom, this is to say, is cooperative or it is not freedom.

The word liberal, as many of you know, means something quite different today from what it meant a century ago. It used to denote individualism, autonomy, isolation, the free market, imperialism, and freedom from government. Now the word liberal denotes mutuality, interdependence, cooperation, the mixed economy, self-determination of peoples, and freedom through government. The old liberalism and its new expressions say in effect: "Leave me alone and society will prosper." The new liberalism and its old expressions say in effect: "Let us guarantee each other's freedom and society will prosper." A crucial difference between the old and the new liberalism lies in its attitude toward the poor, the weak, the oppressed. The old liberalism, premised in self-interest, devoted to the individual welfare, holds that success is an evidence of merit, and prosperity a virtue. The poet John Davidson, paraphrasing the Book of Ecclesiastes, wrote: "The race is to the swift; the battle to the strong." The new liberalism, in contrast, premised in mutuality, devoted to the common welfare, holds that there is no success or abundance for the individual apart from the success and abundance of the larger community. This idea is unforgettably stated in the words of James Russell Lowell:

Is true freedom but to break  
 Fetters for our own dear sake,  
 And with leathern hearts forget  
 That we owe mankind a debt?

No! true freedom is to share  
 All the chains our brothers wear,  
 And with heart and hand, to be  
 Earnest to make others free.

This sense of obligation to one's community, this moral interdependence, is what I mean by the responsibility of the liberal. "If a single person is in chains," said Rousseau, "I am not free." The ethics of Isaiah, of Jesus, of

St. Francis, of Martin Buber, of Reinhold Niebuhr - all are rooted in this sublime equation.

The liberal is one who acts from himself, who risks openness, who affirms diversity, who prizes controversy, who accepts responsibility. I wish to emphasize that liberalism is not so much an attainment as an ambition, not so much a conclusion as a process. We are not liberals, my friends, by definition; we are liberals by vocation, called to the renewal of ourselves and of the world.

This church is a liberal institution. It exists to encourage self-originating action, it thrives in openness, diversity and controversy, and it seeks to enlarge its realms of responsibility in the human community. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, however, the phrase "liberal institution" is a contradiction in terms. "Liberal institutions," Nietzsche wrote, "straightway cease from being liberal the moment they are soundly established. Once this is attained, no more grievous and more thorough enemies of freedom exist than liberal institutions." We assume that Nietzsche is mistaken, but our assumption does not give the lie to his statement. Only our present deeds prove him wrong.

I urge you to take seriously your liberal vocation in this church. I urge you to use this church for the fulfillment of your dreams as a person, as a family, as a leaven in the loaf of civilization. Our will to innovation was never more resolute than in this moment. Our capability to transform the neighborhood, the city, the nation, was never more promising than now. The church asks your whole-hearted commitment to the liberal vocation as it is exemplified and practiced here. The church calls you, calls us to new life--not in heaven but in the midst of earth; not as saints but as we are; guaranteeing nothing save a great, rich, passionate adventure in being a real person--for once and forever.