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## MY FIRST SERMON.

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*"Let her alone; she hath wrought a good work on me." Mark 14:6.*

One Sunday morning in 1869, a young theologian sat in his room at Number 9 University Place in this city contemplating a sermon on the foregoing text, which he regarded as a masterpiece of clever composition. It was his first sermon, his "trial sermon," and not unnaturally he was eager to deliver it. The church bells had ceased ringing. There came a knocking at his door and, as if in immediate answer to his wish, a messenger announced that Dr. Joseph P. Thompson of the Broadway Tabernacle had been suddenly taken ill and somebody was needed to supply his pulpit. Would the young man preach? *Would he?* How true it is that fools rush in where angels fear to tread! The youth mounted the pulpit steps of the Broadway Tabernacle that morning with a degree of self-confidence that he has never been able to command even to this day. At the close of the service he was assured by some of the ladies present that his sermon was "simply beautiful"; he knew, without telling, that it was profound. His only misgiving was lest he had preached over the heads of his congregation. He realizes now that half a century has passed—for this is the fiftieth anniversary of that notable debut—that the sermon in question was "faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null."

The preacher has never repeated that discourse or even ventured to use the same text; nor does he propose to do so now. My text will be announced at the close of the sermon today. It may not be amiss, however, to submit some of the conclusions which I have arrived at with reference to the Minister and his Mission. No doubt there are those who will differ with me. Nevertheless *experientia docet*. I would hardly have agreed with myself fifty years ago.

I. To begin with, John the Baptist was right in affirming that *the Preacher is a Voice*; that is, he is nothing in himself while his message is everything.

And his message is clearly marked out for him. It is three-fold, to-wit: First, *a holy God*, in whose sight the very stars of heaven are not clean; Second, *a sinful man*, made in the divine likeness but fallen from his high estate and therefore exiled from the presence of God; and Third, *a mediating Saviour*, by whose self-sacrifice in our behalf a sinful man may be restored to the favor of a holy God.

This is the Gospel, the good-spel, the glad tidings of salvation which the preacher as a Voice is under bonds to proclaim far and wide. Failing to deliver that message he fails in his ministry and his preaching is naught but beating the air.

What shall we say then of the Chaplain who on his recent return from a year of service on the battle-front, announced that he made himself "popular with the men" by refraining from any reference to the Gospel? In a newspaper interview he is reported as saying: "At first they gave me the cold shoulder, but I determined to get next to them; so I never pulled a long face or mentioned God or prayer or religion or any such thing." He wears a service star on his breast and has achieved no end of publicity and popularity; but what do you business men think of a minister who, having taken a covenant vow to "maintain and defend the Gospel," thus renounces it? Shall the level of common honesty in the pulpit be lower than in the market place? We may differ as to many things but doubtless all will agree that "an honest man's the noblest work of God."

II. I think, also, of *the minister as an electro-magnet*; that

is, he has no outstanding power of his own but borrows all from Christ who said, "If I be lifted up, *will draw* all men unto me." It thus appears that Christ himself is the Great Magnet, and that the preacher can legitimately "draw" only so far as he is magnetized by him.

What becomes then of the adventitious attractions which are advertised in so many of our churches today? Christ himself will attract the people if we lift him up in the pulpit as he was lifted up on the Cross for us. The deepest longing in the heart of the average man is to know the way of everlasting life; and Christ meets that longing, meets it fully, freely and every way. "In hymn," as the Wyclif Version puts it, "ye ben fylled"; or, as Coleridge expresses it, "His Gospel *finds me.*" Christ is our Priest to atone for us, our Prophet to instruct us in the great problems of the spiritual life, and our King to defend and command us. What need we more? "Thy love, O Lord, is better than wine; draw us and we will run after Thee!"

III. The preacher, in my judgment, *should also be a transparent man.* We miss the mark in striving after profundities and sublimities. True, there are depths and heights in the Gospel. "The river of life," said Augustine, "is so deep that an elephant can drown in it, and so shallow that a lamb can ford it." But, blessed be God, the truths that concern our welfare in time and eternity are as clear as sunlight; and it is for the preacher to keep them so.

The simplest preacher that ever lived in this world of ours was Christ himself; wherefore it is written "The common people heard him gladly." His congregations never knit their brows as if to say "I wonder what he's driving at?" He was everybody's preacher, and everybody could understand him. No lesson in homiletics has ever equaled his when, taking a child upon his knee, he said, "Except ye become as this little child ye shall not enter the kingdom of God."

And next to Christ the greatest, because the simplest, of preachers was Paul. It is true, as Peter said, that "in his Epistles are some things hard to be understood," but never in

his sermons. There he continually harped on two themes; one was the story of his conversion on the way down to Damascus and the other was "This Jesus is the Christ." And always his preaching was marked by extreme simplicity. He was probably the most learned man of his time, but he never aired his learning in the pulpit, except once—when he preached on Mars Hill to the philosophers of Athens—and then it would appear that his sermon was as water poured upon the ground. It is clarity that counts; as Paul himself says, "I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue."

IV. The preacher, furthermore, *must be a sensationalist*; that is to say, he should so present his message as to stir the sensibilities of those who hear it.

And why not? Think of the legitimate topics of his discourse: God and the Gospel of his grace, life and immortality, death and the resurrection of the dead, righteousness and temperance and judgment to come, heaven and hell! How can a man preach on themes like these without quivering nerves and flashing eyes? Dullness is our unpardonable sin. We alone are to blame if the people do not hear us.

A young man once came to Henry Ward Beecher with this problem: "I have two or three venerable men in my congregation who habitually sleep during the sermon; and other members have now caught the infection so that a kind of sleeping sickness is troubling the whole church. What would you do about it?" After a moment's thought Mr. Beecher replied, "I would appoint a tactful committee to stand in the rear of the congregation and watch for signs of drowsiness; and when they see anything of the sort I would have them march up the middle aisle and *wake up the preacher*." He was quite right. When you lose interest in the preaching here, my friends, blame me. And God forgive me if I ever grow drowsy in the presentation of a Gospel in which are involved the issues of eternal life!

V. Finally, *the preacher must be a villein*, in the feudal

sense; that is, "the free subject of a thegn." He speaks with authority; but his authority is that of the Master whose he is and whom he serves.

Authority of some sort the preacher must have; or else he neither gets a hearing nor deserves it. What does the mere personal opinion of the most eloquent of divines amount to? Men go to Church not to hear what the preacher thinks about life and immortality, but what God thinks about it. How dare a man whose breath is in his nostrils presume to say, "I am Sir Oracle, and when I ope my lips let no dog bark!" My "inner consciousness" is nothing for you to go by. Authority must needs be infallible; and the wisest of philosophers can lay no claim to infallibility. No more can the church; since the pope himself as its mouthpiece claims to be infallible only as "the vicar of God." It is obvious, therefore, that there is no ultimate source of authority except in God himself, and that authority can be found nowhere else but in the Word of God.

Our congregations are made up of men and women who are busy all the week in their shops and offices or so "cumbered with much serving" at their household cares that they have—or think they have—little or no time to ponder on spiritual things. But they have pastors who are solemnly pledged to devote all their time and energy to the study of the Scriptures and the ministry of eternal life. When the Church bell rings on Sunday these busy people say, "Let us go now to the Sanctuary and hear what the preacher has to say about God's gracious will." A sermon, however eloquent, on art or science or philosophy or anything but the Gospel, based on mere personal opinion or on any authority short of a divine *yea and amen*, must under such circumstances, be like the dry bed of a river to a thirsty soul.

Wherefore, a loyal minister of the Gospel must stand upon the integrity of the Word. This is his *terra firma*. In his equipment for service he is armed with one weapon only, namely, "the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God." Here is a two-edged blade, "quick and powerful, piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit." The minister who has

lost confidence in his Bible is like a soldier going into battle with a wooden sword; but he who reads the superscription of the King on his Damascus blade can rest assured of the promise "Thus saith the Lord, my Word shall not return unto me void but it shall accomplish that which I please and prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."

These are some of the conclusions which force themselves upon me at the close of a ministry of half a century.

And now my promised text: *John 3:16*. It is an old and thumb-worn text; as old as divine grace and as new as the last message from the firing line. A fortnight ago in California I was told of a minister who, on being invited to preach in the Chapel of the penitentiary, prepared a sermon on the Supremacy of Character. On entering the Chapel, before the convicts filed in, he observed three chairs draped in black. The warden explained that these were reserved for three prisoners who were to go to the electric chair at six o'clock the next morning. The preacher thereupon changed his theme, taking *John 3:16*, with a prayer that God would enable him to preach "as a dying man to dying men." My text is the same as his, *John 3:16*; but I would not preach as a dying man to dying men. Nay, rather, as a living man to living men, to men made in the likeness of the living God and destined to live forever! And here is the message—the message that must ring from the pulpit until the last sinner has repented of his sins—a diamond text with a thousand facets and ever-changing lights but always bright with hope and promise and heavenly grace—"God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Do you believe it? If so there is only one thing to do; open every chamber of your heart to Him and live that way.