"IF I WERE A PREACHER": BY WALTER A. DYER

If I were a preacher, I would preach the gospel of the richer life—the life of the personal human soul. I would advocate the quiet life, the good life. If I were a preacher, or a teacher, or a leader of men, I would raise my voice in behalf of the individual life. This is an age of types and masses and combinations. We speak of labor as a concrete thing, of capital, of the child, of woman, of the Negro, of the immigrant, of the poor, and we endeavor to solve their problems en masse, by formulating a remedy for the ills of a group. The needs of the individual are lost sight of in contemplating the needs of society. The personal, individual, human soul is starved while we consider the great problems of mankind.

I do not find fault with the preachers and teachers and leaders who take this grand, broad view of things. We need them sorely—we need more of them. But I have been straining my ears in vain to catch the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make peace with thine own soul." For after all, we are individuals, you and I. We may be a part of this movement or that class, and as such we share the common problems of humanity; but individuals we remain to the end of the chapter.

You may call this view a selfish one, but I maintain that we are by nature selfish. The struggle for existence is selfish. The instinct of self-preservation is selfish. We can’t get away from the personal factor. I am more important to myself than are all the heathen in the world. If I have a toothache my interest in child labor in Pennsylvania wanes. I cannot help it; I was born that way. So were you, and you will admit it if you are honest. And the best form of unselfishness that I know of lies not in sacrifice to some great cause, but in making the troubles of other individuals your own; that is the only way you, an individual, can really understand them.

So, while I would sympathize to the fullest extent with the great leaders of human progress, I, if I were a preacher, would seek to influence individual consciences and to awaken individual souls.

I attended a dinner not long since, and listened to ringing speeches from four great leaders of men—Bishop Williams of Michigan, Francis J. Heney of San Francisco, Champ Clark of Missouri and Theodore Roosevelt of Oyster Bay. Each preached his own gospel in his own way, but each preached of the national life, of righteousness in politics and business, of the soul of ninety-odd millions. They were thrilling, inspiring speeches, but not one of them struck home to me and my little household on Long Island. And I thought
"IF I WERE A PREACHER"

that perhaps there might be something that they, with all their loftiness and breadth of view, were overlooking.

While we are reforming great masses of men, why can we not perhaps take a little thought on self reform? If I do not go to the dogs, and if you do not go to the dogs, and if we two help to keep our neighbor from going to the dogs, and if some millions of other people could be induced to make the same effort, I have a feeling that perhaps the country wouldn’t go to the dogs.

AND I, if I were a preacher, would preach the gospel of the quiet life. Matthew Arnold had something to say once about sweetness and light that made somewhat of an impression on men, I believe. Aren’t we neglecting to meditate on the beauty and usefulness of sweetness and light? Bishop Williams said that our Americanism was Hebraic. It is. We worship a mighty Jehovah, not a kindly Christ. Our national life is the apotheosis of storm and stress, and he is the greatest reformer whose voice is loud enough to be heard above the tumult, and whose arm is strong enough to beat down other strong arms. It is inspiring. War is always inspiring. But here and there, I fancy, a weary heart is saying, “Let us have peace.”

This is my apology for not preaching national reform and the strenuous life. For if I were a preacher I would doubtless neglect these great duties, and preach to the heart of my neighbor, if so I might bring some peace and joy and soul-awakening into his life. For I can love a man; I find it hard to love a race.

If I were a preacher! I have sometimes sat in a church and wondered if the preacher in the pulpit knew what he was preaching, and why. I have wondered if he had any conception of the character and needs of the individual souls before him. I have wondered if it could ever occur to him how little I cared for his expounding of doctrines and texts.

Sometimes I have been a little hard on the preachers. I have scorned their cloistered lives and closed my ears to their ineffectual logic. But I was wrong. I asked a ministerial friend quite frankly, one day, why he did not preach better sermons, for I knew that he was a thoughtful man and did not lack knowledge or purpose.

“You people who write,” said he, “can take a month or a year to crystallize your thoughts. You can take the time to wait for inspiration. If a writer like Emerson should produce a dozen great essays in a lifetime, he would have done a man’s work. But we preachers cannot wait for inspiration. We must prepare one, two, or even three sermons each week, no matter what state of mental
depression we may be in. And the average pastor has enough things
in his work to cause mental depression. It is only the genius like
Beecher who leads a life of continuous inspiration. We cannot all
be Beechers."

I was silenced, I will admit, for I caught a glimpse of a preacher’s
soul. And very likely if I were a preacher I would find myself
worse than the poorest of them. Meanwhile, however, when the
sermon is dull, and my mind goes wandering, I continue to fancy
what I would preach if I were a preacher.

I would preach a little less theology and more philosophy, I think,
—less scripture and more ethics. And I believe I would be right
in this. Christ’s miracles were of secondary importance. His real
influence lies in His teachings, and those are personal and ethical.

If I were a preacher, I would study the Sermon on the Mount,
in season and out of season. I would preach a sermon on charity,
and a sermon on love, and a sermon on gentleness, and a sermon on
kindness, and a sermon on courtesy. I would try to understand the
lives and hearts of those before me, and minister to them in a personal,
practical way. I would try to preach something on Sunday that
would help to sweeten Monday.

Above all, I would preach the gospel of the richer life. I would
try to teach my congregation to feed their souls. I would try to lead
their thoughts away from material things to the life of the spirit within
them. I would try to show them the incalculable value of their own
souls to themselves. I would try to point out definite, practical,
reasonable ways in which they might become happier in spite of
circumstances, calmer, braver, less easily disturbed by those things
which can only harm the bodily comfort and not the immortal soul.

If I were a preacher!

WAGNER MUSIC

RASPING sounds of contest. Hark, to the war’s alarms!
Din of fife and trumpet! Discordant blare of arms!
A thund’rous crash! The surcease. Lo! crystal-pure and strong,
And poignant—like Love’s sorrow—one Silver Star of Song!
HENRIETTA LEE COULLING.