

“A LITTLE FREE ADVICE”

For the 2009 Graduates - June 7, 2009

1 Samuel 3:1-10; Mark 2:23-3:6

Billie Burke was a prominent actress from around 1910 to 1960. She was in movies, radio, and even early television. You probably saw her work a number of times even if you didn't realize it, for Billie Burke played Glenda, the Good Witch of the North in the Wizard of Oz. On one occasion, while on a transatlantic cruise, she noticed that a gentleman close by was suffering from a very bad cold. She sympathetically asked if he was uncomfortable and he said he was. So she said, "I'll tell you just what to do. Go back to your stateroom and drink lots of orange juice. Take two aspirins. Cover yourself with all the blankets you can find. Sweat the cold out. I know just what I'm talking about. I'm Billie Burke from Hollywood." The man smiled warmly at her and said in return, "Thanks. I'm Dr. Mayo of the Mayo Clinic."

I tell this story because it is the best time of year for people to give and get free advice. Many people are beginning new adventures in life. June is the traditional month for getting married. And there are millions across the nation, such as those we lift up today, who are graduating from all sorts of institutions. To help all those graduates, we just want to give the most helpful advice.

I'll never forget the advice my father gave me on graduation day. He said, "Chuck, get a job. And when you get a job, get out." I don't think he was serious about that last part but I was the only child left in the house. You never know. But most free advice is like being kissed on the forehead. It doesn't hurt, but it doesn't do you much good either. Still, for the graduates I take this opportunity to offer a little free advice that comes from the scriptures. I know you didn't ask for it, and like Dr. Mayo, perhaps you don't need it, but I believe the lessons for life that come from faith, the lessons from the scriptures are important enough for all of us to consider and remember.

First, listen for the voice of God. *As Eli told Samuel, >Go and lie down and if he calls you, say, >Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.*'“ (1 Samuel 3:9) Listen for the voice of God. That sounds so simple but it's really not. We have to be intentional about it. When Samuel first heard the voice of God he was confused and misdirected. Instead of listening to God he rushed off to seek the advice of someone else he trusted. Fortunately Eli was sharp enough to understand just what was happening when Samuel came to him. And what Eli told Samuel was to be intentional about listening to the Lord. Listen and respond in faith.

It is very hard to hear the Lord speak to us if we are not focused on listening to Him and for Him. It is not impossible, but difficult. That's because there are so many other things competing for attention. Radios blaring, televisions glaring, people shouting, advertisements touting us to look in some other direction. There are so many options and activities. so many distractions and attractions. One has to be intentional about listening for that still small voice of God calling to you. Many people, like Elijah, expect the presence of the Lord to be an explosion of sight and sound, like a boombox on wheels that some deaf fool drives down the street. But love is not loud, flashy, or intrusive. Love comes like a gentle rain with a power to create life; the power to bring forth compassion where none existed before. God comes to everyone. God calls to us regularly to lift us and lead us. The problem is that too often we are confused or too involved in our own agenda to listen. If you want some joy in your life, if you want some power in your life, if you want some sustaining love in your life, than listen for the voice of the Lord, and faithfully answer when he calls.

Second point - pick your battles with wisdom and discretion, or as Kenny Rogers sang, "You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run." When someone graduates from high school or college they have the tendency to believe that they know all the answers. They are ready to take on the world. We can't blame them for that attitude because for years they have been tested on all sorts of information and they had to know most of the answers in order to move on and move out. But for the vast majority of them, they are a long way from taking on the world. The world is too big, too experienced to be changed that easily, and the people of the world are usually harder to change than that.

I speak from experience. You see, when you leave an institution of education you know how smart you are. And you figure that once the world listens to you for five minutes, everyone else will see the world as you do, will agree with your attitudes, will support your ideas. The problem is, the world won't listen. The same distractions that keep us from hearing God also prevent others from hearing what we have to say. And sometimes trying to shout a little louder merely adds to the noise and confusion. Instead of being heard more clearly, all the world is a little more muttered and muffled. Focusing your energy on being heard will bring more frustration than attention.

This does not mean that you cannot have an impact on the world. Indeed we can change the world. It is how we go about changing it that is important. Notice that God listens to us more than we listen to God. He looks upon us with compassion. The Lord listens to our cries for help, for love, and for justice. We can do that, too. We can look around our world, our community with compassion. We can hear the cries of our friends and neighbors. We can

understand the plight in which many have been trapped. The battles that will change the world are not the ones that are strategically designed to get you noticed and promoted. The fights that are important are the ones about justice and compassion, the ones that focus not on ourselves but on those in need, those in pain.

This is what Jesus did so well. Jesus died for the multitudes, but he never looked on the multitudes. He saw individuals. Even in the midst of the crowds he dealt with people one on one. He challenged the leaders of society, he challenged the rules of society only when those rules got in the way of meeting the needs of the people. A man had a useless hand. He came to Jesus on the Sabbath to seek healing and wholeness. And someone said, "We have a rule against that." Others were hungry on the Sabbath and they tried to gain some nourishment. Again we heard, "We have a rule against that." So what?

Jesus told us time and time again that rules and commandments are intended for the benefit of humanity, not their hindrance. Mark 2:27 - *"Then Jesus said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.'" People are more important than proper procedure. Congregations are more important than cathedrals. Blessings more than buildings. Missions more than meetings. Congregations without compassion are no more than spiritual slums where the caretakers of the souls have abandoned their responsibility to build a city of grace.*

Do not be afraid to take on the powers that be. Do not be too frightened to challenge the established ways of how we have always done things. But do not challenge simply to make a challenge. Always look toward the plight of the people. Do something to ease the struggle of another. Reach out to touch the untouchables, to befriend the friendless, to house the homeless, to love the lonely, to accept the abandoned, to offer hope to the hopeless. If we want to change the world, we first need to find a way to stop focusing on ourselves so we can comfort the afflicted around us. Then we can change a life, and in changing a life, we can change our world.

The third point comes from Paul who reminded us that the light of God shines within what had been the darkness of our hearts. 2 Corinthians 4:7-8a *For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. Now we are clay jars holding a tremendous treasure.* That is to say that we carry with us the wonderful good news that Christ died for our sins, and that we have new life in his resurrection. That is what Christian hope is all about, the knowledge that we shall live forever in the power and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet we, ourselves, are like fragile clay pots, easily broken and of dubious value.

Now I thought about that line, and one thing I realized is that you can't see through a clay pot. We have this gospel within us and like a clay pot, when we hold it inside no one can see it. The advice from Paul is to let your light shine into the darkness of the world. Shine on the darkness of poverty or racism. Illuminate the shades of depression. Shine some rays of hope into an otherwise dreary existence. Anyone can stand and complain about how rotten the world has become, but a Christian, one who knows that their life is safe and secure in the arms of Jesus, can paint a picture of a better future, of a brighter future. We can speak of the peace that is possible, of the joys that shall be ours because the light of Christ shines in us. Don't keep it to yourself. Let the light of God shine through you into a darkened world, a world that can use some light.

And there is just one more thing. When Samuel answered the call of God he had no idea where that call would lead him. He became the priest of the nation, the last of the judges, the king maker and the king breaker. When he responded to the call of God he had no idea of all that the Lord could accomplish through him. But he did know that the Lord was with him every step of the way. He knew he had a hand in building a kingdom that was a light shining on a hill, a kingdom that was a beacon to the world that beams the bright and glorious wonders of God's overwhelming grace.

Likewise when we answer that call from God, we never know where it might lead us. Some to the altar and others to the streets. Some to the choir loft and others to the pulpit. Some will be called to visitation and others to administration. Some will be teachers and preachers and healers, even workers of miracles when we commit our life to the Lord, when we begin to answer in faith to the call of God. Go where the Lord calls you. You may be the king maker, the king breaker; you may be the one who leads this community to become a beacon to the world that beams the bright and glorious wonders of God's overwhelming grace.

As you go into a new week, a new situation, a new world, remember some advice that comes from the scriptures. Intentionally listen for the voice of God calling to you, and answer when you hear it. Look upon the world with compassion and challenge the rules and the rulers that prevent people from receiving the help they need. Let the light of hope that comes from the love of God shine into a dark and often loveless world. These are thoughts that can change your life. These are actions that can change the life of those around you. This is the stuff that can move you and your environment a little closer to the world that God would have us build. You never know where it will lead you, but it will lead you to where God wants you to be. That will be a place where we can celebrate and rejoice in life. That is where we can walk with God now and forever. And in your life may it be so. Amen.