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THREE ENEMIES OF DEMOCRACY

Rev. Harold W. Griffis

District Superintendent, Troy Annual Conference, The Methodist Church, Albany

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I think in these days we sometimes consider our democracy too casually. For that matter, we consider many things too casually. We take too many things for granted.

How many times do we meet a person on the street and say, "Good morning. How are you?" and go on? How many times have you received that greeting and said "Fine"? Then, after you said "fine" you started to think about it and wondered why under the sun you said "fine". I have a scheme I use now to see whether people really are interested in me or not. When they say, "Good morning, how are you?" I say, "Terrible". If they just go on and say, "That is great" as most of them do, I understand. Once in a while somebody

comes up sharp and says, "What in the world is the trouble?" It is a good thing, once in a while, to startle people that way.

What about the institutions we take for granted? What about our democracy? Today democracy is being attacked and I think it behooves us to consider very carefully what, or who the real enemies of democracy are.

As soon as I speak about the enemies of democracy, some of you will start to think of specific things. You think of a country, or you think of countries. I do not believe that democracy will be defeated by any one specific country or any one specific movement. There are three enemies of democracy which we must consider and those three enemies are within us.

The first enemy of democracy is ignorance. That seems obvious perhaps. You are concerned with dispelling ignorance. In a democracy, people need to have enough knowledge in order to act intelligently. People have to know certain things.

I heard a story the other day about a

Methodist minister whose bishop was going to visit his church. He wanted to be sure everything was fine. When the bishop came, he took him around the church and the church school and the bishop got very much interested in it and started to question the children. The bishop asked, "Who can tell me who Matthew was?" There was a dead silence.

Then the bishop said, "Could somebody tell me who Paul was?" There was a deeper silence. The bishop asked, "Could anyone tell me who Peter was?" One little hand went up and he said, "All right. Tell me who Peter was." The reply came, "I fink he was a wabbit!"

I don't know how well you and I would pass our test. Do we have enough knowledge to avoid prejudice? Do we have enough knowledge to use modern tools of our day? I think the young people do better with those than we do.

Our day needs people who know how to touch the hidden springs of life - who have enough knowledge.

More important than this, our people

lack the knowledge of the basic purposes of our democracy. It is not enough to teach basic skills. We must be sure our people are not ignorant of the great purposes of life.

Probably most of you are familiar with Myrdal's study called "The American Dilemma" in which he talks about the ideals of America and calls them the American Creed. Do you and I know what the American Creed is? Or, are we confused?

This group of people is concerned basically with the problem of dispelling ignorance. You must teach - teach - teach -- not only the basic skills but also something about the basic purposes of life. You must teach in order that people can act.

I remember one thing about my high school. There was another boy in my class who used to sing and I accompanied him on the mandolin. We entertained in the high school auditorium one day. I tinkled away on the mandolin and he sang. As I was playing, my eyes went up and there was a stained glass thing in the ceiling. There was a world there and

around it were these words: "Knowledge is Power". It was the first time I had seen that. I was in the seventh grade and hadn't discovered it yet but there it was. Knowledge is Power! It fascinated me. All of a sudden, I realized the teacher was pounding me on the shoulder and saying, "Play! Play!" because I had stopped playing as I was watching and looking and thinking about "Knowledge is Power".

Knowledge is Power - when it leads to action.

One of the greatest problems that we are facing in certain professions today is that young men are putting off later and later the time when they will actually get to work because they do not feel they have enough knowledge to do the job they have to do.

The second enemy of democracy is ~~inertia~~. I looked up the definition of inertia and it said: "Inertia is the tendency of a body to maintain its original direction of rest or motion." That is the fanciest definition of laziness I ever found.

I remember once a man told me never to call a man a liar; that he would resent it; but, he said, "If you tell a person that he has committed a fulminated enlargement of an elongated veracity, he really thinks he is being complimented." So you tell anybody he is overcome by inertia and that is all right.

Recently, I was coming up on the train from New York and on the seat behind me was a man trying to entertain his grandson. This man obviously had come from Italy originally. I wish I could reproduce his accent. It was delightful as he was pointing out all the things along the river. As we came by the place where the mothball fleet is, the grandfather got very excited and shouted, "Look, boy! Look at that -- more than a hundred ships and they ain't goin' no place."

How often that is descriptive of our society - we are going no place. Inertia is an enemy of democracy. Things cannot stay as they are. Maybe we would like to have them stay as they are but they cannot.

The third enemy of democracy is ~~irr~~

sponsibility. Ignorance, ~~In~~ertia and ~~Ir~~responsibility! We are having a dramatic evidence of this in the registration reports we are getting. I don't know when I have been so disturbed by anything as by the reports of registrations in our communities and of people who refuse to accept their privilege of voting.

A democracy presupposes that everyone is responsible. What are we trying to do? Well, actually we are trying to avoid being involved, aren't we? You try to get somebody to do something in your community and what does he say? "Oh, I don't want to be involved."

Right in back of where I live there is a housing project. There are enough children in that housing project to take up the time of everybody in this room. I have some fruit trees and some grapevines out back. Notice I did not say I have fruit and grapes. I realized the other day I had been trying to avoid becoming involved with those boys. I went out there and I think half of the project was swarming over my grapevine. They started

to run when they saw me and I called them back. I don't know why they came, but they did.

I said, "You don't have to steal these grapes. If you just came to the door and asked for them, we would be glad to have you take some. We just don't want you to climb all over the trellis and break it. Go on! Help yourself! Would you like some paper bags to take some home?"

- and they did.

Yesterday afternoon I was in my study and I heard a kind of commotion out by the back door. I heard a little boy saying in a lisping voice, "Ith there anybody home here?" I went out and here they all were. The spokesman said, "Can we have some grapes?" I said, "Yes, you can have some grapes."

They went on and I had kind of an uneasy feeling. I don't want to become involved. I don't want to take the responsibility. My boys are grown up. Why should I take the responsibility? See what I mean?

I do quite a lot of traveling and it

seems to me that a great deal of effort and energy is being spent in our day tossing children around. In the morning the home tries to get rid of them as soon as possible by getting them off to school. In the afternoon, the school tries to get rid of them and get them home. Most of the time they are going back and forth. Neither wants to hang onto them too long.

That is a thing I said to a school superintendent once: Just where does the school's responsibility end? He said it ended at the property line of the school. It would be nice if it did. It would be nice if my responsibility as a father ended at the front door of my house. But it does not. Responsibility! That is the thing ~~that~~ we must teach and that we must develop among our young people.

Clerks don't ^{feel} have responsibilities any more. Wouldn't you love to go into a store and have somebody try to sell you something? I found the answer in a little town up north of Albany called Northville. You go there and I think you will still see the sign. It certainly intrigues me.

It reaches all across the front of this store: "Super Self Service". This is the ultimate. And they have not only "Super Self Service" but they say, "Save Your Time - No Waiting".

Well, in a sense, we must develop something quite different from that. We must be responsible for those who come in. Some people would like to put education on a Super Self Service basis. We must have persons who are responsible in every situation.

These are the three enemies of democracy -- ~~Ignorance~~, ~~Inertia~~, ~~Irresponsibility~~. What are we going to do about them?

In the first place, you and I must be informed persons; invigorating rather than overcome by inertia; and responsible. We must be the persons we are trying to create. That is one of the big problems of our society today - adults are expecting young people to be what the adults are not. We must not have substitutes.

I heard a definition of a substitute. One minister went to substitute for

another minister and he felt he had to explain what a substitute was so he said to the congregation, "Now, you see this window over here. If that glass were broken and I put up a cardboard there, that would be a substitute." So he went on with his sermon and after the sermon, a nice old lady came up and said to him, "Oh, doctor, you were no substitute. You were a real "pane".

I don't mean that we should be real "pains" but I do mean we should be sincere people; that we should be the persons we are trying to create. It is not enough to attend board meetings. It is not enough to get past the state audit. ~~It is not enough to keep the peace.~~ It is not enough just to keep peace with the faculty. We must be the people we want our young people to be and then we must never get so interested in buildings and equipment that we forget the person who is being trained. Let us always remember that the building and equipment is a means to an end. Let us have the best tools possible to work with in our

schools. But, let us remember that our primary interest is in those persons who are being trained to be the citizens of our democracy.

We must make decisions. We must act as we want people to act. We must take responsibility. There are some times when we have to make unpopular decisions but we must make them because we have responsibilities.

I have been reading Winston Churchill's "History of Great Britain" and he says this about the King Arthur stories:

"In this account we prefer to believe that the story is not all fancy and wherever men are fighting against barbarism, tyranny and massacre, for freedom, law and honor, let them remember that the fame of their deeds, even though they themselves be exterminated, may perhaps be celebrated as long as the world rolls round. Let us then declare that King Arthur and his noble knights, guarding the Sacred Flame of Christianity and the theme of world order, sustained by valour, physical strength, and good horses and

armour, slaughtered innumerable hosts of fierce barbarians and set decent folk an example for all time."

It is something like that that must get into our blood as we try to combat the enemies of democracy.

In closing, I think all that I have said can be summed up in a strange way. I will have to ask your pardon because there seems to be a lot of commercial material in this thing. It actually is a citation accompanying an honorary degree given at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute a couple of years ago.

"Alfredo Medina V - Engineer, pioneer, man of the future in Mexico. A graduate of Rensselaer in the class of 1924, Mr. Medina took home to his native country the pioneering spirit which from the earliest days of the Institute has characterized men of Rensselaer. His engineering skill developed dams, roads, airfields, and many other construction projects in modern Mexico. In supporting the Polytechnic Institute in Monterrey, he has helped in training other engineers.

From 1935 until now, however, he has been best known for his spectacular pioneering in Yucatan. He has hewn a path from a mahogany log cabin, if not to the White House, at least to white cities of his own creation. Rensselaer is proud of his claim that he learned at this Institute to "dirty his hands." He has shown that an engineer can use a machete or an airplane, a mule team or a tractor, and with vision can make a wilderness yield wealth for himself and a good life for his workers. Realizing the opportunity for development of the State of Yucatan, Mr. Medina opened up millions of acres of rich timber lands, laid roads and railroads, built factories, and for the workers in the forests and factories, built towns with water supply, sanitation, hospitals, schools, churches, and all the other necessities for healthy, modern living. His engineering and economic vision have been combined with a true sense of human welfare. His nickname, "El Loco" - the crazy one.

"He has exemplified once more the truth

that he who steps out ahead of his fellows in enterprise will be called 'the crazy one', and that such ~~men's~~ ^{madness} is the divine force that lifts mankind to new levels. Although this madness is something Rensselaer cannot teach, it can honor it when it sees it."

I would take exception at that point. The schools of our country must teach this madness in order that democracy may be saved.