

Levi Pennington

People

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Levi Pennington To Lillie Young, November 13, 1965

Levi T. Pennington
George Fox University

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in which they all face the terrible situation. Multiple sclerosis is always fatal unless some other disease such as pneumonia steps in and hastens the process. Otherwise the patient may live for 25 years or longer while the disease makes its snail-like but inevitable progress.

Alta Diment wanted to type my autobiography, if that is not too ambitious a title for "Rambling Recollections of Ninety Happy Years," and I got all of it finished except for some possible minor additions to two of the chapters. She and her oldest daughter, who is also a skilled typist, are to do this manuscript as they find the time from their very busy schedule. Later I may have the thing printed in book form, but that is not a settled matter yet.

My visit to Brookings was to spend some days with Emmett and Zoe Gulley. He was my immediate successor as president of the college and she was a student there until his graduation, when they were married. He has had a varied career since I got him as a student in 1912 and he graduated in 1917, with one year out to get his finances in better shape. He studied in Haverford College and in Hartford Theological Seminary; he served for more than five years as a Friends missionary in Mexico, much of the time self-supported almost entirely; he was field secretary for New York Yearly Meeting; he was for years a member of our college faculty, with leave of absence for a half year of war relief in Spain and more than a year caring for war refugees from Germany in Cuba; he was president of the college for years; head of the big job of ministering to 230,000 Arabs driven out of Palestine; executive secretary of the Portland Regional Office of the American Friends Service Committee; was nearly seven years in British Columbia working on the many-sided Doukhobor problem; two years in the Klamath Indian Reservation, preparing the Indians for the closing of the reservation; and there have been other jobs of various kinds. He has retired, but is till working most of the time on some worth-while project; but he fishes a good deal some summers, though he did none of it this year as he and his son spent the whole summer building a lovely house. Emmett and I fished some on Tuesday and Wednesday, and I caught a salmon 27 inches long and weighing, for a guess, a bit less than ten pounds. Not much of a salmon, but the best fish I have caught in more than six years.

I used to suppose that when a man retired he would have a lot of time on his hands, to do just what he pleased. But I never get caught up on the work that I'd like to get done. But finishing these "Rambling Recollections" has taken the strain of that job off my hands. I've not done any useful thing today except writing letters, unless you call washing some clothes and getting some food for tomorrow useful things. But I'm definitely slowing down. But I do want to keep going as long as I can. Doing nothing is too hard work even for a man with as much natural laziness as I possess.

Your request that I explain to you more fully the meaning of Matthew 7:6, rather puts me on the spot, as they say. I do not lay claims to any superior standing as a biblical interpreter, and I doubt that any explanation that I can give can be of any real help to you. But I'll try to think on paper a bit.

We know, of course, that Jesus speaks in figurative language often, notably in the parables but also in other speeches of his. Nobody would actually cast pearls before swine.

"Let us define our terms", as the president of the University of Michigan used to say when he was in a difficult discussion.

"That which is holy" referred to the things that had to do with the worship of God, especially such things as the meat offerings in the temple, which certainly should not be offered to the dogs.

Dogs were unclean animals to the Jews, by no means as highly regarded as are the dogs prized as pets, the dogs used for service such as pulling sleds in the Yukon, the dogs that are used for hunting, the watch dogs, dogs used to find lost children, and a lot of other dogs that are prized as "man's best friend." In the days when Jesus taught, most of the dogs with which his followers would be acquainted were the half-wild, ownerless dogs that fed on carrion, and were more likely to attack than to defend human beings.

Pearls were of course very valuable and highly prized gems, things of beauty, suitable gifts for one who is loved, no matter how high in the social world the loved one might be.

Swine were definitely unclean beasts to the Jew, perhaps the most common and outstanding of the unclean animals with which the men of those days and in our day have important contacts.

Figuratively the term "dog" was applied to many kinds of men and women; persons of an undesirable sort are called dumb dogs, greedy dogs, etc; non-Jews were dogs, and those who did have some Jewish blood, like the Samaritans, were dogs; the dogs of the Gentiles was a well-known expression; and Christians were warned to beware of dogs, beware of evil workers. Finally, "without are the dogs" along with the sorcerers, the fornicators, the liars, idolators, murderers, etc.

Now the application of Jesus' words may mean many different things to many different people. The form of Jesus' speech is a figure of speech called anacoluthon. It means, if we want to analyze the statement grammatically, "Give not that which is holy to the dogs, neither cast your pearls before swine, lest they (the swine) trample them (the pearls) under their feet and (they the dogs) turn again and rend you."

Suppose a girl is tempted to sin with a lustful man, to give up her virtue and her virginity to a man who has already, in all probability, committed such sin again and again, no matter how he swears to the girl that he loves her, that he is going to marry her, that he has never loved another woman and has never touched another woman. If she yields to his temptation, she is giving that which is holy to a dog; and when he has got her into trouble and deserts her and moves on to parts unknown thousands of miles away, this dog of a man has really turned again, and she is torn by worse than the teeth of dogs.

Kipling's poem, "The Vampire", deals with the case of the man who gave up his honor and all that a man ought to prize for a woman who did not even understand what he was sacrificing for his sinful love of her. The poem ends:

The fool was stripped to his foolish hide,
Even as you and I,
Which she might have seen when she threw him aside,

Though it isn't on record the lady tried,
 So some of him lived but the most of him died,
 Even as you and I.

And it isn't the shame and it isn't the blame
 That sears like a white-hot brand;
 It's coming to know that she did not know why,
 Seeing at last that she could not know why
 And never could understand.

This fool of whom Kipling wrote, in throwing away his honor, his wealth, his position, all that was really valuable, for this woman who could no more understand what his foolish sacrifices meant than a hog can appreciate the beauty and value of a pearl -- this fool of a man was "casting his pearls before swine."

There could be many other illustrations. Any temptation to lower ones Christian character, to compromise with evil, to surrender ones loyalty to God and good, is giving that which is holy to the dogs. And any sacrifice of that which is beautiful and valuable to persons incapable of using or appreciating the thing that is sacrificed is, in a sense, casting pearls before swine. It is not so easy to illustrate adequately by material things, but giving a lovely painting to one who is stone blind is not quite right -- a better illustration would be giving such a painting to one who is not grateful and who destroys the painting. Giving a hi-fi with a lot of records to one who is stone deaf, is not so good an illustration as giving such an instrument with really good and high class records to one who cannot appreciate good music and would never play such a record, and who destroys the instrument.

Here one needs to be careful not to carry too far the idea of not giving to those who, for the present at least, are not appreciative. God is kind to the unthankful and the evil. "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand, for thou knowest not whether shall prosper either this or that, or whether both shall be alike good."

But I'm not worried about you, for fear you'll not do enough for others. You'll never throw that which is holy to the dogs; and if by mistake you do find that you have cast a pearl before one of the swine family, it need not be entirely lost. It can usually be recovered.

I'm glad that you got this trip with the Beeson family to their cottage on the lake; glad that you can hear the Sunday service even when you cannot be there; glad that you can hear Billy Graham; glad for every good thing that comes to you.

But there are other letters to write, one especially to a dear friend from the last pastorate that I had, South Eighth Street in Richmond, who is flying back from a visit to her old home in Richmond to New York, where she is likely to face surgery for a lung tumor (not caused by cigarette smoking, I am glad to say.) It is after eleven o'clock, and I'd better get to bed and do the rest of my writing tomorrow.

With love and best wishes always,

Sincerely your friend,