Sunday, November 12, 1972
WE HAD BETTER FEEL LIKE IT!
Hebrews 12 (3, 10, 13, 63)

In his autobiography, THE LIVING OF THESE DAYS, Harry Emerson Fosdick, recalls an incident from his boyhood and youth which he says made an indelible impression upon him throughout the years.

One morning as his father, who was a schoolteacher, was leaving for school, he turned to Harry's mother and said, as he was waving goodbye, "Tell Harry he can cut the grass after school today if he feels like it." Then after a few steps he turned again and added, "Tell Harry, he had better feel like it!"

The key word here is "feel." And all of us as human beings are creatures of feeling and emotion. That's part of our being human. We laugh, we cry, we feel good, we feel bad. We are here using the word "feeling" in the sense of an emotional response as a certain state of mind which is changeable at the slightest outward circumstance.

Thus, we often say — "I don't feel like it." Or to explain some action or attitude, we say as if to excuse ourselves, "I don't know, I just felt like doing that."

All of us hear this expression many times with our children and with them we sort of expect it. Fosdick's father knew this; he knew that if he left the decision of cutting the grass to feeling or mood, it might not get done. So, he added the important phrase, "He had better feel like it!"

I guess one of the most difficult things we have to learn as we are growing up in this world is that we cannot for-ever be living our lives; we cannot base all of our actions and attitudes; we cannot trust our judgement or our reli-gious faith to our feelings alone.

When we are small, we live entirely on the basis of our feelings. If we feel hungry, we cry or scream. If we are the least bit uncomfortable, we let our parents know about it. But as we grow and mature, one of the things we have to learn is that if we feel hungry, we may have to wait, that things sometimes have to run on a kind of schedule, and we can't have our feelings and whims satisfied just when we happen to want something or do something. We have to learn that the world is not so constructed as to always bow obediently to our feelings.

We also have to learn as we grow up that we had better feel like doing a number of things regardless of what our feeling is at the moment. It begins with such small things as washing our hands and face, regularly brushing our teeth; with picking up toys and going to bed. We learn that all of these things and more have to be done whether we happen to feel like it or not. We had better feel like it! As we grow and mature, we have to continually learn that life is not to be lived on the basis of how we happen to feel at a particular moment.

This is not at all to say that we should deny our feelings, or that we don't have them. They are part of what make us wonderfully human. And we need to let our feelings out — to be happy, or to be sad, angry or loving. What we have to learn is that we can't make all of our decisions just on the basis of our feelings of the moment.

In the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau, Esau made the mistake 0£ living according to his feelings. He came home one day feeling especially hungry — he felt so hungry that he was

willing to do almost anything to get some food immediately. Jacob, his brother, knew this and took ad-vantage of the situation which ended with Esau selling his birthright, his inheritance for a mess of pottage.

There are many things throughout life which cannot be trusted to our feelings in themselves. After an operation in the hospital, few persons feel like getting out of bed when Ware told to. However, doctors have learned that it is usually best for the patient if he or she does begin exercising his muscles, even though he doesn't happen to feel like it and would just as soon remain in bed. We had better feel like it, for it's part of the healing process.

In an opposite way, sometimes we feel better that we actually are physically and have to learn to take it easy. The point is to attempt to live our lives, to base our actions and decisions, on our feelings alone is a sign of immaturity. It can also lead to false judgements and serious mistakes.

Again, this is not to say that we are to not have feelings. Thus, we've all used the technique of writing a letter in anger, but not sending it. Rather we put it aside till our anger subsides, then read it again and usually tear it up and write something else. Here we have let our anger out, we have not tried to deny the answer, but we have also not let it cause us to make a serious mistake.

Or we've heard people say before making an impulsive decision, "I'm going to sleep on it." In other words, I'm going to let a few hours pass and not just make the decision on the basis of my feelings of the moment.

Consider how this matter of feeling applies to our jobs. There is routine "grass-cutting" to be done in every one's work. All jobs and vocations have their routine, their rather boring aspects. And there are things we sometimes just -don't feel like doing. Fosdick remembered that on many a Tuesday morning, he didn't feel like beginning work on another sermon for the coming Sunday, but then he would recall his father's advice, "tell Harry, he had better feel like it," and he would settle down and begin work. We cannot trust ourselves even as adults to the level of feeling all by itself.

I confess that on many Tuesday and even Wednesday mornings when I know I must begin work on the sermon for the coming Sunday, I don't feel like it. And if I'd let it up to my feelings, I might not feel like it on Thursday or Friday or Saturday. I have to remind myself that I had better feel like it. In other words, my work and your work, has to be based on a deeper level of commitment and sense of responsibility than mere feeling. My motivation and yours for working has to come from another base than that of feeling. I'm sure that many of the persons here who are in school have at times not felt like studying, but then knew they had better feel like it.

And you know the good news is that once I begin, I actually also begin to feel like it. Our feelings will normally follow our will if we do not first give in to our feelings. The secret is partly in simply getting started.

Or consider how this matter of feeling or whim applies to ·1ove, marriage and the family. Much of the definition of love in our culture is described primarily in terms of emotional feeling. Thus, we hear people say they "feel" in love. It may be akin to saying that we have "fallen" in love.

The problem is that our moods change, and they can change easily and quickly and little things which may be irrele-vant can change them so that if our love is on this basis, then we can also fall out of love as quickly as we fall into it.

Thus, in love, in marriage, as well as in our vocations, there are times when we need to be faithful to a deeper commitment rather than trusting only our feelings of the moment. We often have to be faithful to our intention of love so that it can carry us through our changing moods and feelings.

In other words, there is a discipline to life that is necessary. We all have certain responsibilities which we take on regardless of our moods and feelings. In the same way, love, marriage, and the family make certain demands upon us, regardless of our moods and feelings at a particular time.

Sometimes a mother doesn't feel like fixing a meal or washing the dishes or doing any one of a number of routine tasks, but usually she knows that part of the demand of being a mother is to prepare healthy meals for her family. So, she may be true to the deeper commitment even though she doesn't necessarily feel like doing that job at the moment.

So also, in marriage we take vows to underscore our commitment to the relationship. We promise to love and sustain each other in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health. We don't promise to do these · things only if we happen to feel like it, but we make a commitment. The vows are to protect us and carry us through even though our feelings vary.

We had better feel like it! Sometimes we have to hold onto things our reason and will have once accepted in spite of our changing moods. This is certainly a large part of the meaning of faith.

Now again, all of this is not to say that sensation, emotion and feelings are not good. Indeed, they are. They are a part of our lives and part of being a human person. But we cannot entirely trust our actions and decisions to the feelings in themselves.

Our emotions, our feelings, our whims, are often painfully misleading and at best we have imperfect control over them. If we did everything, we felt like on the spur of the moment, this would be nothing but a world of chaos. Psychology tells us that our emotions, our feelings can and are affected by such irrelevant matters as the mood of those around us, by whether we had a good night's sleep or a good meal, (thus the wife for example may cook an extra good and favorite meal when she wants a special favor from her husband): our feelings can be affected by hunger, indigestion, and we even jokingly say by such minute matters as getting up on the wrong side of the bed, or any one of a hundred different things.

Thus, it is that our feelings apply to all of our living, including our Christian faith. In fact, the Bible takes the whole are of emotions and feelings very seriously. Jesus was a person of emotions and feelings. In the Bible we are told — "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." The fact that we feel anger and other emotions is taken for granted, but we are to deal with it before the day ends.

In other words, our Christian faith teaches us to pay at-tention to our feelings, but not to necessarily depend on them. If we are to love people as Jesus loved them and begin to

change the world, we cannot depend solely on ou1 feelings. Follow God's commands and love in costly ways that may not always feel good and may be inconvenient.

So, our faith calls for a "we'd better feel like it" approach. It calls for such an approach in even the little disciplines of life. We've heard people say, "I just don't feel like praying this morning! I'm not in the mood for it." Well prayer is more than just a matter of feeling and mood.

Or people will say, "I just don't feel like going to church." Worship, like prayer, is more than a matter of feeling like it. In fact, as in other areas of our living, once we begin the act of worship, we may find ourselves beginning to feel like it.

On another level people will say, "I prayed to God for for-giveness, but I didn't feel any different after the prayer." And they will thus conclude that they are not forgiven as if forgiveness depended only on feeling at the moment.

Not long ago, a sixteen-year-old boy asked me, "How can one be sure he is a Christian? If a person has asked Christ with sincerity to come into his life, but still doesn't feel any different, well how can he know whether he has or not?"

Again, the key word is "feel" . We petition, we pray, we want, but we do not feel any different. Just as too much of a reliance upon feelings are at the bottom of some of our difficulty with our work, our studies, our love and marriage, so also it may be at the bottom of some of our difficulties with the Christian faith. We expect to "feel" differently immediately, and we falsely judge the quality of our faith with how we feel.

In her book, BEYOND OURSELVES, Catherine Marshall admits that much of her own problem with the Christian faith arose from an early misunderstanding of what faith is. She believed that faith had mostly to do with "feeling." For example, when I messed up some situation and asked God for forgiveness, then I would peer inside myself to see if I felt forgiven. If I could locate such feelings, then I was sure that God had heard and had forgiven me. Now I know that this is an altogether false test of faith.

She went on to say. "We would not be so foolish as to go to a railroad station, board the first train we saw, then sit down and try to feel whether or not this was the train that would take us where we wanted to go. Our -feeling would obviously have no bearing on the facts. Yet I know now at times my actions in the spiritual realm wave been just as foolish."

Again, this is not to say that emotions and feelings are not important. Our religion has to be geared to our feelings and moods as well as to the mind, but one cannot be without the other. Thus, the saints discovered, as did Jesus, that they needed to follow the disciplines of prayer, devotion and giving, regardless of their mood or feeling, even though during the so-called "dry-spells" they didn't feel like it. But they also discovered that if they were true to their inner commitment, true to the decision of the inner will and intention; that if they held onto the things which their reason had once accepted, in spite of their changing meads, then the feeling would return, and their faith would gain strength and grow.

C.S. Lewis wrote — "Now that I am a Christian, I do have moods in which the whole thing-looks very improbable. This rebellion of our moods and feelings against our real self is going to come from time to time. Unless we teach our moods where they can get off, we may never be a sound Christian, but just a creature dithering to and from, with beliefs dependent on the weather and the state of a person's digestion."

So, we need to recognize that our moods and feelings change and that life in all of its aspects is not to be based on our feelings all by themselves!

Jesus didn't say, "wait until your feelings are right, then follow me." No, he said, "follow me." He knew that once a person began to follow him, his feelings would come along. Amen.