Sunday, March 14, 1976
HOW TO CHANGE HUMAN BEINGS
Acts 8:9-24

A few years ago, when it first became evident that there was to be a severe shortage of electricity in New York City, as there has been since then in other places, the question arose as to how in this situation do we change human beings so that we save in our usage of electrical current.

Columbia University in New York City tried two different approaches. The first one was through advertising. A lot of cards and posters reading, “Save A Watt” were printed and were placed on everyone’s desk, in the corridors and on bulletin boards. Not much happened!

The second approach was more direct. The janitors removed some of the light bulbs from university corridors and replaced the remaining larger bulbs with smaller ones.

Here we have two different approaches to social problem solving. One approach is based on the assumption that people can be taught to change their habits rather easily through the use of slogans, advertising, wearing buttons, propaganda and gentle persuasion and that through such means they will remember to switch off unused lights. The second approach assumes that people will not easily change their basic habits through admonition, friendly persuasion, slogans, propaganda, or even religious conversion.

What causes human beings to change? The prevalent approach in the treatment of our numerous and still multiplying social problems many times seems to assume that human beings are rather easy to change. Imbedded in the programs of the federal, state, and city governments, and embraced almost instinctively by many citizens, is the assumption that if you go out there and get the message across — persuade, propagandize, explain, campaign, people will change; that human beings are ultimately quite pliable.

It often seems that political leaders, religious leaders, and the general public believe that advertising is powerful, that information campaigns work, and that an army of educators, counselors, or rehabilitation workers can achieve almost everything if they are sufficiently numerous, well-trained and have enough money to support their programs.

But maybe we need to confront the fact that human beings are not very easily changed after all.

Take smoking for example. Since 1964, when the surgeon general began calling attention to the danger of cigarettes, a vast and expensive campaign has been waged, involving press releases, lectures, television advertising, pamphlets, and notations on cigarette packages. The positive result of all of this activity, however, has been slight. At first there was no effect at all; actually, cigarette smoking continued to rise until 1967. Then it dropped from 11.73 cigarettes per person per day for persons aged eighteen years and over to 10.94 in 1969. More recently the level has risen again.

The moral? If you spend $27 million, you may get enough people to switch from Camels to Kools to make the investment worthwhile for the Kool manufacturers. However, if the same $27 million is used to make nonsmokers out of smokers — that is to try to change a basic habit, no significant effect is to be expected. Advertising molds or teases our appetites, but it

doesn't change basic tastes, values, or preferences for large numbers of people. Try to advertise desegregation to racists, world government to nationalists, temperance to alcoholics, or as we still do, drug abstention to addicts, or even church attendance to nonchurch attenders and see how far you get.

In fact, the mass media in general have proved to be in-effectual as tools for profoundly converting people. Studies have shown that persons are more likely to heed spouses, relatives, friends, and "opinion leaders" than broadcasted or printed words when it comes to deep concerns.

This is of course, as the saying goes, both bad news and good news — bad news because it shows that people are more difficult to change from their bad habits than we imagine, but good news because it means that we cannot be as easily influenced or manipulated or changed by the media as we sometimes suppose.

What's this got to do with the Christian faith? Quite a lot, for what we are about as Christians is changing people, converting them, having people be "born again," so that they become new persons and hopefully we also want to change society for the better. But it's not an easy matter.

The story we read this morning from the Book of Acts under. scores this. Simon, a magician in Samaria, came under the influence of the preaching of Philip, one of the apostles. Philip was having some success in converting persons to the Christian faith in Samaria, so much so that the writer of Acts tells us, even Simon himself believed. "Simon was a well-known person in that town. The writer of Acts tells us that he was somebody great. All people paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest. He was a celebrity, so when Simon was converted and baptized, this made the news.

In our own time the same thing sometimes happens. A few years ago, in the midst of the Watergate affair, it was discovered that Charles Colson one of Richard Nixon's chief aids had gotten religion and it made all the newspapers.

However, in Simon the magician, we see again that human beings are not very easy to change after all. It happened that a few weeks later, Peter and John came to Samaria to visit these new Christians, including Simon. Peter and John brought a new kind of power with them — the power of the Ho.ly Spirit. The Book of Acts tells us tha.t Peter and John laid their hands on the new Christians and they too received the power of the Holy Spirit. This so much impressed Simon that he offered Peter and John money, saying, "Give me also this power, that any one on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Simon, a recent convert, was already reverting back to his old tricky ways. He wanted this new magical power so that he could use it for his own purposes as a magician. Even though he had been converted and baptized just a few weeks before, his basic nature had not changed. The "born again" Christian needed to be "born again." But we shouldn't be surprised. This happens to many persons. It happens to us!

Some years ago, there was a word which was commonly used in the church, a word and concept we need to recover; that word was "sanctification." It means that after conversion, after a person becomes a Christian, there is needed a constant nurturing process because we human beings are difficult to change. We keep slipping back into our old bad habits without often even being aware of it.

Even the disciples who spent time with Jesus found themselves constantly slipping back into their old habits and their old ways of thinking. It's a co1n11ton problem. Some years ago, when religious revivals were popular in this country, they often ran for two weeks in a town, the first week was for the "backsliders," those who had been converted a year or more ago and who needed reviving because they had reverted back into their old habits, and then the second week was for the conversion of new Christians.

People, human beings, are rarely changed once and for all. It's an ongoing process. We human beings can be taught many things — speedreading, belly dancing, how to operate complicated machines, but when we turn to the modification of ingrown habits, of basic values, of personality traits, then it's a different matter.

How then are human beings changed and kept changed?

1. First of all, an individual has to have the desire to change. "When the pupil is ready, the teacher appears." There are teachab1e moments in all of our lives and when these occur, we are ready for change. In Alcoholics Anonymous, the first step is — "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable."

Here the individual admits that he or she wants to change. So, whether we want to lose weight or deal with a drinking problem, or a family problem or some aspect of our personality, or some habit, or become a new person in any way, the first step is always the same — we have to want to be different. We have to want to be healed. This is true in medicine as well as in religion.

I vividly remember my first experience with an alcoholic in my first church. He came to my home for help. After talking with him for a time, I suggested that he contact A.A. He asked that I make the call for him. The man who answered the phone said, "I have to speak to the person who wants help. After a pause, the man who had come to see me, picked up the phone and said simply," I need and want help. "That was the beginning of a long slow change which took place in him. Many times, over the next several years, he slipped back into his old habits, but only through the loving community of persons he found in A.A. did he finally stay sober.

2. This leads to the second factor in changing human beings or in conversion or being born again. The person not only has to want to change, but he or she has to at almost the same time become part of a group or community of persons which supports him or her in the change. That's why organizations such as "Weight Watchers" and A.A. are so ef-fective. First, they are made up of people who have consciously made a decision to change, and secondly the persons become part of a regular group, all of whom are seeking the same goal and who support one another in reaching that goal. The conversion experience or the desire to change is never enough all by itself.

Bill W., the cofounder of A.A., had an overwhelming spiritual experience at one point in his life. But he discovered it was not enough all by itself. He needs to be with others who could criticize, encourage, and support him.

There are many persons who like Simon the Magician in the book of Acts are converted to the Christian faith, but then do not become part of a community of Christians and therefore constantly slip back into their old ways. It's impossible to be an isolated Christian. Ours is a communal faith.

One reason persons who come out of prison have such a problem in society is that they have no group to which they can belong which will be their community of support. There needs to be for ex-prisoners the kind of community there is in Alcoholics Anonymous. In fact, there need to be groups like this inside prison too. Without group support almost all efforts at rehabilitation fail.

Recently, I read the new book by Charles Colson, entitled “Born Again.” In this book, Mr. Colson tells how he became converted to Jesus Christ. But he also tells how often he slipped from his faith after his conversion and that the only thing that brought him back was being a part of a group of fellow Christians who could encourage him, pray with him, and criticize him. We all need groups of persons to which we are responsible and accountable.

3. The third basic element in any change in human beings is the power of God which works in us if we let it. Thus, Peter said to Simon the Magician, “Repent of the wickedness you have just found again in yourself.” Peter asked him to repent because God’s power does not work in us until we make a decision to turn our lives and be open to that power.

Most important of all, this has to be a continual process. In a sense, we have to be converted over and over again. When a person says to me, “I have been born again,” I’m happy about it. But what I really want to know is what will be happening to that person one year from now, or even six weeks from now or 10 years from now. That’s the basic test. And for the person to remain changed and to grow in the faith, to be sanctified, he or she is going to have to be part of a community of support.

A fine beginning is often easy, but to carry through with a change is a different matter. The qualities which make a good start possible are not identical with the qualities that see life through to the end. Starting power and staying power are not the same thing in any realm.

A vital element in the staying power for us as Christians is to be continually open to the power of God in our lives. This comes from being part of group and also from a regular and disciplined prayer life of our own. We grow weak, go flat, lose our morale so easily unless our interior re-sources are replenished by worship and prayer and the support which comes from others. We never produce power; we always appropriate it. We never create power, we assimilate it.

Human beings are not easy to change and it’s even more difficult to stay changed and to continue to grow and mature in our faith, but that’s what God calls us to do, and we can do it with the help of others and the help of God. And in the process, we will experience life with all of its joys. Amen.