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"WHAT EVERY CONFIRMAND SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HIS FAITH"

What I have to say this morning is directed primarily to the members of the Confirmation Class. But I must not deny my hope that other members of this fellowship will find meaning in these remarks of summary intended for a group of young men and women who have completed their formal religious education.

We live at a time of increasing complexity and specialization. The student in the mid-twentieth century, if he permits himself, can become emotionally depressed as he becomes aware of the immense amount of accumulated knowledge. When he realizes that in every field of learning thousands of intelligent men and women labor daily to discover more and more and to publish their findings he sometimes feels the utter futility of his educational ambitions.

Many despair, at ever knowing, with any degree of intimacy, more than a tiny corner of a tiny plot in the vast acreage of accumulated information.

And yet, while knowledge is vast and daily grows in extent and depths, there are those contemporary thinkers who are convinced that there is an underlying relationship between all fields of learning.

This was the conviction of Albert Einstein. He spent his last years seeking to develop a theory that would unite all physical phenomena into one universal scheme. He believed in a unified explanation of the mysteries of the universe. This is the conviction of other workers in scientific fields who believe they can further the process of gaining knowledge and increasing man's perception of the world in which he lives by their discovery of basic truths of our world, our universe, and of man himself.

Thus, at the same time that knowledge ranges widely into all the highways and byways of existence, there is a belief that somewhere there exists a master plan. Somewhere there are ultimate rules. Somewhere there is summary and synthesis and simplicity.

And so we search for those ideas that will bring order and relatedness to all the mass of information that has become a part of us.

This desire for simplicity, this urge to discover basic principles, ideas with universal applicability, has been repeated again and again through the centuries in many different expressions of Judaism.

The prophets expressed their ideas of synthesis and summary when they set justice and righteousness and humility as basic religious ideals before their coreligionists. Hillel, when he stated, "What is hateful to you don't do to your neighbor," intended these words to be the ultimate in simple religious expression. And when Micah said -- as a summary of all the teachings of Judaism -- "Seek God, and live!", he intended that these four words should contain the basic message of his religious faith. Seek God -- inquire after God's truths in the world, and then you will live fully and completely and with satisfaction and happiness.

Many of us have developed an attitude toward religion and religious thinking that keeps us away from this search for essentials. Many of us have the feeling that unless religious ideas are clothed in a special language and are spoken with a certain kind of reverential tone, liberally sprinkled with references to God, that we are not really talking about religion or things spiritual. Many of us like to

remove religious thinking to a kind of never-never world of vague holiness, an area that we approach only at intervals and then in a mood of melancholy.

This religious sentimentality is probably unique to our times. We cannot find such attitudes expressed in the Bible. The Prophets were stern realists, approaching religious belief forthrightly; sweet sentimentality is absent from their works. And the Judaism that preceded prophetic statements is also characterized by realism and the desire to make religion an element of daily living, down to earth, expressed in language that men can understand, addressing itself to the problems of this world, concerned with the needs of man while he lives.

This concept of Judaism as a religion of realism and personal intimacy is expressed in the 30th chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy where Moses tells the children of Israel that they are standing before the Lord, their God, all of them, including, he stated, "your little ones and your wives and the stranger that is in the midst of the camp, from the hewer of the wood to the drawer of the water."

And Moses tells the people the following about the message they are to receive from God:

"For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it."

Judaism is to be understood and Judaism is to be put into practice. Judaism is not a mere theory of personal conduct. Judaism tells us that we are involved, as individuals, in the course of human events. We cannot isolate ourselves or separate ourselves from the world. Life may at times be unpleasant, but man has the duty to come to grips with his existence, to struggle with it, to do his best to change what is evil and to achieve what is good. And this is not beyond him. Religious goals are not over the sea. They are very close to man -- in his mouth and in his heart. What we say and what we think and what we do must be viewed from the perspective of religious ideals and moral goals. This is our religious duty. This is the instruction of Judaism.

You have studied, during the years of your religious education, the ideas and goals of Judaism. You know them well. You are acquainted with the way in which Judaism would have its adherents conduct their lives -- in justice, in mercy and in love.

But I am sure you realize that there is more to living than the observance of basic rules of conduct. We can know the rules and yet be unable to follow them. For the end of the matter is the attitude we possess toward religious idealism, toward our fellowmen, and toward ourselves. Our attitudes, our feelings, our individual approaches to life -- these will determine the manner in which we will be able to practice our religious faith.

There seem to me to be three words, expressing three ideas, that express Judaism's basic approach to living. An approach that goes beyond the specific rules of conduct with which we are all familiar. An approach that is a way to conduct, a manner of achieving a successful life. These three words are: Rationalism,

Reverence, and Wonder.

Let us see what they mean within the framework of thinking of our faith.

First -- Rationalism. What is the place of this idea within Judaism?

The story is told of King Solomon that shortly after he had succeeded his father David to the throne the Lord appeared to him in a dream. And God said to Solomon: "Ask what I shall give you."

Solomon answered: "Thou hast shown great and steadfast love to Thy servant David my father because he walked before thee in faithfulness and in uprightness of heart. And now, O Lord my God, thou hast made thy servant king in place of David, my father. And thy servant is in the midst of the people, a great people, that cannot be numbered for multitude. Give thy servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern the people, that I may discern between good and evil."

Now this answer, we are told, pleased God. And God replied to Solomon: "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor."

One of the oldest traditions of Judaism is its encouragement to all men and women to seek understanding. And how are we to seek understanding? Through our willingness to examine, to question, to think, to apply reason to the decisions we make and to the attitudes which we possess.

King Solomon, of course, is the great example of the wise man and the manner in which the wise man conducts himself in a moment of great responsibility.

The story of King Solomon and the two women, each claiming the same child as her own, offered the young king an opportunity to demonstrate his reliance upon the powers of reason as the means to reach a fair judgment of a troublesome problem.

You know the story, and how the king reached his decision by an act that penetrated to the very heart of the matter -- how the true mother of the child reacted to the threat to her baby and how the king perceived the truth by reasoning with simple but splendid logic that a true mother would rather lose her baby to another than see it die.

The purpose of this story, and others like it within the religious literature of Judaism, stories that enthrone the efforts of man to learn, to understand, have established within our faith a tradition of rationalism, a desire to seek answers to the problems of life through our power to reason.

You are urged to study. You are urged by Judaism to search for the truth. There is no field of learning which your religion wishes to close to your investigations. Judaism fears no truth. Judaism encourages man to search the unknown for truths that will shed light on the mysteries of the world to broaden man's ability to live creatively.

Rationalism -- understanding -- to be reached by study and thought, is the first approach of Judaism to successful living.

Reverence is the second requirement.

Reverence is the true humility of which the prophet spoke when he preached of walking humbly with God.

Reverence is having respect for the world and respect for man. Reverence is the possessing of respect for the dignity and beauty of the world and, at the same time, for the dignity and the beauty of the human being.

Specifically...

Three years ago, shortly before the death of Albert Einstein, he was interviewed by a young college student in the company of two older men. In response to their questions Einstein had this to say about people. To the greatest physicist of our time there were two kinds of men -- men of success and men of value.

Men of success, the scientist said in his interview, take more from life than they give to it. But men of value give more than they receive.

When I read this interview I was greatly impressed by this definition. I have used it in speaking to other confirmation classes of our congregation. I believe it bears repetition, much repetition. It relates to Judaism's concept of the kind of relationship man is to have with his world and with his fellowman.

The man of success, with little reverence for the world in which he lives, or for the people with whom he lives, regards everything about him as intended for him and for his personal use. He is the kind of man who, through the years, cuts down the forests of a vast continent without concern for replacement. He is the man who mines the soil of its fertility and puts back into it only what he must to extract yet more from it. He is the man who despoils nature without a thought for those who will come after him. He is the man with contempt for his fellowman -- who uses them for his benefit. He is the man who regards all about him as intended for his personal enrichment and satisfaction. He is the man whom some may call successful. But he is also the man whose lack of reverence for the world isolates and separates him and makes him a lonely and unhappy person.

The man of value, the man who loves the world he sees about him and treasures it, and seeks to make it more beautiful, to leave it richer than when he found it, this man sees himself as the participant, the partner, working with the forces of nature and with his fellowman for mutually satisfying and enriching goals.

The man of value marvels at the beauty of the earth and sky and in true humility sees his relationship with his fellowman and with nature -- receiving in proportion to his giving, blessed in relation to his blessing.

Reverence. Reverence for all we see about us. The realization of where we stand in the world, of our responsibilities as well as our opportunities. Reverence is Judaism's second requirement for significant living.

And Wonder... Wonder crowns all the goals of man. Wonder is the expression of man's truest self.

Once again, Albert Einstein, whose philosophy has sometimes been characterized as irreligious, even atheistic, has this to say:

"The most beautiful and most profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can

comprehend only in their most primitive forms -- this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness."

How magnificently does the modern scientist reflect the words of the familiar 8th Psalm:

"When I look at thy heavens, the
work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which
thou hast established;
what is man that thou art mindful
of him,
and the son of man that thou
dost care for him?
Yet thou hast made him little less
than God,
and dost crown him with glory and
honor."

But the sensation of wonder is sometimes lost in our efforts to know the complete story, to possess all the facts, to seek the final answers for all the problems of our lives and the world.

Judaism counsels us, and the advice is repeated in the words of many of the most distinguished thinkers of our time, that no matter how far we may seek, no matter how wise we may become, no matter how much we may learn, there will forever be mysteries ahead of us, beckoning to us to pursue them throughout our lives.

And we are asked to accept the belief that in the awe and wonder we may know for the universe and sometimes for the most commonplace things of our world -- a small flower, the trusting smile of a friend, the emotion of love that binds us happily to our parents and dear ones, all these experiences are wrapped in feelings that really are not mysteries but rather bemisted truths whose obscurity makes them only more beautiful.

Wonder is the final urge of Judaism to man which we consider this morning.

And though it is last its function is the function of encouraging man to begin again and again for all his conscious life. For rationalism begins with wonder and religion finds its way into the hearts of those who permit themselves to stand in awe of the ways of God and the patterns of his world.

May your lives be blessed by the power of knowledge and the creativity of rationalism. May your lives bless others by your personal dedication to the way of reverence for the world and for all the creatures of the world. And may God bless you with his greatest gift -- the ability to dream, the ability to wonder, and to sense your relationship with the unfolding truths of your world.

Amen.