

THE TALE OF TWO CITIES

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 23:37-39

Text: Hebrews 11:10

Songs: PH471 1,4; "The Beautiful Isle of Somewhere"

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus Our Lord,

"The Tale of Two Cities." Today's sermon title you recognize as the title of a famous book, The Tale of Two Cities. Many of you know how that novel about the French Revolution begins, "Card." One reason that novel has always remained popular is because that description could be made of any time in history.

In fact, Charles Dickens was not the originator of the tale of two cities. The idea behind the famous novel is in Christian theology. Centuries before Saint Augustine has also written about two cities: the city of this world and the city of heaven. Saint Augustine wrote about two cities, but his book title only speaks of the city to which we all wish to be going, The City of God.

Of course "The Tale of Two Cities" did not originate with Saint Augustine; it originated with Jesus Christ. He speaks about it succinctly and eloquently in our Scripture Lesson this evening. For His people, the Jews, there was no city in the world like Jerusalem. Indeed, by the world's standards there is hardly any city more typical of cities than this city. It may not have been the largest or the most extravagant, but it was the hub of the ancient world, especially the hub of God's redemptive plan. Today Jerusalem is still one of the key cities of the world; not because of its power or prestige, but because it is the center of the hopes and aspirations of humankind. Muslims, Jews, Christians, even atheists, expect something to come from this city. By the human standards of today, there is no city on earth that expresses the hopes and dreams of humankind the way Jerusalem does. Our pre-millennial brothers and sisters in Christ expect Jesus to reign from there for a thousand years. It is a city with a history, with a present, and with a significant future if you ask many Christians. That city typifies the "The Tale of Two Cities."

The people who were listening to Jesus speak in our Scripture Lesson thought Jerusalem was the finest city in the world. There are people from Grand Rapids, Michigan, who think the same of their city. They think that there is not place in the world like the city by the rapids of the Grand River. That is why jokingly across the United States people refer to it as "Jerusalem." Some residents have made that city seem like a spiritual Mecca.

There are cities that achieve great fame because of the excellent administration and the superior life-style they offer to their people. Ancient Babylon was such a city. Its gardens are one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Life was peaceful and serene under Hammurabi's code of laws. Athens did the same for the Greeks. Then Rome did ditto for the then-known world. These were great cities. In our century we have Chicago, the city that works, the city that was romanticized by Carl Sandburg, the city that is the home of the voice of the Christian Reformed Church, the Back to God Hour Ministries International.

Yet to all these cities there is a sad side. Chicago has some of the worst slums in the world. The high rise apartment buildings that stretch for miles along the freeway and Lake Michigan are a monument to government's inhumanity to its citizens. The name Cabrini Green is synonymous of all that is wrong with urban America. Rome had its galley slaves, the men who were forced by whip to row the giant triremes that were Rome's famous warships. Athens had its religious prostitution, and Babylon had a sordid side to its city where infants were sacrificed to a false god. On earth there is no perfect city. Each is stained with stubborn spots of sin.

Even Jerusalem: both Grand Rapids and the true Jerusalem of Jesus' day. To the people who thought so much of their city, Jesus agonizingly calls out, "Matthew 23:37." Not only is God disgusted with what their past, but God has plans for their future. Those plans are described this way, "Matthew 23:38." No Jew standing there with Jesus that day could have imagined the way the Romans would absolutely devastate the city in less than forty years. Never has a city had a more inglorious destruction than Jerusalem had at the hands of the Romans who just crushed it into oblivion for centuries.

The best plans of cities end in frustration. Chicago has its Cabrini Green, Grand Rapids has its Division Street and near southeast side, and Sully has its problems, too. We like to think of ourselves as a spotless, clean little all-American mid-Western community where Christianity had totally permeated the city, the city of churches. Yet we must now lock our doors. While there are many good things about Sully, we are not a perfect city, and we are not moving toward a more perfect city, we are moving toward a more secular city. Sully is sliding toward secularity, not sliding upward toward greater spirituality. Like every other city on earth, Sully is populated with people who are totally depraved--and it shows.

Jesus' judgment on Jerusalem has a silver lining. It is found in the last verse of the chapter. "Matthew 23:39." There is another city, a perfect city, which is coming. The residents of Jerusalem in a moment of inspiration had welcomed Jesus to their city on Palm Sunday and shouted, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." They were now on the verge of rejecting Him. In a couple of days He would be dying on a cross on Calvary just outside the Jerusalem city wall. Yet the day is coming when not only the citizens of Jerusalem, but everyone who has ever lived will be calling out, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." "Phil. 2:10.11."

That is the city Hebrews 11 speaks about so eloquently. In speaking of the father of believers, Abraham, the Bible says, "Hebrews 11:10." That was the city for which he was really searching. He wandered on earth, but his eye was on the heavenly city. That is why the secular novelist gives us The Tale of Two Cities, but Saint Augustine in tradition of our spiritual father Abraham, gives only The City of God.

The late Dr. James Boice, Pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, host of the annual Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology, and speaker on the national radio program "The Bible Study Hour," has tried to re-write some of the classical Christian books for our time. He knows that in the age in which we live very few people are going to plow through the two volumes of John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, so he recast them into Twentieth Century application in a book called The Foundations of the Christian Faith. He also did that with Augustine's The City of God. Dr. Boice call his Twentieth Century remake of Augustine's great book Two Cities, Two Loves. It has great impact for Christians who are seeking to establish the City of God in the secular city of America. Two Cities, Two Loves has the kind of contemporary impact that Augustine's The City of God had centuries ago. For those who are activists on the front of public policy, it is an exceptionally brilliant book pointing out why in America more people go to church than ever, but Christianity has less impact on public life than it has ever had. His analysis of the failure of the pro-life movement to be overwhelmingly embraced by all thinking Americans is brilliant. His basic premise is that of Christ in our Scripture Lesson: We ought to love our earthly cities, but our greatest love should be reserved for God and His city.

The Bible calls us in passages like Romans 13 to be good citizens of the nation in which we live and the city of which we are part. Yet our eye always must be fixed on the celestial city that lies beyond us. Real redemption does not come by politics in a city, it comes by salvation in Christ who leads us to the heavenly city. Politics is important for the Christian, but redemption is essential for a Christian. As we come the end of a long political season, we Christians are reminded again by the American election process that there is a squalid side to the

earthly city, but there is full redemption in the heavenly city. As long as we Christian live we will live in two cities, one on earth and one in heaven. Saint Augustine is right: The only one which counts is The City of God. Pray that you may be a member of that city. Thanks to Teen Challenge many teens are now headed for that city.