

CLINTON LIBRARY PHOTOCOPY

2/2/94
National Prayer Breakfast

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

February 2, 1994

THE FIRST LADY'S REMARKS
TO THE NATIONAL PRAYER LUNCHEON

MS. CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you very much, and thank you, Susan, for that prayer and for the spirit that imbues you every day, that enables you to reach out to so many of us.

I must confess I am here with some trepidation. The last time I spoke in public about spirituality, around the time of my father's death, I was astonished to realize that there were many people for whom spirituality should be confined to events like this, and not brought out into the public arena. I was amused when one commentator wrote that my critics were divided between conservatives who suspect I did not mean what I said and liberals who feared that I did.

And I have become accustomed over the past year to living between those kinds of poles and trying as best I can to navigate what is for many of us uncharted terrain. Because as my husband said this morning, freedom of religion does not mean, and should not mean, freedom from religion. And striking the appropriate balance, and being able to witness in a public role what one feels and lives through one's own spiritual journey, opens one up to misunderstanding and criticism.

But it is my very firm conviction that there is a growing awareness of the need for a spiritual renewal in our country and a willingness on the part of many to act and work in good faith together to fill that sense of emptiness with the Word and with an outreach that is grounded in real Christian values.

I am indebted, as I stand here before you, at the end of my first year in this city, to many, many people: I am indebted to a new church home, which is an inner city church, struggling as part of a social gospel to minister to

MORE

the many needs that one finds in any of our cities and struggling also to deal with the personal needs and demands that come through a congregation's individual search for salvation. I am indebted to the many friends who have been supportive and understanding of what it is like to make the kind of transition that my family has made.

But I am particularly indebted to the group of women that Susan referred to, women who have reached out to me, not only by praying for me, but also by being my friend, who knew often just the right moment to call or to drop a note, to send a book, to let me know that they were thinking about me. I have received many gifts in the year that I have been here, wonderful gifts, but none meant more to me than the intangible gifts that were given to me at The Cedars a year ago by these women.

And what I would like to do with all of you today is to convey to you the same intangible gifts. They are gifts that have stayed in my heart, have kept me going, have served as both balm and spur, and have helped enrich greatly my own sense of what we all mean when we use words like "values," "spirituality," "renewal." I am so grateful for these gifts that I want to share them with you.

The first gift is the gift of compassion. This was given to me with the warning that I would be called upon to show compassion to endless lines of suffering ones. And the prayer that came with that gift of compassion was that I would never try to rely on my own reserves, but to draw freely and regularly from the One whose storehouse is always full.

The other part of the gift of compassion was the scriptural reference that came along with it. Mark 6:34: "As He went ashore he saw a great throng and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things."

We all need compassion. It is not only a gift that I have tried to give; it is a gift I have gratefully received.

The second gift was the gift of courage -- courage to stand strong in the midst of criticism, to give in when necessary, to take a risk when it's right, and, above all, to fear God alone, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

MORE

Courage is needed in our everyday life. Everyone of us in this room needs the gift of courage. Sometimes we don't recognize when we need it. Sometimes we reject its offering, because it is frightening to use the gift of courage. But courage is not rooted in the day-to-day, but, instead, again, comes from the Word of the Lord.

I can't say I have necessarily needed courage in the last year to face risks that were public and large, where the enemies that were arrayed against me were visible, but I have certainly needed courage on many days just to keep going, to feel supported, to know that, even in the face of misunderstanding, there were risks that I felt called upon to take, and that I could never have done it without the courage that comes from God alone.

The third gift, and one of Susan Baker's favorite words, is discernment, a word I had never really paid much attention to before, not a word that I really associated with scripture. And I'm very grateful to have that word and its meaning now as part of my life.

The gift of discernment, to seek wisdom that should come, to know that it is through our Father that the spirit of revelation gives us an insight into a person, an experience, an event that would not otherwise be available, has enriched and enlarged my life immeasurably.

When one learns a new word, one sees and hears it all the time. The Old Testament scripture this morning, if you remember, referred to the understanding to discern wisdom. So it's one of those words that I now take with me and incorporate into my life with gratitude.

The next intangible gift, the greatest gift in many ways for all of us, is faith. "God is utterly faithful, and it is He who has called you into fellowship with his son Jesus Christ our Lord." That, from First Corinthians and one of my friends.

Faith is something I take very seriously. I do not believe I am a very good Christian. I think it is extremely hard to be a Christian. I think every day is a challenge to one's Christianity, and that by growing in faith, minute by minute, hour by hour, faith becomes stronger and deeper and bigger and opens one's eyes to greater possibilities and further challenges.

MORE

One of my husband's former pastors, a great Southern Baptist preacher, W.O. Vaught, used to preach often about "baby Christians." And, yes, you move through stages of maturation, but most of those whose Christian work I most respect are open always to learning more about their own faith, and knowing that there is no final answer until the end of one's life, and that part of what we must do is to grow in our faith and exhibit it. Faith is for me a great gift and a great challenge.

I remember the first time I ever spoke in front of a religious group was in my church as a child, when, during confirmation, each of us were to stand and read our essays, "What Jesus Means to Me." I recently re-read that essay of my 11-year-old self, and there was much that was very simple about my beliefs, but much that was also as profound as any theology I have read since. One's faith journey is really for me a continuing effort to grow in both wisdom and stature as a Christian.

The next gift was fellowship, and I am so grateful for that. The scripture that was used to convey that gift was from Proverbs, "A friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity." The prayer that went with it was for a sister to walk with me through adversity, to hold me up when the burdens are heavy, and to encourage and love me without condition.

I have been blessed with many brothers and sisters who have been there for me, and I always hope that I can be as good a friend to others as they have been to me. Because it is through fellowship and relationship in Christ that one grows and sees what is possible with the human condition. Without fellowship one's faith becomes too inward, too isolated.

The next gift is one I have needed on a daily basis. It is the gift of forgiveness. This gift came with this description: that forgiveness is the most powerful expression of love we can give or experience. It is also the most costly. For the Lord, it was the cross; for me, it cost my pride. Forgiving is hard. Forgiving those who seem determined to destroy, to tear down, those who seem to have a political or financial or personal agenda; forgiving those who bear false witness, who delight in spreading stories, gossip, rumor.

It is hard to forgive. But it is also essential, not only to live, but to grow in Christ, to forgive.

MORE

Remember when Jesus was asked, "Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, "I tell you not seven times, but seventy times seven." I must confess that some days I think I must have exhausted that number and look for a way to avoid any more calls on my spirit for forgiveness.

I have always believed that Christ wanted us to be joyous, to look at the face of creation and to know that there was more joy than any of us could imagine. Or as Mother Teresa told us this morning, to see the joy on the face of a homeless beggar, who is picked up off the street and brought in to die, and says joyously, "Thank you."

This world in which we are engaged is serious, but joy should far outweigh any other experience. I hope I will never lose sight of the joy and laughter that revitalizes the spirit, lightens our burden, brightens our way; and that I will also find joy in the trials I face, and that you will as well, because I know that these trials or difficulties are part of God's plan.

The next gift is that of love. I particularly appreciated the description of this gift from my friend who wrote, "Over the past decade I have witnessed conflict between my friends who are Christians and those who are Democrats. They often act as if they each belong to an exclusive club. They appear to have little in common and are cynical of each other." But as she said, "My belief is that this is not true."

It is also my belief. There is no greater gift that God has given any of us than love, and every time I get discouraged by what I see as the nitpicking and the nay-saying that sometimes floods the air, I remember what Jesus said when he was asked which of all the commandments was the most important to follow, and he mentioned two. You know what they are. Both had to do with love. Because all the commandments were given to help us love God and love each other as we should.

It is very hard to do. It is so difficult for me to love some people. My husband has a much better and greater understanding. His mother was filled with unconditional love. You had to go so far to get her off of you. She wouldn't give up on the sorriest person you ever saw. I would sometimes have conversations with her where I would say, "Virginia, this person is" -- and I would fill in the blanks. And she'd just look at me and she'd say, "Well,

MORE

all I know is that he's good to his mamma," or, "He's good to his dog," or he's good to somebody. She taught me so much about love, unconditional love for people that weren't always the best that society had to offer.

As I've sat here, many of you have come up and introduced yourselves. You've been with Chuck Colson's prison ministries, you've been with urban ministries. Day in and day out you are called more than I to love those who need to see God's love through you. And I am grateful both for the love I feel, and hope to be able to give more of it.

The next gift was peace. Very hard to achieve. It seems there is always a reason why your anxieties interrupt the peace you seek. I pray along with my friend who gave me peace that God's perfect peace will envelop me as I face each day's demands and opportunities. That is not always the case. I try not to read the newspaper. I try not to watch the television on days when my peace is in a fragile condition. But it is something for which I seek.

And the gift of vision, seeing things which are often invisible to others, knowing that Jesus provided the ultimate vision of being the Way, the Truth and the Life, and that each of us, not only should have a vision, but inspire others by our vision.

Spiritual renewal often starts with a person's vision, a revelation, if you will, an idea planted by God and shared with others, trusting that the Holy Spirit will inspire similar thoughts in those with whom you share yours. Because when you encourage and inspire others to have a vision of what is possible through Christ, you put into action ways that will lead to the accomplishment of God's goals.

And the gift of wisdom, a gift that we are always seeking. If any of you lack wisdom, you should ask God, as the scripture says, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But wisdom that comes from Heaven is, first of all, pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Wisdom. When I went to Sunday school years ago our books often talked about how Jesus grew in wisdom and stature. I think about that often because it is unlikely I will grow any further in stature, but I certainly hope I will grow more in wisdom as the years go by.

MORE

To these gifts I added the gift of prayer, an intangible, but all-pervasive gift that stays with me on a daily basis, that lifts me up, that helps me let off steam, that guides me. These are gifts that I am so grateful for. But beyond that, I am grateful for the spirit that offered them.

When I came here and was asked if I wanted to meet with a group of women, bipartisan, Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal and all those labels that I think interfere with us seeing each other as people, I didn't know quite what to think, but finally decided it was something I needed to do and have been very grateful that I did.

I hope for all of us as we think through this day that brought people from all over the world together, of the gifts we have to give and receive. The greatest gift to us is Christ's life and his example. That should guide us, challenge us, support us, not just at prayer breakfasts or prayer lunches, but every single day. If we approach these gifts with the humility that we should, then the chance of renewing one's own spirit and of that renewal reaching out across our land becomes all the greater. And that would be a great gift for America. Thank you all very much.

END

MORE