

FURNESS WILLIAM HENRY

A Discourse for the Time, delivered
January 4, 1852 in the First
Congregational Unitarian Church

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«Public Domain»

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Rom. 14:7

'NONE OF US LIVETH TO HIMSELF.'

In speaking from these words last Sunday morning, and in endeavoring to enforce the great truth which they express, I began with referring to certain facts which characterize that most brutal and ruthless military revolution which has just commenced in France, and the recent news of which made every heart, that cherishes any regard for Freedom and Humanity, burn with indignation. The first statements to which I alluded have been more than confirmed. Unarmed, unoffending citizens, utterly ignorant of what was going on, and taking no part in it, were shot down by hundreds in the streets, and then transfixed with bayonets. If but a window was opened, a shower of bullets was poured into it. Cannon were brought to bear upon whole blocks of private dwellings. In one instance, a woman who rushed out of the house to the help of her husband, who had fallen under the fire of the soldiery, was instantly despatched and laid dead at his side. Bloodshed and terror filled the place, and scenes were enacted, so eyewitnesses report, that baffle description, and that can find a parallel only when cities are sacked.

Now, I refer to these facts, not to harrow up your feelings, my hearers, but because these facts, and such as these, speak trumpet-tongued, as to the vital interest and the sacred religious duty which every private man, no matter how humble and obscure, – nay, which every woman has, in those great questions that agitate nations, in what are designated as matters of public concern and the public welfare.

I know very well that there are those who deplore it, and consider it a great grievance, that here, in this country, there is so much agitation of public matters in private circles, and by private, unofficial persons. To be sure, one would like to have quiet, if he could. But there is no help for it. We must take our lot as we find it. And such is the nature of our social fabric; drawing all the power of the government from the people, from the individuals that compose the people, that it is made the direct and plain duty of every man and woman of us to know about those things, which are public, for this very reason, because they concern the many, – the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the security, the happiness, the improvement, the civil and the religious liberties of every man in the land. A necessity is upon us; and if we have been accustomed to confine our ideas of duty and religion to the Church and the Sabbath, the sooner we get our minds sufficiently enlarged to see the religious obligation which binds us to the great Public of mankind, the better for us, for our neighbors, and for all men.

So, then, the fact that private men are interested in public affairs, even though it be attended with a good deal of excitement, – that is not the thing to be deplored. But what is to be lamented is, that false way of thinking, out of place in this country, out of time in this age, by which thousands justify themselves in continuing ignorant and indifferent to things of a vital private concern, simply because they are of a public and general character. What is more common than to hear men say, in reference to such matters, 'They are no concerns of ours. We care nothing about them. Let those busy

themselves about them who are so disposed. As for us, we are not going to perplex our brains, and fret and worry ourselves. We will mind our own business.' And, in the proud consciousness of this virtuous resolution, they wrap themselves up in their comforts, and keep aloof and indifferent, and flatter themselves that they are the wise and the prudent, they are the enlightened, judicious ones. They are no meddlers. They do not trouble themselves about what does not concern them.

But though we will not meddle with public affairs, who shall answer for it that public affairs will not meddle with us? With such facts as I began with mentioning, glaring in our faces, sickening our very hearts with horror and indignation, who will say that public affairs may not interfere with us, with our very lives, yes, and with what ought to be dearer to us than our lives? Let them take their own course, as you say. And then, as surely as we breathe, bad men will gain the ascendancy, – ignorant, unprincipled, ambitious men, despisers of human life and human rights, ready to shed blood to any extent to gratify the devilish lust of power. Into such hands will public affairs fall. And then there is no man – there is no woman, so retired but she shall find to her cost, that she has an interest, the very deepest, – that her all is involved in these things, – that they may tear from her her father, her husband, her brother or her son, aye, and her own life also, which she is pampering so delicately.

There is some excuse for the people of France, ground down as they have been by ages of oppression, denied the right to think, to judge, to act for themselves, made to believe that their rulers held their power by the grace of God – there is some excuse for them. But, whatever may be their excuse, there can be no doubt that it is the ignorance, the indifference, the cowardice, the selfishness of the people at large that have caused their public affairs to wade so often towards a settlement, through such frightful streams of innocent and unoffending blood. Here, in our land, the peace and security of private life are as fully and extensively insured as they are, precisely for this reason, because of the lively and general interest which the people in their private capacity take in things of public concern. In this country more than in any other, the people keep a watchful and commanding eye upon public matters. And, with all the excitement and agitation which it involves, it is the great pledge of our private and personal security.

But if the indifference to public affairs, which is now confined only to a class – only to a portion of the people – to too large a portion, indeed, but still only to a portion, – if it were to become general, if things were allowed to go on their way, without any interest taken in them by private persons, by those whose intelligence goes to create a commanding public opinion, then you would soon find your private interests, the comfort and lives of individuals, threatened and assailed. If your public affairs, as they are directed in your Public Councils, were uncontrolled by the sentiments of private men, they would soon be coming down into our streets and into our private dwellings with a most disastrous influence. They would make their appearance in the shape of armed men. They would be heard in the rattle of musketry and the roar of cannon; and the door-posts of the humblest and of the richest homes of the people might be spattered with the blood of inoffensive men, women, and children, – of the very persons who maintain that they have nothing to do with public matters.

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