

Vida Chenoweth's final
Chapel Message, Nov. 8, 1993
Barrows Auditorium
Wheaton College, IL

This is the last time I will be speaking to you and, after having given it some thought, I settled upon four topics: church, submission, fear and love.

The church

As Christians we seem to operate within two definitions of "church". On the one hand, we know it is the Body of Christ; and, on the other hand, we speak of "church" as the place where we meet on Sundays. At this meeting place are members of the Body of Christ - caring, supportive friends whom we enjoy. These are those intrusted with the task of relaying the Gospel to all the world, but in the enjoyment and warmth of our own fellowship are we in danger of forgetting the task? Back to the first definition, the church is the Body of Christ. We remember that the task of Jesus, the Christ, was to accomplish redemption. This He did, and after His resurrection, He commissioned his followers with the task of telling this to all peoples on earth. So, I would encourage you at some time when you have a say in the running of your church, to keep the question always before: "Who are we serving?"

I am reminded of a niggling assignment given us in the survival course required of Wycliffe Bible Translators. In the midst of trying to cut down materials with a machete in order to make a shelter, make a mud stove on which to cook, cut firewood, haul water from the river and boil it for drinking, attempt to build a fire with wet wood, learn an Indian language and assist with medical work under a doctor's supervision, we were to keep a daily diary to account for every minute of the day. We wondered why.

At the end of the week we were asked to add up all the hours we had spent on ourselves - surviving - and how many we had spent in actual ministry to others. That first week many of us had spent three quarters of the time serving our own needs, and it became readily apparent that if we were to be missionaries the allotment of our time had to change radically. We set about improving our skills and reevaluating what was important and, by the end of week two, we were spending only about 20% of the time on ourselves.

Submission

As Christians, we are on a journey of continual submission. In any ordered society there is a hierarchy of authority. In a Christian organization; Christ is the head, but we also submit to human authority. And if this is hard, we need to remind one another to pray for the one in authority over us. We must relinquish our rights to self. This is not a popular concept today when so many are howling for their rights and when our culture praises individualism and idols. But WE are bought with a price; we are not our own. Sometimes I think our emphasis is in error when we seek to train Christian leaders rather than Christian servants.

Fear

Fear seems to come in one of three forms: There is a fear of the unknown and a fear of the known. There is sudden fear coupled with shock; this fear, unanticipated, catches us off balance so that one can manage hardly more than to call God's name or to scream inwardly for his help. This kind of fear comes in situations such as being kidnapped, seriously threatened, lost, as in a foreign city where you have no knowledge of the language, or of suddenly receiving tragic news. To conquer this sort of fear takes us over until we remember the words of the Psalmist who says over and over, "He heard my cry and delivered me." God has delivered me more times than I can count, and I am certain that He is my strong defense.

Fear of the unknown has not played a part in my own life so much as fear of the known. I feared physical pain because I have known pain. One does not become immune to pain. I feared the loss of loved ones because I have lost loved ones.

I know that it is true that God never asks us to do what we think we cannot do. We are the ones who place limitations on ourselves. We can, IN GOD'S STRENGTH, do all He asks.

One of the aims of a survival course is to train for the unknown by making it known. When we dealt with each fear that arose and survived, we gained the confidence to continue. With each new fear we cast ourselves upon the Lord, and when it occurred again, we had complete confidence in the strength of the Lord and could cope.

(Horse riders know to make a horse face anything that threatens him. These skiddish animals may bolt at the slightest thing that is out of the ordinary. If the horse is made to look at the threat, he will not fear it the next time.)

Love

One reason that it is so hard to translate the word "love" in many of the languages of non-literate societies is that so often it does not occur as an abstract noun. When it is an active verb meaning to cherish, support or to endure on another's behalf, then most understand. Our emotions aid us in loving another human, but to love God is the ultimate love, and unless we know from His Word who He is and what He has done and what He has given to us for eternity, how can we love Him? He, like the noun "love", will only be an abstract.

One thing that will mystify me all of my life is how He can remain faithful to us when we are so prone to neglect Him, so quick to wander away.

Soon I will be tearing up my roots and leaving Wheaton. I have applied for active status with Wycliffe Bible Translators once again. My life thus far seems to have fallen into three distinct chapters - the years as a concert artist, the years as a Bible translator in New Guinea, and my years teaching ethnomusicology at Wheaton College.

I know that God has already written the last chapter of my life and, whatever it contains, wherever it leads, whatever the cost, I trust Him.