

November 12, 1975

To: Trustees, Faculty, Administrative
Personnel and Permanent Secretaries
of
Southeastern Baptist Theo. Seminary

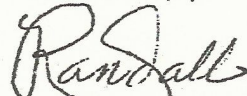
Dear Colleagues:

As you know, Dr. Archie Nations' wife, Elaine, died in May, 1975, following a very brief illness.

Archie and his four sons have been steadfastly discovering that "something steady over all the wreckage."

He has given me permission to share this profound and moving "Meditation" with you. He shared these thoughts with the Seminary family in chapel November 4, 1975.

Sincerely,



W. Randall Lolley
President

WRL/ach
Enclosure

"Love and Suffering"

A Meditation, delivered at Binkley Chapel
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

November 4, 1975

Archie L. Nations

Making a life may be compared to the weaving of a multi-colored tapestry. Many of the strands upon the loom, the vertical ones, are given to us. We receive them from above, as it were, and have no control over their color or texture, whether it be dark or light, delicate or coarse. But the other strands, the horizontal ones, we are casting through the loom each day, often hour by hour and moment by moment. Our choices are critical, our responses are urgent, our reactions are necessary, and it is out of our selections that these strands come to fashion the design and pattern, the shape, color and quality of our lives. The most important decisions we ever make are made in personal relationships. The presence or the absence of caring, affection and love in those relationships determines how we shall choose the threads with which we construct our own personal tapestry. The longer one lives the more one realizes the presence of pain and suffering in the world; the more intensively one loves the more deeply does that person enter into the dialectic of love and suffering; and the more profoundly one engages in this interplay of love and pain the more does he or she move directly into the very heart of God. Now having said this I have given you already all I wish to say today. The rest is commentary.

I am as much at a loss to explain the mystery of evil and tragedy as is anyone else. I often tremble in weakness and despair before some of those dark and ominous threads which drop swiftly from the midnight sky. But I have begun to learn, I think, that I cannot avoid choosing how I shall feel and think and act when the hurt or suffering

comes. This I must do even though I do not understand; and yet, in a sense I do have a better understanding despite the mystery: I have come to see the nearness of God in our pain and sorrow. The reason for this is that God has always loved His world and His people so much that again and again He has come into our midst to speak His word of grace and love and healing. He is near and not far away! Israel of old knew that Holy Presence and was sustained through much travail, and the word of the prophets clearly shows the suffering in God's loving heart. Most of all I see a bit more clearly because in our Lord Jesus Christ God freely took upon Himself our sin, our sorrow and our loss, our pain and our dying. And I have come to this conclusion: If God is that kind of love, I can learn to live with life's unanswered questions which tumble in upon me as I am faced with ever more intense suffering brought on by my commitment to the way of love.

Each day, many times during the day, God incognito stands before us in the form of a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, a little child or a tiny infant. You and I must make such terrifying choices! We can be indifferent; we can shun or ignore; we can become hostile or full of hate; we can break forth in bitter sarcasm or icy cruelty; we can strike out in violence; or we can speak softly in kindness; we can touch tenderly; we can smile reassuringly; we can hold or embrace securely and warmly; we can laugh with contagious joy; we can help unselfishly; we can lift with strenuous expenditure of energy; we can take upon ourselves the loads of those whose strength is gone; we can love and not count the cost; we can lose ourselves for the sake of the one toward whom we give our love. But do not forget one thing: We cannot weave the golden thread of love through the loom alone, by ourselves. There is simply too much pride and greed

in our hearts. First, we must be forgiven. Second, we must accept God's grace as enabling Power and as ennobling love which changes our stony hearts to hearts of tender feeling.

When I think about it sometimes, I become very much afraid. God's love is not a light and easy thing. It pulls me into the mainstream of human life, and in that surging torrent of people I witness enormous suffering. Indeed, when I give myself in love to another person, I lay bare the nerve endings of my deepest self. I expose the tender eye which sees through tears the face of the one beloved, whoever he or she may be. And what that person does or does not do may pinch those nerves or pierce that tender eye. To care for another human being and then to be disappointed by that person's words or deeds means that I suffer. To love deeply and with increasingly unselfishness means horrifying pain in my own heart when the person upon whom I bestow my love is struck down by a dread illness, or by some other cause is taken from my presence by death. The height of love defines the depth of pain and loss. Inasmuch as we love selfishly without awareness of God, we may be utterly undone and destroyed, either by the act of the person we love or by the loss of that person. But insofar as we love unselfishly as God in Christ has loved us, so much the more will Grace uphold us whether in disappointment or grave loss, and thus moving ever more deeply into God's loving heart shall we be able to love again and yet more deeply still!

The longer one lives the more one realizes the presence of pain and suffering in the world; the more intensively one loves the more deeply does that person enter into the dialectic of love and suffering; and the more profoundly one engages in this interplay of love and pain the more does he or she move directly into the very heart of God.

We are casting the woof threads through the warp threads which are given to us. Some kind of tapestry is being woven day by day. You may choose a random pattern with no special meaning. You may form a surrealistic picture with monstrous distortions, with nightmarish unreality. You may tell a horror story with your picture of indifference and hate. But such is not necessary. It can be different. God gives each of us the choice to pick up the shuttle with the many-colored strand of love. We may weave shapes and forms of dazzling color, of indescribable beauty, as we move in love--through suffering--into God's loving heart.