

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

THE ART OF REBUKING

*"Better a frank word of reproof than
the love that will not speak."*

(Proverbs 27:5)

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It belongs to the middle and latter years to ask where things have gone that used to be. The seventy-five cent haircut, for example, or that good five cent cigar. Perhaps at times we wonder aloud about what has become of the general practitioner in medicine, or the good and dependable carpenter we once knew, or the art of shoeing a horse.

I come before you today to speak a word on behalf of a rapidly disappearing human service. I choose to call it the art of rebuking. Can you remember when you were last rebuked? Can you remember when you last rebuked a friend?

* * *

A friend? Perhaps that's the key to our difficulty. As commonly understood, a rebuke is something one hurls at an enemy, not something one does for a friend. Friendship in our society leaves little room for reproof, reprimand or rebuke. To have and to hold friends one must adjust to the other. Tolerance must be developed. One must accommodate himself to the other's weaknesses.

Basically, rebuke is considered a form of judgment, and Jesus settled that for us once and for all when He said, "Judge not that ye be not judged."
(Mat. 7:1)

Even in counseling situations we have been warned against making direct prescriptive or judgmental statements. Most books in recent years dealing with pastoral psychology take pains to warn the minister that he should neither order nor forbid, advise nor persuade.

And yet, despite the current style of friendship and the "in" status of non-directive counseling, we are forced to reckon with an uncomfortably plain text from the Old Testament -- Proverbs 27:5. I give it to you in the translation of James Moffatt; "Better a frank word of reproof than the love that will not speak."

Is this insight one that we have outgrown in our march to maturity? Or is there, perchance, a hunger lingering beneath the surface to give and receive rebuke?

Many of us are familiar with John Steinbeck's delightful little book, Travels with Charley. A few years ago the celebrated author decided to tour the country leisurely with his dog as lone companion. On one particular Sunday he found himself in New England and slipped into a church. This is what he says about that experience: "For some years now God has been a pal to us, practicing togetherness, and that causes the same emptiness a father does playing softball with his son. But this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me. He put my sins in a new perspective. Whereas they had been small and mean and nasty and best forgotten, this minister gave them some size and bloom and dignity. I hadn't been thinking very well of myself for some years, but if my sins had this dimension there was some pride left. I wasn't a naughty child but a first rate sinner, and I was going to catch it."¹ It would be fair to say that Steinbeck was in arrears in his rebukings.

A week ago Thursday, in the midst of the Senate hearings on the Watergate affair, Senator Sam Ervin backed off long enough to give an overview and pronounce a judgement. I confess that something brightened within me when those squalid charges and counter charges were suspended long enough to permit the

distinguished chairman to invoke a word of rebuke from Galatians 6:7: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap."

* * *

Frequently in Scripture people come head to head and toe to toe in candid rebuke. In the scripture of the day we find two disciples drifting away from Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus on Easter evening. They wonder aloud why the sky had suddenly dropped and all their hopes had evaporated. As the stranger, the incognito Christ, overtakes them, they continue in their despondency: "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." (Lk. 24:21) They remain in this vein, until Jesus breaks their mood with a sharp rebuke: "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken." He went on to expound to them the Scriptures, pointing out their many references to Him.

Jesus performed this service for Simon Peter shortly after the triumph of Caesarea Phillipi. Jesus had announced in clearest terms his pending death. Peter responded, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But Jesus turned to his slow but willing disciple and said, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men." (Mt. 16:22,23)

He went one time into the home of Simon the Pharisee where his host took Him to task for allowing a woman of fallen reputation to wash His feet. Jesus beckoned to Simon and said, "Simon, I have something to say to you." (Lk. 7:40) He then went on to straighten Simon out by use of a parable.

The early church owed much to a man and wife by the name of Aquilla and Priscilla. Aquilla was a tent-maker in Ephesus with whom Paul spent considerable time. One day the couple went out to hear a young preacher of impressive gifts by the name of Apollos. As they

listened they found that something was amiss in his message. As Acts 18:26 reports it, "Apollos began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Aquilla and Priscilla heard him they took him and expounded to him the word of God more accurately." As it turned out, they were largely responsible for salvaging a mighty preacher for the cause.

On occasion, Paul had to withstand Peter to his face. It is a singular tribute to Peter's capacity for growth that he was able to accept rebuke and thereby demonstrate a further reason why he should be called the rock.

The art of rebuking belongs to the Christian ministry. In that pastoral letter, II Timothy, this counsel is given to the young evangelist: "Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort." (II Tim. 4:2)

* * *

Rebuking does not have to be a vehicle of condemnation. Indeed, it should not be. It can be an expression of concern, and it ought to be. One of the most striking illustrations of a daring rebuke that I know anything about was done on John Calvin by William Farel. Calvin was trained in law and the classics. He was not by nature a man who enjoyed confrontation. It was his misfortune to have been born when the reformation was about to burst.

Calvin had gone over to Geneva where he had been of no small assistance to the infant movement. He then determined to leave via the Alps and make his way back to France where he could be sequestered once again in the quiet of his library and pursue his profession. But he met William Farel the night before he was to leave. Farel told him in hard-hitting language: "You are simply following your own wishes: and I declare in the name of Almighty God that if you refuse to take part in the Lord's work in this church

God will curse the quiet life you want for your studies."² How's that for rebuke?

Calvin said later on, "I felt as if God from heaven had laid His mighty hand upon me to stop me in my course. . . and I was so stricken with terror that I did not continue my journey."³ Still later in recalling that critical encounter he said, "Farel kept me at Geneva not so much by advice and entreaty as by a dreadful adjuration. As if God had stretched forth His hand upon me from on high to arrest me."⁴ Thus Farel was able to save the first formative theologian that the reformation was to know.

I remember in my first church deciding that the congregation had been asked for funds so often for emergency causes that I would table a request that had just arrived. I was sure that the members of that church had given about as much and as often as they could. Following the next meeting of the Session a gracious and committed elderly man addressed the chair: "Did not our pastor receive a letter about the flood-stricken churches in Kansas?" I replied in the affirmative and went on to explain why I had done nothing with that letter. Firmly and kindly he drew a bead on me and said, "Young man, you have no right to shield your congregation from a genuine need. If the people do not wish to give, that is one thing, but you have no right to deny them an opportunity to give." I was rebuked. I have always been glad that I was.

A friend of mine, an athlete of some distinction, decided to go to Daytona Beach during an Easter vacation when college young people by the thousands would be gathering to enjoy a respite from their studies. As he walked along the beach one morning he met a young man who was wearing a sweat shirt. Knowing full well what he was about my friend went over and said, "Ah, the University of Virginia!" The student said, "No." "Why don't you drop your arms and let me read it?" The young man obliged somewhat sheepishly. The legend on the sweat shirt read, "Help Stamp Out Virginity."

The boy by now was ashamed. His conscience was aroused.

My friend walked on but the student followed. He wanted to talk some more. "Would you like me to throw this sweat shirt away?" he asked. "No, I'd like you to take it home and have it dry-cleaned. Then I'd like you to place it in a plastic case. You're a likely young man and the chances are that after college you'll get married and have some children. When your daughter is sixteen I want you to go up to the closet, take kown that sweat shirt and let her wear it on her first date!" The student could only think to respond, "If my father had talked to me like that I would not have worn it in the first place!" Most of us upon seeing that sweat shirt would have laughed and said nothing. "Better a frank word of reproof than the love that will not speak."

* * *

Rebuking belongs to the life of the church. I suspect that it is a lost art there because, frankly, we lack sufficient care for one another! There are two levels at which rebuking is to take place in the church. One is the formal level where church governing bodies are supposed to bear responsibility for the souls within their charge. Conservative churches are growing, we are told, because, among other reasons, they are "high demand" churches. They are willing to drum somebody out of the regiment! They are prepared to suspend a person's membership for proper cause. Did you ever ask yourself what a member of any church that you know anything about would have to do or be or think before he would be dropped from the membership of the church?

The other level where rebuking is to be practiced in the church is the inter-personal. We call it modesty when we refrain from "interfering" in the lives of fellow-believers. It may not be modesty but indifference. It could mean that we do not want to accept responsibility for anyone else. When Jesus

said, "Judge not that ye be not judged," He was speaking only of censorious condemnation. He was not saying that we should live without opinions. Surely there ought to be a middle ground between playing God and playing dumb!

Rebuking belongs to the church because it must always be practiced in a context of love. We must both give and receive rebuke in this context. Paul speaks about the need to speak the truth in love. If what is spoken is not done in love, it may not be the truth. Love is the anesthetic that makes the surgery bearable, possible and productive.

A rebuke should never be spoken in anger. It should never be spoken to put another down in order to build up one's self. A rebuke should never be delivered in passing. It requires the permanence of a community of faith. A rebuke should never be the first word in any relationship, nor should it be the last word. But it will, on occasion, be the right word!

* * *

Love finds a way and a time. A rebuke cannot be dropped into another's life like a stone from a towering height. Jesus turned to His disciples at a time when He was disappointed in them and said, "I have many things to tell you but you cannot bear them now." None of us could take the full truth about ourselves head on in one massive delivery. There is a right way to declare a rebuke.

I remember hearing of two chaplains serving in the Navy in World War II. Both were upset about the blasphemous language that abounded on their ship. The protestant chaplain was very uptight about it. He came from a strict denomination that believed in hitting such problems straight on. He called the men together and berated them. The result? More blasphemy than ever. The Catholic chaplain got hold of

the men one night and said, "I wish you guys wouldn't talk about my boss like that." His plea got through.

Love perceives when rebuke is needed. There is a Hasidic story which Martin Buber has shared with the world. "How one should love men," he said, "I have learned from a peasant. He sat in an inn with some other peasants, drinking. For a long time he was silent like the others, but when his heart was moved by the wine he said to his neighbor: 'Tell me, do you love me or don't you?' And he replied: 'I love you very much.' But the first peasant answered: 'You say, I love you; and yet you do not know what hurts me. If you loved me in truth, you would know.'"⁵

* * *

Rebuking belongs to our growth. There is much being said in Roman Catholic circles these days about "spiritual formation." I am drawn to that term. We are not made, we are being made. We are in the process of becoming. The ultimate intention is that we should some day rise to the fullness of the stature of Christ. It may be too extreme to say that many in their Christian growth have been killed by kindness, but it is not too much to say that many have been stunted by kindness. Even Christians can fantasize about wrong marriages, wrong vocations, wrong values and wrong beliefs. If we spare the rebuke we may spoil the soul.

* * *

Rebuking as an art belongs to our common priesthood. It is a duty to give rebuke, and an achievement to receive it. In too many instances we are guilty of withheld candor -- a refusal to level one with the other in the bonds of the spirit.

I love him so much I won't. No, you love him so much you must. "Better a frank word of reproof than the love that will not speak." The same writer went

on in the next chapter to add a second touch to the same theme, "He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue."

CLOSING PRAYER

*O Thou who hast made us necessary
to each other, deliver us from the
love that will not speak.*

*Make us grateful for brothers and
sisters in the faith who make
our needs their own.*

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Steinbeck, John, Travels With Charley, p. 78, Bantam Books, Inc., New York, 1966.
2. Parker, T. H. L., Portrait of Calvin, p. 25, SCM Press, Ltd.
3. Ibid., p. 25.
4. Walker, Williston, John Calvin, p. 158, G. P. Putnam & Sons, New York, 1906.
5. Kaufman, Walter, The Faith of a Heretic, p. 307, Anchor Books, (Doubleday), New York, 1960.

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