

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

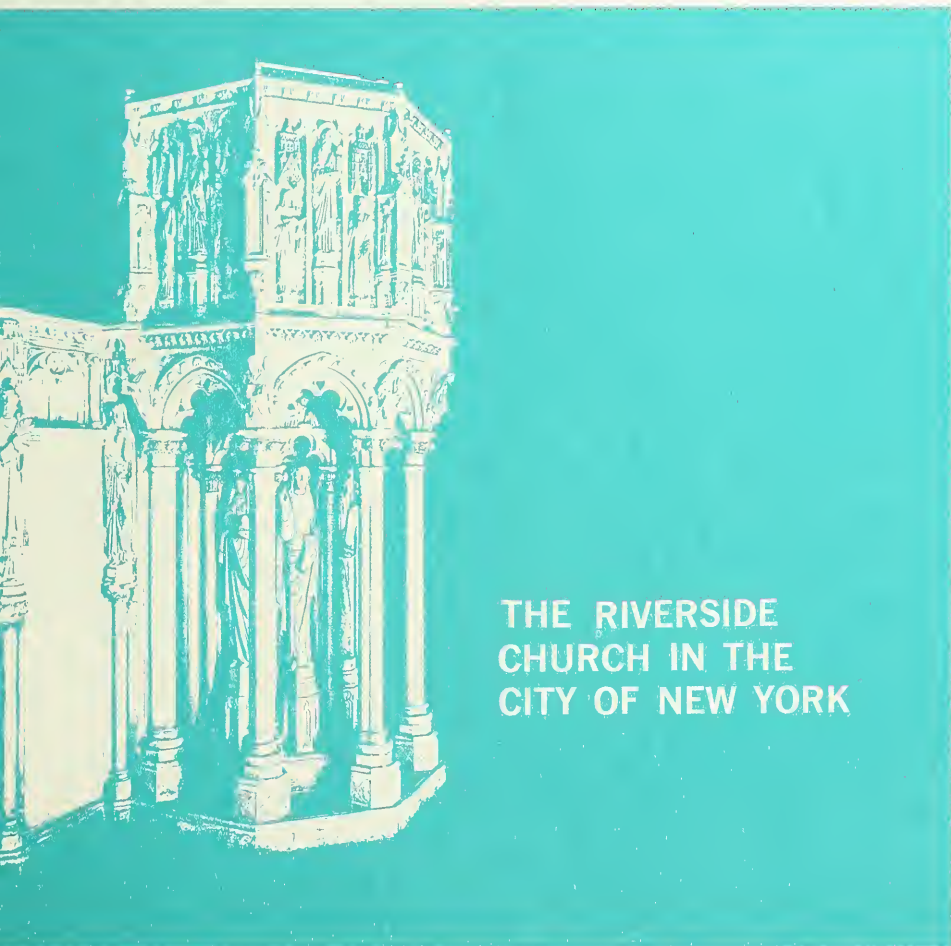


"GETTING HIGH ON GOD"

"Don't give way to drunkenness...  
but let the Holy Spirit fill you."


Ephesians 5:18 NEB

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## "GETTING HIGH ON GOD"

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This is a time of anguish and tribulation, a time of torment and unrest, a time of soul-racking pain and grievous national division. But it is also, thank God, the time of the Holy Spirit. We live after Kent State and the decision to invade Cambodia, after Augusta, Georgia and Jackson, Mississippi, but we also live after the advent of God's Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost! Can we afford to celebrate the Festival of Pentecost with the world so bent and bleeding? A better question would be: Can we afford not to? We court disaster when we focus only on our problems and forget the sources of our power.

Christians have an unfortunate way of making too much or too little of the Holy Spirit. Sect type churches in the Pentecostal tradition tend to over-stress the Spirit. They down-play the cerebral and encourage the emotional in religious experience, prefer spontaneity to order, demand inner holiness of life, and ecstatically acclaim the charismatic gifts.

But rather than sit in judgment on those zealous Christians let us confess that for our part as conventional, standard-brand church members we are less aware of the Spirit, His gifts and power, than should be the case. It's as though we were afraid of the kindling power of the Spirit; as though we disdained enthusiasm of any kind. We know God as the Father over us. We know God as the Son for us and with us. But do we know God in us as the Holy Spirit?

St. Paul delivered a curious exhortation to the Ephesian church. "Do not give way to drunkenness...but let the Holy Spirit fill you." (Eph 5:18) This is a curious word because the apostle dares to suggest that being filled with the Spirit is the Christian counter-part to being drunk.

The King James Version has it, "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit." And we may be sure that "wine" here is the real thing, not Welch's grape juice or kool-ade.

This is not the only time that the Holy Spirit is associated with inebriation in the New Testament. You will recall that on the day of Pentecost after people of diverse backgrounds had experienced the Spirit's renewal and empowerment, there were some at least who said, "These men are drunk." Peter wasn't all together flattering in his defense of the crowd. He didn't say that drunkenness was beneath them, that they couldn't get drunk or wouldn't. He simply said as a matter of fact, "They are not drunk. It's only nine o'clock."

Mood alteration by drugs, soporifics and alcohol is very common in our society. Those over thirty prefer to get high on alcohol. Some under thirty prefer to get high on pot or heroin or LSD. Perhaps if St. Paul were writing today he would say, "Don't get high on alcohol. Don't get high on drugs. Get high on God, be filled with the Holy Spirit."

\* \* \* \* \*

What connection could there possibly be between the false elevation of excessive drinking and an experience of the Holy Spirit? Well, for one thing, men drink for warmth and conviviality. Gordon Cosby, a good friend and the founding pastor of the Church of the Savior in Washington, D. C., tells of a time some twelve years ago when he was speaking as a guest minister during Lent in a church in New England. The service was particularly dull and uninspiring. The only things that seemed to move were the collection plates. When the service was over Gordon and his wife felt totally depressed at the absence of life in that church. They drove for a while before turning in for the night. The last room available to them in a wayside inn happened to be directly above the tavern. They didn't sleep much that night, but they were impressed by the laughter, the sounds of happiness, the comradery that came up from the floor beneath. Cosby was moved to say, "I realized that there was more warmth

and fellowship in that tavern than there was in the church. If Jesus of Nazareth had his choice he would probably have come to the tavern rather than to the church we visited."

All taverns aren't that cozy nor all churches that cold. The point is that God intended that through the Holy Spirit the church should provide for men and women the most satisfying and accepting fellowship anywhere under heaven. To some degree the church is effective here. Remember that the church operates without a committee to pre-select members. There is no screening to insure that likes join likes. We do not gather in a church around anything as superficial as a hobby, like stamp collecting or flower raising; or something neutral like music. The church dares to say "Whosoever will may come." Consider the opposites that the church enfolds: Male and female, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, pensive and emotional, old and young, lettered and unlettered, black and white, yellow and brown.

Joseph Haroutunian was keen to insist that Christians should notice not only the Spirit working in them but among them, creating the kind of warmth and oneness that so many in our time apparently feel can only be achieved by drugs or alcohol.

Unfortunately for them when the drugs or drinks wear off, there they are. I have had people who frequent the cocktail circuit tell me that the reason why they drink is because they really couldn't stand each other apart from alcohol. And here we are in the church, standing each other, if you will, maintaining remarkably durable friendships despite the issues of city, nation and world that threaten to undo us. However exasperated a member of this church might be because of the happenings of the day, he can always come within the bonds of this fellowship and say, "I belong." And this is of the Spirit.

Moreover, men turn to drink for joy. I am not a drinking man, but I confess that when it was my business to ride the train between Lancaster and New York rather fre-

quently, I always chose the club car when I could. I enjoyed the mirth, the laughter, the easy access of people to each other. Those who drink testify that alcohol relaxes their tensions, gives the world a rosier hue and induces gladness in the heart. Unfortunately again, when the drink wears off the realities are still there. The problems do not vanish. And for every moment of exhilaration there comes a compensating moment of depression. At bottom, the glass is an escape.

In contrast, the fruit of the Holy Spirit in the believer's heart is abiding joy. God is here and in control. This knowledge comes by faith, and faith is engendered in the heart by the action of God's Holy Spirit. Feuerbach was prone to describe faith as the mere projection of man's inner hopes and ideals into the outer reality of a transhuman God. The only thing we can say to Feuerbach and others is that by the action of the Holy Spirit in our hearts we know that we are the children of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.

It is the ministry of God's Holy Spirit to confirm the truth of who Jesus was and what he came to do in the hearts of men. O, we sorrow with the sorrows of the world to be sure. We are caught up in its convulsions, its movements and its counter-movements. But always with a sense of scale, for we believe that history whatever it includes is "that which happens," as Moltmann says, "between promise and fulfillment." Our joy does not rise from the equilibrium of the nations; therefore, when that equilibrium is threatened our joy does not recede. The ground may shake, as it does just now, beneath our feet but always we can say with Moses, "The eternal God is our refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms." (Dt. 33:27)

One of the things we Christians ought to be about these days as we mobilize to express our social and political concerns is to seek ways to express the joy that the world so much needs. It bothers me that the church is associated in the minds of men with gloominess and gravity. I sit through so many prayers that ministers give at public occasions that convey a sense of travail and death. Surely it is

possible for us to be seriously engaged in the issues of the day while at the same time testifying to the joy that resides inside.

I have kept for some time now a copy of a prayer that was offered by Father John J. Hever of St. Joseph's Church, Belmont, Massachusetts, at a public banquet in the city of Boston. I imagine that the gathered guests were bracing for the usual funereal tones, prepared to endure a few moments of somberness before going on to enjoy themselves. Father Hever must have surprised them when he prayed: "Almighty God, our Father and our friend, we know that your memory of earthly banquet halls is pretty grim, ever since that first Christmas eve when an insolent fellow in a greasy apron at the only hotel in town slammed the door right in your mother's pleading face. Well, the mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine, and here we are today, twenty centuries later, on a continent that the innkeeper never knew existed, speaking a language he never heard, and our very first thought before we sit down to our banquet tables is to stand in reverence and salute your undying name.

"We are especially happy to make this prayer, O Lord, and we hope you are to hear it, because this time we are not in church and not in trouble. As a rule when we speak to you, we are either kneeling against the background of a stained-glass window, or buckling on a life preserver. It is either the routine of religion or the rush call for help. But today it is gloriously different. Today we want you to bless our joy as we stand poised for a few hours of genial festivity. Bless us then, O Lord, and in thy goodness, grant that the food may be well flavored, the service smooth, and -- if it isn't asking too much -- the speeches short." 2  
The fruit of the spirit is joy.

Finally, men turn to drink for strength. They feel stronger after they have had a few. Bold enough to tell the mother-in-law to go home, courageous enough to go in and ask the boss for a raise, equipped for taking on the world. I believe we have seriously misunderstood and left unappropriated the ability of the Holy Spirit to enlarge the powers

of those who believe. I mentioned Gordon Cosby a few moments ago. Some of you may be aware that in his church there are rather steep requirements for membership, one of which is the reading of a considerable body of semi-difficult literature. I asked Gordon how he could possibly ask housemaids and charwomen to read the likes of James Pike and Emil Brunner. He said he believed that when Christians honestly seek to know, God expands their mental powers and gives them the capacity to understand. He has demonstrated this year after year in the membership of that congregation.

Most of us who would rise to testify to unanswered prayer would likely have to say that most of our prayers that have gone unanswered have been prayers for things. But is there one of us who has prayed unsuccessfully for the enlargement of patience, self-control, courage, poise, self-understanding? Wherever the Holy Spirit has taken possession of men, ordinary people have become capable of extraordinary achievement. I have listened to ministers, polished and well-educated whose words were delivered flawlessly, but whose message carried no conviction. And I have listened to others who stumbled through a poorly prepared sermon whose words carried the weight of the eternal because they were delivered in the enlarging and capacitating power of the Holy Spirit. We haven't begun to explore the possibilities here. Every once in a while in the market place, in the bank, in the apartment building, in the church, one meets an individual who is living out this quality of life. What impresses us about them is that their deeds stick, their words carry, their influence counts and their life convinces.

Outsiders looking on at Pentecost when the Spirit came were staggered by the boldness of men who heretofore had been run-of-the-mine. In a darkening hour we should systematically and humbly ask that the gift of courage might be increased in us. I like the way Sean O'Casey puts it in Red Roses For Me when he has Ayamonn say, "I am not one to carry fear about with me as a priest carries the Host. Let the timid tiptoe through the way where the paler blossoms grow; my feet shall be where the redder roses grow,



though they bear long thorns, sharp and piercing, thick among them!" 3

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"Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit." The times cry out for God-intoxicated men. Of course we feel outmatched. Who doesn't? You may recall that in the last act of Tristan and Isolde Wagner pits a lone harp against ten assorted woodwinds, the entire string section, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and a tuba. We know how the harpist must feel when called upon to play against all that. But it is the business of God's Spirit to make us able for the day. Because we live this side of Pentecost a Christian may stand and say in confidence, "I belong! I believe! I can!"

#### CLOSING PRAYER

Spirit of the living God, and promised gift of our saviour Jesus Christ, we open now our hearts to receive Thee anew. Enlarge our expectations, deepen our sense of belonging, and renew our joy, to the end that we may shine as lights in a darkened world and make it easier for others to know that Thou art love.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray.  
Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. O'Connor, Elizabeth, Call To Commitment, p. 109, Harper & Row, New York 1963
2. Saturday Review, December 1, 1962
3. O'Casey, Sean, Red Roses For Me, Act I, pp. 274-5, Dell Publishing Co. , 1956



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