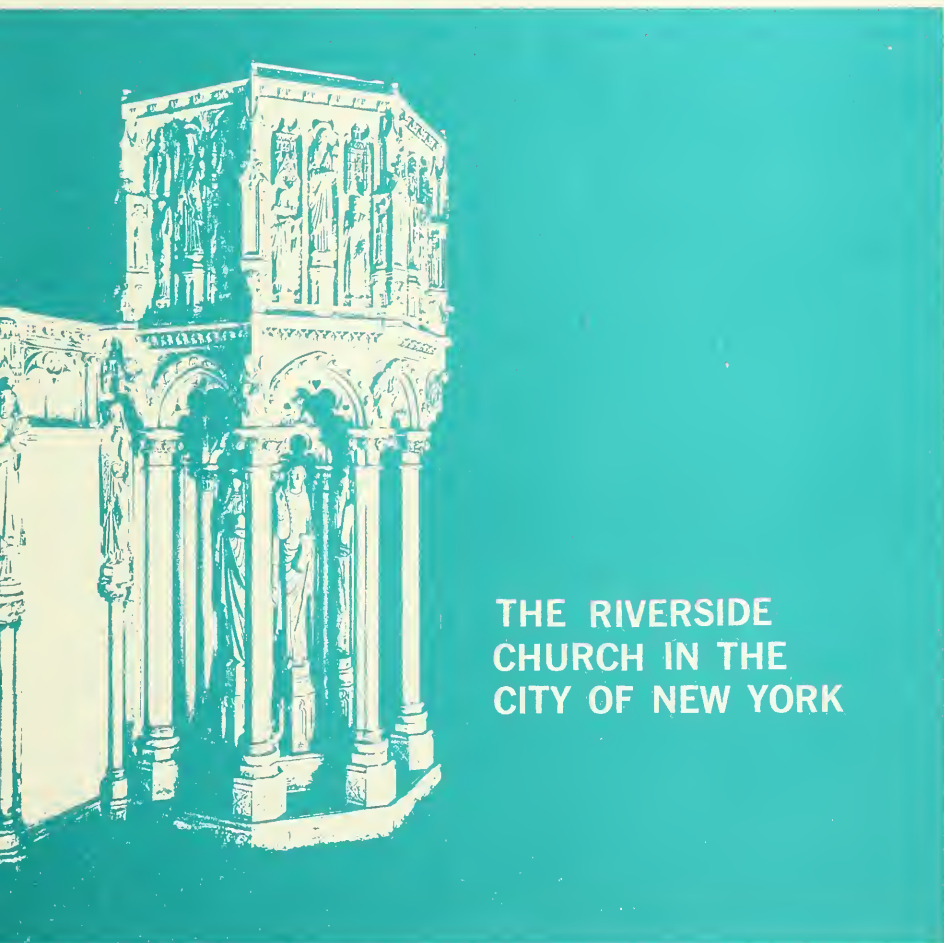


SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

THE HOME COURT ADVANTAGE

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THE RIVERSIDE
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THE HOME COURT ADVANTAGE

Sport fans have been arguing for years over the worth of the Home Court Advantage. Most collegiate and professional teams play as many games each season on the road as they play at home. Virtually everyone agrees that the home team has some advantage over the visiting team.

The team playing at home has the backing of a partisan crowd. It will not be weakened by the rigors of travel. It will benefit from dining in, rather than dining out. It will get an odd break now and then from the officials, especially in the final minutes of a closely contested game. It will be more accustomed to the local climate. It will be more familiar with the peculiar features and idiosyncrasies of the stadium, court or rink.

In some sports, in fact, the home team has an advantage written right into the rules. In hockey, for example, the home team has the privilege of making the last line change. In baseball the home team has the advantage of being able to bat last.

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The Home Court Advantage and its corollary, the "Away Game" disadvantage, does not belong to the world of sports alone. It is part of the "gamesmanship" that runs through all of life.

The Home Court Advantage figures in our relationships with other people. Consciously or not we try to have others meet us on our terrain. We like to deal from power, preferring subjects that we can handle, formats in which we are comfortable, and settings that are congenial to our strength.

The corporation executive is not at his best on the beach where brawn and physique matter more than

brains and titles. The university president is hard-put to maintain his poise on the barricades. Prize fighters as a rule do better in the ring than they do before a microphone.

We all get a mite uneasy when some social conversation in which we are involved drifts into a field that takes us away from our competence. For our ego's sake we try to change the subject, and change it quickly. The theologian who finds himself drawn into a discussion on a comparison between Quantum Physics and Newton's cosmology will soon be heard to ask, "How does Augustine's City of God compare to Harvey Cox's Secular City?" It is his way of trying to get back from the strange world of physics to a world of his own competence.

A friend of mine who is rather high up in academic circles had some friends in one night. The conversation around the table was intellectual and sophisticated. The youngsters were completely shut out, save for the food. The same calibre of talk continued on into the living room. Finally, towards the end of the night as the guests were getting their hats and coats and preparing to leave, a seven year old lad looked up and asked, "Do you know that a brontosaur weighs 200 tons?" It was his way of trying to get them to play for just a minute or two on his home court! The Home Court Advantage - we try for it every time!

But good things like growth and understanding can come to us when we muster the courage to play on the other fellow's court. Some years ago I was in a church that was not housekept as well as it should have been, to the consternation of the ladies, particularly the ladies who taught in the Church School. Enormous pressures were applied to have the church cleaned up.

The men of that congregation volunteered to do the job on a given Saturday. They turned in a fine piece of work. We all came duly instructed as to what to bring - a bucket and a sponge. We were given

numbers when we arrived and assigned to a team. Scaffolding had been donated by one of the local contractors. Ladders were on hand. There was plenty of soap and water.

That church had a predominant number of book-oriented, verbal types - doctors, lawyers, teachers, preachers, social workers, etc. An interesting thing that happened, at least on my team, as we began to dismantle light fixtures, erect scaffolding and move pianos around, was that the usual aristocracy was inverted. Those of us who were strong with words and books were at a loss. We stepped back while our manually skilled brothers came forward to direct and manage the operation.

I fear that in most of the Protestant world those who work with their hands have been kept in the background while the more cerebral types have moved into positions of prominence and leadership. I can only say that through that common work experience a new dimension of fellowship was realized in that congregation that proved more important and longer lasting than the sparkling clean-up job itself.

The Home Court Advantage figures in the kind of service that Christians render in the world. The negative models here are the priest and the Levite in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan. They were the men who came upon the mugging victim on the open road and chose to pass by the other side.

These were not degenerate human beings. Presumably they were trained and dedicated men, prepared under proper circumstances to bring men to God and God to men. On their home court, within the temple at Jerusalem, they were doubtless effective. But not in Samaritan territory. Not where physical dangers lurked. (Perhaps the robbers were still there!) They were not able to function effectively without their robes, and away from their other symbols of authority. There on the road, so to speak, they were totally dysfunctional. Their religion didn't travel very well.

Enough on them. What of us? Many of us tend to be enthusiastic, strong, and active within the life of the church. But out there on the road, when we sense that we are playing an "away game", we tend in many cases to be mute, ineffective and uncertain.

No one, I think, is caught in this frustration more than the professional minister. Let it be confessed for most of us that we function best in our place of power - behind a pulpit, in an office, in circles where we are surrounded by a friendly climate of respect and appreciation. But frequently we are something less than scintillating and relevant out there in the unprotected, rough and tumble of daily life.

I find it helpful to deliberately take myself into situations where I do not have everything going for me that I have within this church. It is good for a minister to be in situations where he must get through on the strength of his humanity, rather than the virtue of his ordination. Ministers need more situations where questions are not begged. Where they can be talked back to on the same level as those who are raising the objections. Two or three times now I have had the opportunity to be on open-mike radio programs. This is at once a demanding and satisfying kind of experience. Someone out there who can remain anonymous, and who may be harboring a deep animosity against the church or some aspect of theology, can call in and put you on the spot right there for all to hear.

Jesus in his ministry did not seek the Home Court Advantage. He met people where and as they were. He took his chances on being hurt or crossed up. He did not decree that they should meet Him at some central holy place where He had His power.

And what of you, my laymen friends? What is your "away from home" record? We all need the church. We need the homogeneity that we feel when we gather with those of like mind. This is why the Apostle Paul exhorted us to not "forsake the assembling of ourselves

together." (Heb. 10:25) We need the fellowship, strength and inspiration that come from joining with others of like persuasion. But the critical question concerns what you do when you are "out there" where the climate is not one of encouragement but criticism, where the mind of Christ counts for very little? What do you do, for example, at work when someone comes out with a racial slur? What do you do when someone with whom you are associated curses the futility of life? What do you do when some acquaintance of yours signals his need for love? What do you do when you are part of some corporate decision in the private or public sector that you sense is going wrong and away from the will of God?

Our road games are every bit as important, if not more so, than our home games. It doesn't take much to build a good Christian track record within the life of the congregation. Out there is where it happens. Jesus dislodged us permanently from the familiar and the friendly when he said, "... you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8b) He wants us to take the show on the road.

Finally, there is a sense in which the Home Court Advantage figures in our understanding of how the church relates to American society. Some Christians blithely assume that they live in a Christian country. They believe that the nation is more or less controlled by the mind of Christ, that our overall leadership is sensitive to His spirit, that the ethos surrounding us is, in the main, friendly to the gospel. In other words, they assume that as they "do their thing" in this country as Christians, they are playing a "home game."

To start with that assumption is to head down a long trail of misguided expectations, disappointments and futility. It is one thing to believe that democracy as a political system comes closer to what we understand the will of God to be than any other system, and something else again to claim that this is a Christian nation.

It is easy to Christianize in retrospect those

who got this nation started. Probing historians have shown, however, that the religious among the founding fathers were more often Deists than Christians. Most of the early settlers were adventurers in quest of a better temporal life.

Christopher Morley held it to be unfortunate that Plymouth Rock hadn't landed on the Puritans. I am not prepared to go that far. On the other hand, I am not about to sanctify at a safe historical distance the founding fathers of this country. Horace Greeley was probably right when he said, "The illusion that times that were are better than those that are, has probably pervaded all ages."

It is my conviction that we live out our faith in this country in an alien culture; that every game we play in these United States is an "away game;" that this country is one of the prime mission fields of the world. The climate at best is neutral, and at worst hostile. The prevailing sentiment is a cocky, self-assured, pragmatic secularism that has little time for the transcendent - Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Jewish.

Some of the Scripture that we heard this morning may have sounded strange to us. (Romans 13:1-10) Perhaps we have the feeling that we have moved beyond the position of those Roman Christians and their need to submit to the powers of their day. I wonder if we have moved at all from that minority status.

It is vital for us to see this, lest our expectations as to what we can achieve in society be exaggerated. We are not going to change very much by ourselves. The key word is the word "witness." We simply bear witness to the powers concerning the truth that we have found in Christ. This means pragmatically that to get some things done that need doing we will have to form coalitions with others of like mind and be willing to play a supplementary role.

I slipped into a minister's office in Georgia

two weeks ago, and was struck by a piece of bric-a-brac that graced his desk. It was a plastic replica of Peanuts' baseball team. What a bedraggled, non-descript, unlikely lot they were! Underneath was the legend: "How can we lose when we are so sincere?"

We can lose in a way and for a time because the odds are heavy against us. Each game in which we are involved as Christians is played away from home. Yet, our hope continues strong, for our trust is firmly fixed in God who can do a lot with a little.

Closing Prayer

We labor and pray in faith, O God,
believing that the day will come
when Thy will shall be done on
earth even as it is in heaven.

Grant us, in the meantime,


the power to work

and wait,

and watch,

to Thy name's eternal praise.

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.



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