

# SERMONS

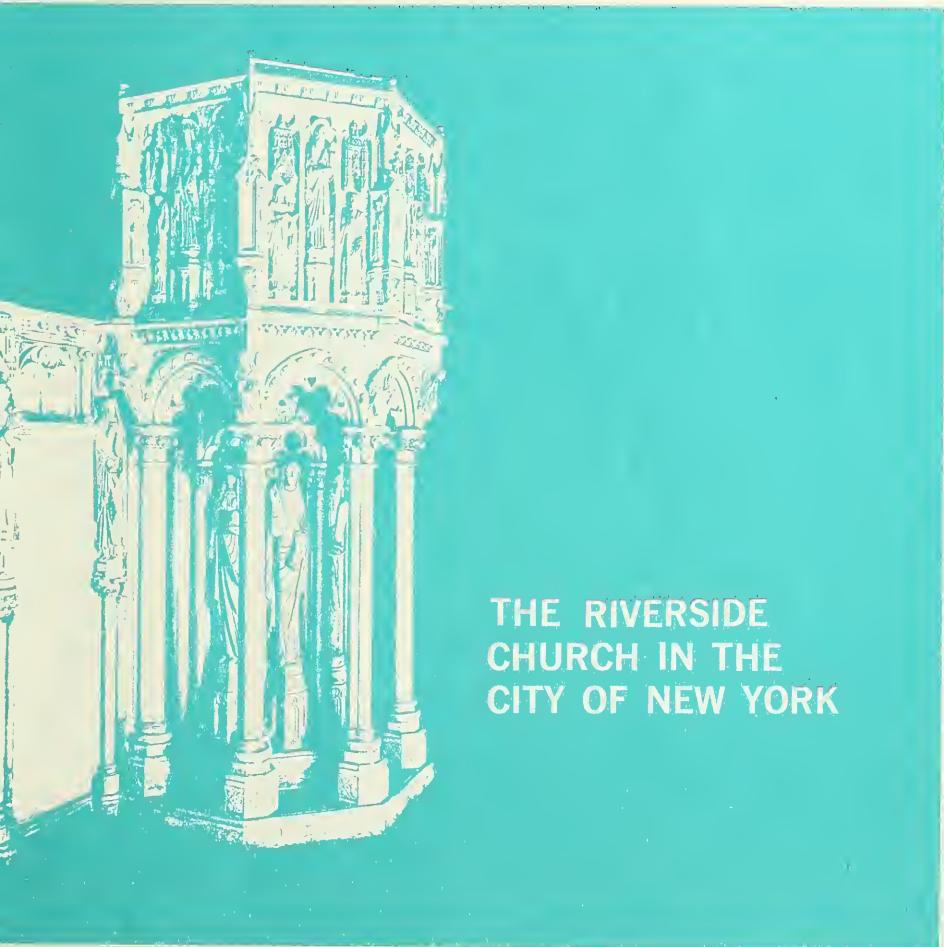
FROM RIVERSIDE



## "INTRUSIVE GRACE"

"Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.'"  
(John 4:7b)

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## "INTRUSIVE GRACE"

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The writer of the Book of Proverbs confesses: "Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden." (30:18-19)

He might have added yet one more: The ways of God with men. Grace has been described as God's extended hand. But how God's grace invades our life is difficult to say. On Christmas last we gave our son a book entitled: The Way Things Work. The contents fulfill the promise on the cover: "an illustrated encyclopedia of technology - from the ball-point pen to the computer, from the polaroid camera to the atomic clock, with ten thousand seventy-one two-color drawings and diagrams."

It is comparatively easy to learn the way things work. But how grace works cannot so readily be gathered into words. For God is free and sovereign. And man is blessed with a will of his own, and blinded by his sin. Grace is personal, not mechanical. We are safest, not when we theorize about grace, but when we watch God's grace in action. And that's what I propose we do today - watch God's grace "on location" at a well-side in Samaria.

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The incident took place early on in Jesus' ministry. The master was thirsty from much walking. His disciples had gone off to shop for food. Jesus approached the well at Shechem at high noon and met a woman who had come there to draw water. In the simplest language possible Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (John 4:7b) Simple though it was, that request of Jesus serves to illustrate the intrusive quality of grace.

The woman, to her credit, was quick to sense the threatening implications in what Jesus asked. She replied, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (John 4:9a) Something was up and she knew it!

This woman stood to lose a lot. Her privacy for one thing, the right to come and go alone. Some of the water that she had drawn with her own toil. More importantly, she stood to lose some of her pride as a woman. In those pre-women's-liberation days women were held to be inferior. And those who held the view claimed to have theological support. It was an accepted precept among the upright of that day that a man should not salute a woman in a public place, not even his own wife.

Still more, she stood to have her patriotism undermined. Ever since the exile, to be pro-Samaritan was to be anti-Jewish. A cold war had been going on for so many years, supported by convictions on both sides that had hardened into ideologies.

Her stereotype of the Jew was being challenged. It is always a disturbing experience to have one's prejudices unsettled. We like our characterizations to stay in neat array. This helps us, we think, to manage life. It also saves much thought. "Welfare recipients are lazy." "Politicians are self-serving." "Communists are bad." "Policemen are brutal." "Liberals hate America." In such generalities we take refuge. But for this woman, as for us when Jesus comes our way, her pigeon holes began to run together and her carefully structured categories no longer held.

Beyond this, her religious loyalty was on the line. Jews regarded Samaritans as unclean - in particular, Samaritan women. That line in verse nine of John 4 that reads: "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans," might better, on the basis of the Greek, be rendered: "The Jews do not use (vessels) together with Samaritans." A line would be breached should Jesus take water from her pail or use her cup.

\* \* \* \* \*

But this was still only a beginning. As the conversation went on she would be shaken down to the very soles of her sandaled feet. The conversation continued: "If you knew the gift of God," said Jesus, "and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked of him, and he would have given you living water." (John 4:10) "Sir," she replied, "give me this water, that I may not thirst, . . ." (John 4:15) But because grace can never be enjoyed alone, but must always be shared, Jesus turned to her and said: "Go call your husband, and come here." The woman replied, "I have no husband," Jesus said, "You have answered rightly, (that is, in a technical way,) for you have had five husbands and the one that you now have is not yours." (John 4:16-17)

She never thought when she went off for water that noon that she would get into this! It would be kind to believe that this woman had been widowed five times, but it would not be realistic. Apparently she was attractive enough to win men but not substantial enough to hold them. Legalists among the Jews had taught that three marriages were the limit in the commonwealth. She was now two over par. She pre-figured in a pathetic way the "serial polygamy" that has made Hollywood so infamous.

We may be sure that she had built up a rationale to justify her easy virtue, for we must live with ourselves. She had marshalled her defenses. She had learned to "live around" her past. But now her protection was torn away. The subject she wanted least to talk about had been pried open. One thinks of a line from a Broadway musical of several years back, "The Rope Dancer." A young girl in that production had the misfortune of being born with six fingers on each hand. All through the play she went around with her hands in her pockets. When someone threatened to take away her pockets she screamed from the depth of her being, "Don't take away my pockets! I can't live without my pockets!"

Blessed with feminine guile, the Samaritan woman sought to change the subject immediately. To divert attention from herself she posed a clearly religious issue: "Sir,



I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain (Mount Gerizim) and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." (John 4:20)

This is the old trick of trying to postpone the God question with an urbane, sophisticated question on religion. "Don't you think there are too many churches?" "Don't you think it is better to say trespasses than debts in the Lord's Prayer?" "Don't you think the King James version is better than all those modern translations?" Meanwhile, God keeps saying, "Son, give me thine heart."

She shifted from the subject of her husband to the subject of religion, and Jesus shifted from the place of worship to the manner of worship. He answered, "God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24)

Almost cornered she resorts to one last refuge. "I know that Messiah is coming; when he comes he will show us all things." (John 4:25b) She was exercising the instinct for postponement. You are a prophet, but I am not altogether sure of your credentials, and prophets differ on these subjects anyway. Why can't we just leave well enough alone until he is come who will show us all things!

Men can live more easily with a Messiah who is coming than with one who is here. But Jesus seals off this last escape by responding solemnly, "I who speak to you am he." (John 4:26b)

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Intrusive grace - is there a better term for it? The grace of God that we sing about so easily and talk about so glibly is initially for everyone who knows it a disturbing and provocative experience. God does not come into our lives to be a mere additive. He comes to present us with a grand alternative to our weak and futile ways.

Frankly, I don't see how God can break through to any of us with salvation or deliverance until first our myths

fall and our idols topple and our illusions are stripped away. The false peace that we have entered into must first be broken before we can know the peace that passes all human understanding.

There is no way that an experience of grace can be anything but painful. I should like to have been there that day last month in Hanover, New Hampshire when Dartmouth College held its commencement exercises. I should like to have been there not only because the environs of that picturesque campus are so impressive, but because a young man by the name of David Levy said something that had the ring of intrusive grace to me.

David Levy had the highest academic record of any of the 940 graduating seniors. On those credentials he was accorded speaking time on the commencement program. Imagine the shock on the faces of the old alums gathered there, the mothers and fathers, the faculty, the dignitaries, and some of his own classmates when David Levy of this city said:

"I have rejected graduate school offers because I could not worship black ink on white paper. I have made no plans because I have found no plans worth making.

"Take pity on me, those of you who can justify the air you breathe. Send me letters and tell me why life is worth living. Rich parents, write and tell me how money makes your life worthwhile. Dartmouth alumni, tell me how the Dartmouth experience has given value to your existence.

"And fellow graduates, fellow members of the Class of 1971, take pity on a student who did not think, but only studied. Tell me how you have justified your existence to yourself, or perhaps why you have not felt the need to do so. And if some one of you out there is also made like me, write me a letter and tell me how you came to appreciate the absurdity of your life." 1

It is reasonably certain that that speech rankled

the majority of those who heard it. But from within the stand-point of Scripture it might very well be that grace was moving from that platform, overturing the hearts of many in that place.

How can God get through to us while we hang on to our inordinate obsession with money, to name one myth? We know few people, if any, who are happy because of the money they have. But the myth persists. If only they had more their happiness would be complete.

I like the story (shared with me by one of our members) of the minister who was riding a train in Ceylon. As custom had it he put his small, rather beat-up satchel of possessions on the luggage rack above his head. Then, also according to custom, he settled down to snooze. But it wasn't a sound sleep. Every little while he had to wake himself to check whether his satchel was still there on the rack. Finally, when he opened his eyes about 4:00 a. m. , he discovered that the satchel was gone. "From then on," he says, " I slept absolutely peacefully."

How can the grace of God get through to us if we maintain our obsession with pleasure - in which, however, we come at, self is still king, and people and objects are there to serve us ?

One of New York's up and coming professional athletes who, before he retires, if he stays healthy, will bank six or seven hundred thousand dollars, was recently interviewed on television. When asked what he liked to do with his money - he said, "I like to spend it." The questioner continued: "What do you like to spend it on?" With a straight face and without embarrassment he said, "On me."

"No man," said James Smart "is truly himself, the man whom God created him to be, until his whole existence has its center beyond himself in God." 2

How can the grace of God get through to us while we continue to cling to our obsession with race -- trying to turn the accident of color into the heart-beat of life?



How can the grace of God get through to us so long as we continue our obsession with security? Bonhoeffer was on the mark in noting that: "When we seek for security in possession we are trying to drive out care with care, and the net result is the precise opposite of our anticipations. The fetters which bind us to our possessions prove to be cares themselves." 3

My friend Kenneth Wilson, editor of "The Christian Herald" tells of a conversation he once had with a missionary. They were talking about security. The missionary acknowledged that he had not put a great deal of money into life insurance. When asked why, he responded, "I am putting my money into mission projects. I think that it is better insurance for the future of the world and therefore of my children." 4

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"Give me a drink." With that request intrusive grace proceeded to "move in" on the woman at Samaria. You ask, is the intrusiveness of grace worth putting up with? Is life worth having? See yonder the woman as she rushes to her village with a joy that she has never known before, shouting ecstatically to one and all, "Come, see a man who told me all that ever I did. Can this be the Christ?" (John 4:29) And John adds: "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony." (John 4:39a)

Next time something gets under your skin -- at a Dartmouth commencement, in a book, in an argument with a hippie, in a sermon, in a documentary on Vietnam, in a conversation with a missionary, be careful how you answer. It might just be God's intrusive grace trying to save your eternal soul from death!

## CLOSING PRAYER

Forgive us, Lord, if we have made of Thee an  
easy mark, and assumed that grace was  
cheap.

Forgive us if we have sought to have Thee  
bless our blind and wilful ways.

Strive with us, O God, for that striving is  
our hope; and we have no rest until  
we rest in Thee.

Amen.

### FOOTNOTES:

1. The New York Times, June 14, 1971
2. Smart, James D., The Quiet Revolution, p. 124  
The Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1952
3. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, "The Sermon on the Mount,"  
The Cost of Discipleship, p. 197, Macmillan,  
New York 1963
4. Wilson, Kenneth L., Have Faith Without Fear,  
p. 69, Harper & Row, New York 1970



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