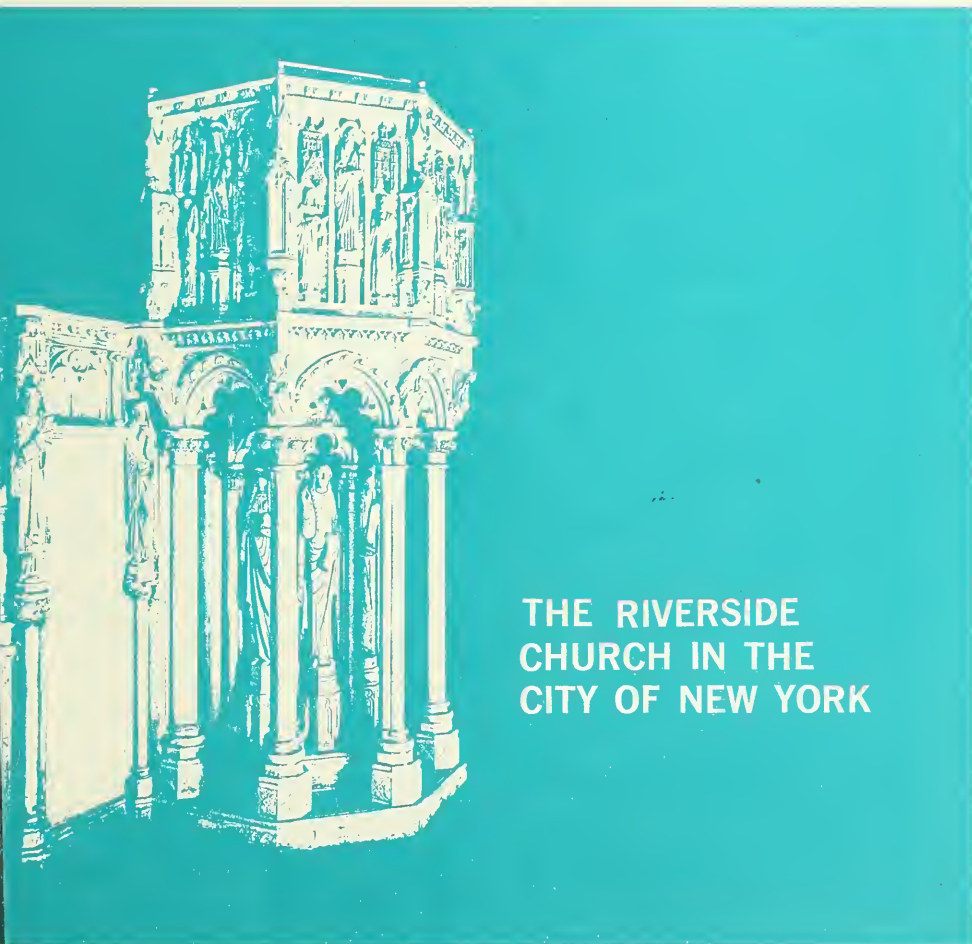


SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


IS THAT YOUR BUSINESS, PETER?

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THE RIVERSIDE
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IS THAT YOUR BUSINESS, PETER?

I stand in perpetual admiration of those who are employed in the Complaint Departments of our major stores and businesses. What a workout that must be each day; absorbing indignation and abuse, pouring oil on troubled waters, rendering to no man evil for evil, paying lip service at least to the merchant's adage, "The customer is always right!"

But complaints about merchandise and service are child's play compared to man's complaints about life. How many arched eye-brows, mad looks, imprecatory prayers and outright curses are directed toward God in any given day, only heaven knows.

A contented human being is the rarest of discoveries. All of us some of the time, and some of us all of the time are possessed of a covetous, envious, jealous, complaining spirit. "Why hast Thou made me thus?" is our question. What we take to be the well-being of other people angers and unsettles us.

There is an old fable that tells of a time when the devil was stalking the Libyan Desert. He came upon a group of fiends who were trying to tempt a pious, holy hermit. They tried him with the seductions of the flesh; they tried to sour his mind with doubts and fears; they told him that all of his sufferings were worth nothing. But the holy man did not flinch. Then said the devil as he moved in, "Have you heard the news? Your brother has been made Bishop of Alexandria." With that a scowl of malignant jealousy clouded the serene face of the holy man.

* * *

Blessed Peter acted out our part that day along the beach that fronts the Sea of Galilee. After breakfast the resurrected Christ turned to Peter and asked three times, Simon, Son of John, do you love me?" Answering "yes" each time, Peter was recommissioned as

an apostle and obviously forgiven for having denied his Lord.

But there was more! Jesus went on to indicate what lay ahead for Cephas. "When you were young you fastened your belt about you and walked where you chose; but when you are old you will stretch out your arms, and a stranger will bind you fast, and carry you where you have no wish to go. Jesus said this to indicate the manner of death by which Peter was to glorify God." (John 21:18,19) Over the years Peter would gradually surrender his self-will and eventually die as his Lord had died, by crucifixion.

This was a heavy word and Peter responded by saying in effect, "Why me?" As he saw John -- that most intimate of Jesus' associates -- trailing them, Peter could not resist playing "comparative providence." He turned to Jesus and said, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus replied, "If it is my wish for him to stay until I come, what is that to you?" Or, as the Phillip's translation has it, "If I wish for him to stay until I come, is that your business, Peter? Follow me."

* * *

Most of our discontent comes from comparing ourselves unfavorably with others. We insist on democratizing God's dealings with men. Forgetting that while all men are created equal we are not all created the same. Forgetting the varied endowments, gifts and testings that God sends us to fit us for our several callings.

One is not, in the least, trying to counsel the deprived to a benign contentment with their lot. Nor is one suggesting that people of means and power should not, as a religious obligation, work for a more equitable distribution of wealth and income. The point is that even under the best of systems some unevenness in fortune is bound to exist.

Did you ever question the right of the 10th Commandment to be there? I mean after all those juicy sins like stealing and adultery, and murder. Whoever put those commandments together didn't have much of a sense of climax. He should have started with the throw-away sin of coveting and worked up to the big stuff!

And yet it is true that the commandment, "Thou shalt not covet," finds us. Whether our bag be theology, whether we work the academic field, whether we be hard hats or homemakers or whatever, we can testify from experience that the covetous spirit, the jealous attitude, the envious disposition can render us permanently unable to step up to life and enjoy it!

There is always someone around that we point to whose lot seems far happier than ours. In a thousand different ways we plead with God, "What about him? Or her? "The answer is ever the same, "Is that your business, Peter? Follow thou me."

* * *

Next time you are tempted to lodge a complaint with the management about your lot in life there are a couple of things that you would do well to keep in mind. One is that other people aren't as well off and trouble-free as they seem! Appearances can be deceiving.

Albert Camus has found us by suggesting that we are all addicted at times to "nostalgia for other people's lives." He goes on to explain: "This is because, seen from the outside, they form a whole, while our life, seen from the inside, is all bits and pieces."¹ Nostalgia for other people's lives! Peter's nostalgia for John's future. The almost incessant desire to swap our providence for somebody else's. To play "what if?" -- if not, "why me?"

There is some truth, if not much poetic worth, in

the well known lines;

"If every man's internal care
Were written on his brow,
How many would our pity share,
Who have our envy now!"

(Unknown)

I recall years ago sitting in the home of a wealthy man who allowed as how one of his hobbies was stamp collecting. We vibrated on the same frequency here because in my younger years I was interested in the same. But his idea of stamp collecting and mine were quite different. He reached up to some high shelves and pulled down several expensive, hand-tooled, leather albums to show me sheet, after sheet, after sheet of perfect stamps. He went on to explain that he had a standing order with the Post Office so that every time a new issue was released he got himself several blocks in flawless mint condition. I could not help comparing his method of stamp collecting with the one we used to know. With us, if someone got a letter from his grandmother in Hungary, even though the stamp was badly cancelled and perhaps partly mutilated, we cherished the inclusion of that stamp in our album.

More is not always better. Who's to say whether John or Peter had the easier lot? Indeed, it may be more difficult to live for Jesus than to die for him! "Lord, what about him?" "Is that your business, Peter?"

* * *

Another word to remember is that authentic happiness comes primarily from the inside out, not from the outside in. This is not a popular word in a day when so many of us are working hard to alter the external conditions of life. Yet, the fact that it is not popular adds to the urgency to say it. Authentic happiness comes from the inside out, not from the outside in.

David Roberts in a very helpful book called, Psychotherapy And A Christian View of Man, describes a tendency we all have to fix the blame for our unhappiness on outside forces. "When an individual is not aware of the seriousness of his conflicts, this may be due to the fact that he has projected them on to people and circumstances outside himself. Then the trouble always lies in his opinion with the wife, the boss, the world situation, the Jews, the communists, etc. And if these external annoyances could be straightened out, he assumes, everything inside himself would form a serene harmony."²

Whatever it is that represents our assignment in life, there are pluses and minuses to it. The big thing, as I understand it, is to take this combination of "yeses" and "noes" and make them stand up and serve the glory of God.

Some of you will remember that in chess the one who has the whites moves first. Now, when some of us play, it really doesn't make much difference who moves first. We can lose a game either way! But there is a level of play at which the person who draws the blacks simply plays for a tie. There is no point in trying to offset the initial advantage of white's first move. But I read with a sensation of pleasure a while ago about a Russian Grand Master of the 20's and 30's by the name of Efim Bogolyubov who would not accept the view that one could at best get only a draw with the blacks. This is how he put it: "When I am white I win because I am white. When I am black I win because I am Bogolyubov!" "Lord, what about him?" "Is that your business, Peter? Follow me."

* * *

My last word would be this; as Christians we must learn to take pleasure in other people's blessings. I concede right off that this is easier said than done.

A certain "communism" of talent and experience belongs to the Christian faith. Did you hear Donald Soper the other night when he was speaking about the early Christian experiment in communism. After the Holy Spirit came the first believers held all things in common. Were they wrong in this? If after the advent of the Holy Spirit the first thing they did was to make a mistake, that doesn't say much for the Holy Spirit. Maybe they were pre-mature in pooling their physical wealth, who knows? But what is clear is that throughout those early churches the attempt was made to have each member enjoy the talents, capacities, blessings and assets of the others.

One of the sadder parts of our American legacy is that we see each other as competitors. We assume that someone else's capacity implies an incapacity on our part. Thus, we have a tendency to debunk others in order to shrink the distance between their gifts and our own.

Even preachers are caught in this. I talked with a man of some reputation the other day whose predecessor two back was a man who personified pastoral care to the nth degree. He established a widely acclaimed record as a beloved shepherd of his sheep. The younger man who is now in that place dismissed the whole achievement with one short comment; "It filled a deep need in his life to do that sort of thing." That's the subtle way in which we write each other off today -- and put each other down.

When you find someone who surpasses you in the ability to give, in the ability to sing, in physical appearance, in longevity, in family situation, be thankful to God that we have these gifts in our midst. Paul laid this procedure upon the Christians in Corinth who were seriously divided. They had several "fan clubs" going in that church. There were some who thought that Cephas was the man. Others thought Apollos was. Some thought Paul was. A holier-than-thou contingent announced that they belonged to the Christ party. The

apostle pleaded with them in these terms: "All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's." (I Cor. 3:21)

"Lord, what about him?" "Is that your business, Peter?" Then came the redeeming imperative, "Follow me." We are all aware of the Copernican revolution that took place in the 16th Century when a Polish astronomer discovered that the earth was not the center of everything with all the heavenly bodies rotating around us. Instead, the universe was found to be heliocentric -- with the sun at the center and all of us revolving around it.

It may be that the best cure for the covetous spirit and the anxious, jealous heart is a Copernican revolution of the soul. We must finally come to understand that the world does not revolve around our little axis, but that we were made to revolve around the purposes of God.

The ultimate question is not the state of our pleasures, wealth, or conveniences, but the quality of our obedience to Christ whose will is indeed our peace.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Camus, Albert, Carnets, quoted in "Experiential Religion" by Richard Niebuhr, p. 66, Harper & Row, New York, 1972.
2. Roberts, David, Psychotherapy and A Christian View of Man, p. 25, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1950.

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