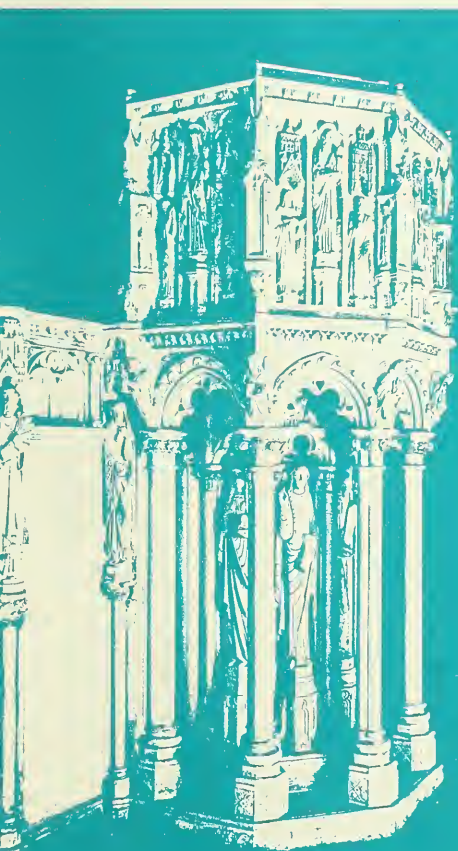


SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

NEVER BUY SHOES IN THE MORNING

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THE RIVERSIDE
CHURCH IN THE
CITY OF NEW YORK

FEBRUARY 25, 1973

NEVER BUY SHOES IN THE MORNING

My theme today sounds as though it would better serve a Consumer Affairs program than a sermon: Never buy shoes in the morning.

This piece of market place advice makes good sense. Our feet tend to swell in the course of a busy day. If one buys shoes in the morning he is likely to find them uncomfortably tight as the day wears on. See that your shoes are fitted at the point of maximum need.

It is not shoes however that we are concerned with today but religion. In particular, the religion of young people. It pains me that in the morning of life many of our finest young men and women are "buying" religions that will not meet the test of the middle or latter years! It belongs to youth to wander. It belongs to age to warn. I attempt now the assignment of sounding a warning that is long overdue.

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Let me begin with a fact of life: Rebellion against accepted values is the time honored way by which the young establish their identity. If they wish to become something other than lengthened shadows of their parents or the dominant institutions of society, they must break away and make tracks of their own.

This rebellion may be more pronounced in our time than ever before, but it surely is not new. Wise parents have always made allowance for and even welcomed signs of independence in their offspring. I heard the other day of a teenager who went out to buy a shirt. As the clerk was wrapping it up the lad asked, "Can I bring it back if my mother likes it?" Protesting mom's and dad's religion is the adolescent's way of saying, "Look, I'm a person in my own right!"

Let me continue with a concession: Young people

today are aware of more different life possibilities than was any previous generation. Thanks to radio and television, thanks to the advent of inexpensive paperbacks, thanks to increased access to post-high school education, thanks to accelerated global travel and its attendant cultural exchanges, the youth of today are confronted by a bewildering assortment of religious options. There are voices on every side of them now whispering, now shouting, "this is the way, walk ye in it."

Our young people cope with these multiple options by developing a sequence of short-term attachments to different world views. Today it's Zen, tomorrow it may be astrology or Ayn Rand's Objectivism.

Have you noticed how young people nowadays like to speak of being "into" something. This is a characteristic and significant term. It suggests the tentativeness of the search. I'm "into" Transactional Analysis. Or, Harry is "into" drugs. Or Sam is "into" Black Separatism. The other day I heard of a minister's daughter who turned to her mother and innocently asked, "Is daddy into God?"

The aim of young people as they attempt to cope with their multiple options is to scan the field before settling down. When one is in a strange community and turns on the radio, he doesn't stop at the first acceptable station. Rather, he sweeps the band to be sure that he is listening to the finest program available.

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We began with a fact of life: Rebellion against accepted values is the time honored way by which the young establish their identity. We continued with a concession: Young people today are faced with more different life possibilities than was true of any previous generation. I move on now to speak some rather direct thoughts to our young people and the

generation that they represent.

First, I should like to urge you to investigate life's options with your minds and not your morals. It is important in trying to understand the various options before you to "enter in" as fully as possible. To understand Zen Buddhism as a devout Buddhist does, one must sit where he sits and feel what he feels. The same is true for coming to terms with any life philosophy.

The attempt however can lead to danger when the investigation is done not only with the mind but also with one's morals. Think, for example, of the sexual freedom that is presently sweeping the western world. True, there has been an unseemly amount of hypocrisy surrounding sex in our society. The other day a judge out west made a significant confession to a friend of mine. This jurist's son is living with a girl to whom he is not legally married. They are living together on a fixed term contract. They have no license. As for the judge, he is trapped in a tired and listless marriage. Speaking of his son the judge said, "He's married except for a piece of paper, and I'm divorced except for a piece of paper."

Hypocrisy abounds, granted. But it just may be that total sexual freedom creates as many problems as it purports to solve. Young people would do well to ask themselves whether unbridled promiscuity is the best possible preparation for the kind of life they envision for themselves and their children.

Something of the same order might be said of drugs. It is true beyond dispute that the older generation has been hung up on alcohol. To an astounding degree we have learned to accommodate ourselves to this killer. Yet, one folly does not justify another. Young people who begin to experiment with high powered drugs cannot convincingly defend the practice on the grounds that they are correcting an earlier wrong.

No one ever started out to be an alcoholic. No one ever started out to be an addict. Always the start is made on the grounds of investigating a new sensation. Presently for many the chains are forged and enslavement sets in.

The same might be said of young people who get caught up in radical anti-establishment movements. In Donald Barr's book, Who Pushed Humpty Dumpty? the noted educator makes the point that young people who are interested in large causes develop what he calls "Macro-morality." They are big on the large issues. Often, however, they turn out to be quite indifferent to what he calls Micro-morality -- cheating on tests, stealing, being cruel to parents, lying, the destruction of property. It is possible for a young person to be so caught up in a wave of hatred for society as to actually go out in a fit of rage and kill a policeman or some innocent bystander. Consequently, for the rest of his life he must live with a murderer -- either in or out of prison. When we investigate with our morals instead of our minds we run the risk of becoming a permanent casualty.

I carry in my scrap book a picture from "The New York Times" of April 29, 1971, depicting a giant ship lying half on its side on a bed of rocks. The caption beneath the picture is terse and to the point: "All Hope Abandoned." The troubled vessel was the Brazilian freighter Taquari. It rammed the rocks a mile or so off the coast of Uruguay. Wondering whether the Taquari was ever salvaged, I called the Brazilian Steamship Company office in New York the other day and asked about it. The ship was never recovered. The force of the current in those waters was too strong to permit the divers to work. Saddest of all, the Taquari was on her maiden voyage when disaster struck. The maiden voyage turned out to be the last voyage.

* * *

My other word is this: Ask yourself before you

make a serious life commitment how well this faith is likely to travel. Too many young people buy their shoes in the morning. Thus, lacking perspective, they fall for the first thought system that they come upon.

If a man has never heard a symphony orchestra before, a high school orchestra playing a classical selection at a P.T.A. meeting could sweep him off his feet! To one who has never studied Political Science, rantings from a platform in Hyde Park or Union Square could sound like distilled wisdom. A friend once observed that Augustine probably became a Manichaeon in his early years because this was the first philosophy that he had ever stumbled on.

Before you "buy" ask questions. Is this life philosophy likely to be good for the long haul? Is it sufficiently comprehensive to deserve my full commitment? I think in this connection of the various liberation movements that are the rage just now -- Gay Liberation, Women's Liberation, Black Liberation, Poor People's Liberation and the like. May I share a judgement with you? Any form of liberation that is qualified by an adjective is not sufficient for a life commitment. Adjectival liberation falls short of being sufficiently comprehensive. These limited thrusts for freedom can well be footnotes to a total faith, but they are not sufficient to stand alone as rallying points for life.

What shall be said of the new fascination with the stars that so many are excited about? I sat with a minister the other day who always recommends to his troubled members that they get an astrological reading on their problems. He was proud of this procedure -- as though it represented an advance over conventional Christian care. But is this progress? Is it gain for any generation to trade the sovereignty of God for the tyranny of the stars?

We are experiencing an epidemic of drugs in our city and the nation. Can indulgence in drugs answer

the longings of the soul for meaning? Can it deal with our sense of guilt? Can it speak to our need for community? What can it do for us when we stand before the grim and unalterable fact of death? Does the drug culture represent the kind of life style that we could, in all good conscience, sit down and commend to our children?

Information leaking in from a variety of communes in America suggests that all does not necessarily go well when young people get away from their families and the rigors of a regular job. One book that I was "into" this past week suggests that communes face the same old human problems that have plagued man for ages: Guilt feelings about sex, petty gossip, envy, and a profound boredom with life.¹

In summary, I would say to our young people, shop in the morning but do not buy in the morning. And when you shop, do so with your mind and not your morals.

* * *

My final word is one of testimony and commendation. I speak to you as a convinced Christian -- not necessarily a faithful Christian, but a convinced Christian. I have found the gospel of Jesus Christ a faith for all times and seasons, for every need and circumstance. It is comprehensive. It is worthy of our children's trust. It grows upon us as we grow into it. It travels well -- to prisons, to hospitals, to cemeteries, to Civil Rights marches, to peace vigils, to migrant workers' strikes and boycotts.

I do not ask you to "buy" it uncritically or to remain in ignorance of alternative interpretations of reality. The market place of religious ideas is free, open and unregulated. It is yours to explore. Besides, the Christian gospel needs not to be protected from its rivals. It can hold its own.

I only make the plea that when Christ bids for

your heart and the claims of his suffering love register with force on your mind and spirit, you say, "yes" to Him. Then you will discover what we have discovered who have gone before you; that He is sufficient for all the life that we are called upon to live-in this world and the next.

CLOSING PRAYER


*Spirit of God - without whom none can
say that Jesus Christ is Lord,
work in us the gift of faith.*

*Grant to our young, especially, a due
sense of the incomparable worth
of Christ and a willingness to
follow Him all the way -- to death
and beyond.*

Amen.

FOOTNOTE:

Katz, Elia, Armed Love, Bantam Book, New York, 1972



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