

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

"ON BRINGING OTHERS WITH US"


"And other sheep I have, which are not
of this fold: them also I must bring..."
(John 10:16a)

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**THE RIVERSIDE
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(John 10:16a)

Most of us card-carrying members of the Preacher's Union are guilty of telling people how they ought to react to Jesus instead of so presenting Jesus that men and women will respond as they should. To tell people to be good is easy. To make goodness attractive and desirable is something else again.

I find grounds for loving Jesus more in the words of today's text. The verse comes from the well known tenth chapter of St. John's Gospel and forms part of Jesus' self-presentation as the Good Shepherd. We read in that chapter at the sixteenth verse these words: "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring."

Reaction to these words usually centers in an attempt to clear up just whom Jesus had in mind when he spoke of "other sheep not of this fold." But it is quite apparent that Jesus was talking here to Jewish disciples and announcing the fact that Gentiles were to be included in the kingdom that he had come to establish. "Other sheep ... them also" -- this is where most of us come in. Judaism under Jesus Christ was to be universalized. Old lines of exclusivity however valuable in the past were to give way to a new inclusiveness. Henceforth and forever, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Acts 2:21)

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But what of the neglected latter part of this verse, "... them also I must bring." What does this tell us about Jesus? Does it not testify to a willingness, yea, a passion, on his part to make His insights and perceptions real and believable to others? If a mystic is one who has attained attunement with God, then Jesus was a mystic. But most

mystics are loners. Their awareness of God so surpasses the dullness of their fellows that they move on alone to enjoy a higher plane of rapture.

Not so Jesus. His communion and identity with God were so constant and complete that he could say convincingly, "He that hath seen me has seen the Father." (John 10:9) Yet, he did not turn aside from ordinary folk who were too much preoccupied with fish and taxes and contested wills to think about eternal things.

"them also I must bring." -- Peter the overspoken, Philip the questioner, Thomas with his doubts, Judas with his good but weak intentions, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Roman centurion, that woman at the wellside in Samaria. When we call Jesus the man for others, part of what we mean is that rather than enjoy God alone He sought to bring the likes of us along.

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We Christians are to emulate our Lord in this. If He is the man for others, and we are His, then what is the church but the community for others. "them also we must bring." The temptation is always there to turn in upon ourselves, to enjoy God, and whatever insights we have about God, and hopefully each other. To form a self-perpetuating ghetto. To preserve and carefully guard the boundaries of the fold. But this is always fatal -- always fatal. "For a fold that is never opened will become a cemetery; as a mind that never adventures into the wide universe that environs us will speedily decay and die." 1

We live in a pluralistic society and hide behind this fact to justify a failure to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. We claim to be tolerant, but what if our tolerance is a front that hides our indifference? We say we wouldn't dare to impose our faith on others, this would be unseemly. But is it an imposition to bring a hungry man to bread; an ailing man to health; a losing man to victory; a tired man to rest; a doubting man to faith; a fearful man to peace; a floundering man to purpose? Where in the New Testament is it anything

but continuous with the will of God to bring men to Christ?

Karl Barth's last major work is entitled The Humanity of God. In that work Barth says: "On the basis of the eternal will of God we have to think of every human being, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable, as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father; and we have to deal with him on this assumption. If the other person knows that already, then we have to strengthen him in the knowledge. If he does not know it yet or no longer knows it, our business is to transmit this knowledge to him." 2

Wilfred Grenfell, the celebrated missionary to Labrador and Newfoundland, was back in England on a furlough. A dinner was tendered in his honor at which he found himself sitting directly across from a rather prominent socialite who was flustered by the prospect of making conversation with a man like this. Finally, to break the agonizing silence, she blurted out, "Dr. Grenfell, isn't it true that you are a missionary?" He looked at her kindly but firmly and replied, "Madam, isn't it true you are?" On the base of the Charles Wesley statue in the courtyard of the New Room in Bristol, England is a phrase which must have been the working credo of his life. 'Let me commend my saviour to you.' "them also we must bring."

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These words of Jesus speak to me at still another level. They ask me as a man and as a citizen how many I am bringing with me in my views on the raging public issues of the day. The fast spreading polarization of our society, being interpreted, means that we prefer to enjoy the company of those who believe as we do rather than to attempt to bring others with us. It's such an effort to convince and convert.

Granted, we need time in the congenial fold. We must have comradeship with those who see things our way. Jesus had the inner three and the twelve. Our convictions require social reinforcement. There is a courage that comes with numbers.

But at this stage in my own pilgrimage I am led to say that there is something terribly unrealistic about special interest groups that continue to meet only by themselves. Surrounding themselves with familiar slogans and mottos. Steaming up each others glasses with their predictably torrid rhetoric. Handing out strong position papers. And threatening violence if they do not get their way.

I have minister friends who left the pastorate within the last ten years because resistance to their views was more than they could take. Some of them have gone to staff the boards of our major denominations where they serve as interpreters and analysts for social action causes. In this rather homogenized environment they meet no resistance. They go from one meeting to another talking to people of like mind. They prepare missiles at safe postal distances for local churches up and down the land.

However valuable and necessary such service is, perhaps it is time for those who love the church to recognize the heroic character of the local parish. This is where the action is, where the missiles land and the hot ideas explode! It isn't enough in our society to have strong convictions. The pragmatic question is: "How many are we bringing with us?"

It is unrealistic to try it any other way because here and now in these United States there is no way, No Way, NO WAY that any special interest group, right or left, can get where it wants to go by itself! We may not like this, but this is a fact of life. Hilary NG'Weno, the Kenyan writer who formerly edited "The Daily Nation" of Nairobi commenting recently on the Panthers in these United States said, "Their strategy of confrontation, whether one calls it legitimate self-defense or not, flies in the face of the enormous preponderance of power - both in terms of arms and the will to use them - which the police and the National Guard have more than adequately proved they enjoy."

It is both realistic and Christian not to regard our ventures in separatism as a final step to anything. A first or middle step, yes, but not a final step. We must make an

attempt to share our vision of the truth with other people. This is how we clarify the vision for ourselves and rid that vision of its clay. To attempt to bring others with us will involve us in contact, exchange, modification, and, hopefully, movement.

Someone has wisely noted that the difference between a prejudice and a conviction is that one can speak to his convictions without losing his temper. And where better for this to happen than in the church? We hear every so often about churches that are "with it," churches that specialize in only one kind of people; jazz people, theater people, turned off young people. But without being personally critical about any of these experiments it seems to me that it is rather easy to pull together a homogenized congregation. But the minister who talks only with those of like mind and feels that he is getting somewhere deceives himself. Who is he bringing with him?

The church is a bridge where people from the left and right banks meet. At times that bridge may shake with the traffic, rhetoric and noise, but Browne Barr of Berkeley is surely speaking sense when he notes that "For us to organize ourselves into parishes or denominations on the basis of substantial agreement on every issue or doctrine would immeasurably impoverish us."

No seminary that I know has ever offered a course in "schismatics." No adult education program in any church I know has ever taught schismatics to the laymen. It is such an easy thing to break a church. One doesn't need professional help to learn how to do it. But what isn't so easy is staying in with those who do not see as we see in every particular with the hope that, under God, we might find His will together.

The other morning I bumped into a young man who serves a thriving church in a New York suburb. The fact that he seemed so happy bothered me, because it was early in the morning and I didn't feel that good. When I asked him how things were going his smile got even broader. "You know," he said "I just had a great week." "You did?" I re-

plied. "Yes," he said, "I brought three families back into the church, families that had become disaffected because of what my denomination had been saying on top, and because of what I had been saying and doing as their minister." I was reminded by this pastor's radiance that we shouldn't "write them off," we should "bring them in."

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"Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them I also must bring." This was Jesus' business. And it's our business too.

CLOSING PRAYER

O Thou who didst wait for us
overturing, moving, confronting
and challenging us -
Help us to wait and pray for
those whom we would win.

Give us a sense of mission
to all men, and a loyalty to truth.
And make us as quick to
listen as to speak.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Major, Manson, Wright, The Mission and Message of Jesus, p. 821, E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., N. Y. 1938.
2. Barth, Karl, The Humanity of God, p. 53, John Knox Press, 1969.
3. NG'Weno, Hilary, "New York Times," October 2, 1970.

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