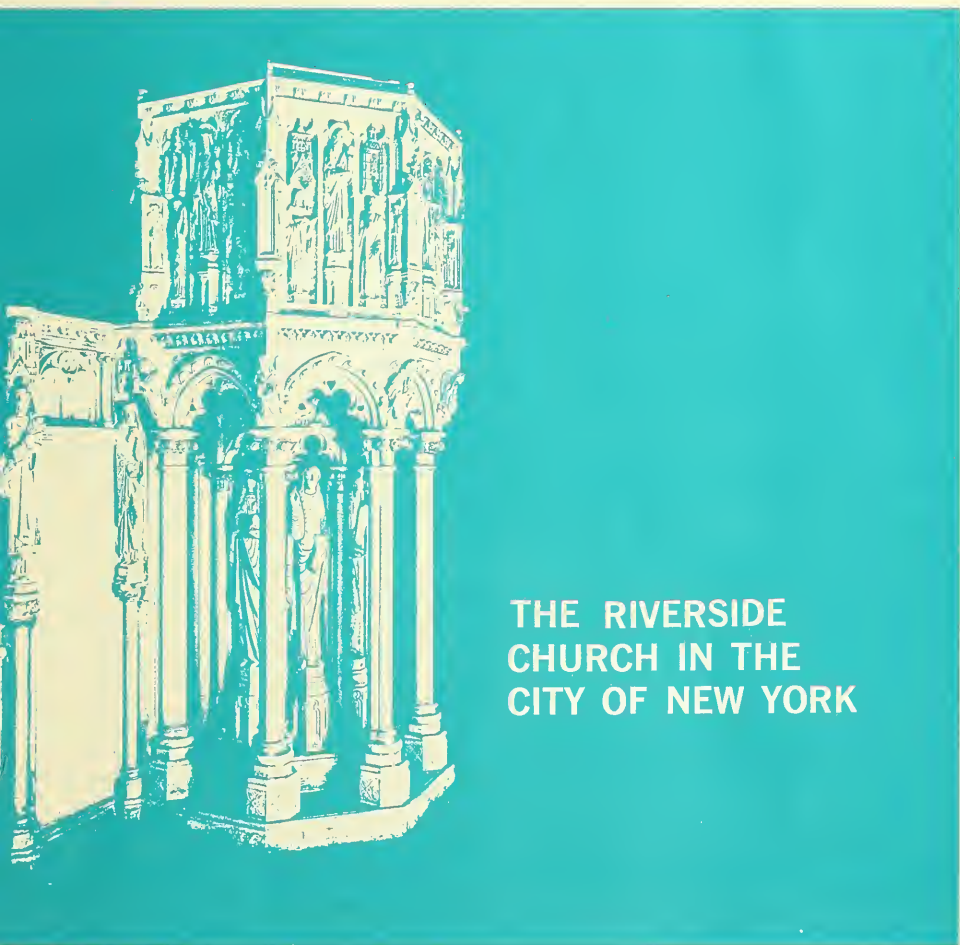


SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


ON TAKING OURSELVES TOO SERIOUSLY

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ON TAKING OURSELVES TOO SERIOUSLY

"For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think...." Romans 12:3

This is the first Sunday in American history to follow an ended war that we did not win. Is there a one of us who has not been affected by the events of the past six days? Anxiously we have witnessed troop evacuations, refugee airlifts, the closing down of the American embassy in Saigon, the fall of the Thieu government and wrenching interviews with Gold Star mothers and fathers.

It is as true for a nation as it is for individuals that what happens to us is not nearly so important as how we react to what happens to us. For how we react will reveal what we are made of deep down inside.

The happenings of recent days -- replete with recriminations, regrets and a daily ration of "I told you sos" -- have taken us to what psychologists call a "Teachable Moment." There are lessons to be learned have we the will to learn them. One such lesson is painfully clear: We must resolve to take ourselves less seriously!

* * *

When one writes a letter she usually starts out taking care to paragraph correctly. Each subject gets its own paragraph and the material is carefully arranged. But toward the end, order has a way of breaking down. Thoughts get bunched together. They come rapid-fire. It is futile to resist being miscellaneous in the closing lines of a letter.

How comforting to remember that St. Paul's letters follow a similar pattern. The main body in each shows logical development. The argument is soundly advanced.

Then, as if in a rush to make the next mail pick-up, Paul puts all sorts of odds and ends together and rams them into the later paragraphs.

The ending of his letter to the Christians at Rome is an outstanding case in point. As that letter closes it incorporates a scattering of exceedingly valuable counsel. Among the pieces to be found there is this gem: "For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him."

* * *

The Saint from Tarsus was a wise appraiser of human nature. He knew that we all have a way of becoming obsessed with a sense of self-importance. What's more, he knew that Jesus has a way of awakening and reinforcing a person's ego. Thus, he knew that in the church a special effort would be needed to keep members from taking themselves too seriously.

His favorite device in making this point is his reference to the similarities between the human body and the church. Paul was so fond of this illustration that he repeated it in three different places: Romans 12, Ephesians 4 and I Corinthians 12. He talks about the varieties of function to be found in the body. These differences are assigned and distributed by God. Thus, there is no room for someone to boast that he is an arm to the disparagement of another who fulfills the function of a foot. Our dissimilar capacities come to us, he said, according to the measure of our faith. There is nothing in our possession that is not the result of grace.

He goes on to develop the body image in a way that is not without its humorous implications. No member of the body can function as the whole. He points out that "The body does not consist of one member but of many." (I Cor. 12:14) Then, surely with

a smile, he adds: "If the whole body were an eye-where would be the hearing?" You'd see everything but you wouldn't hear anything! That's ludicrous, isn't it? "Or if the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?" (I Cor. 12:17)

Each member of the body has a partial role to fill and its own peculiar connection to reality. No single member can set itself up as normative for all the rest.

A person may be stepping forward today to buy a car. His eyes say yes, the color and the style are impressive. His nose says yes. There is something singular about that new car smell. His ears say yes. The engine hums and purrs with power. But the legs may say no. That front seat is just too jammed up. Same reality, same car, different perception -- eyes, nose, ears and legs. Paul is pleading for tolerance and understanding. The same phenomenon can be perceived in different ways.

Somebody sets a meal in front of you. The eyes say yes, and the nose says yes. But the stomach says, no, you'll be sorry. Same phenomenon, but different members value it differently. No member of the body can function as the whole.

This is why a local church has to beware of "methodological fundamentalism." Somebody says we ought to be all meditation groups. Somebody else says no, we ought to be all lectures and Bible study. Another says, no, we ought to be all concerts and major in the arts and aesthetics. Still another says, away with all of that; we ought to be totally occupied with social action ventures. Finally another says, no, we should quash everything else and go in for personality development workshops!

But the ear can't say to the eye I have no need of you. There is no isolated, solitary member of the body that deserves to dominate the whole.

Overshadowing all of this in Romans 12 is the figure of Jesus, even though he is scarcely named as such. Hegel said, "A great man condemns the world to the task of explaining him." When Christians talk of taking themselves less seriously they must always do so in reference to Jesus who did not presume upon his power with God to override others. He did not try to make his mission normative for all. He understood his work as subsumed beneath the larger will of God. He exercised his role in humility. His was a special kind of power. He did not crush others but sought to bring out their best. "By the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him."

* * *

We could use a similar restraint in our national self-understanding. Enough people in the land who were touched by the spirit of Jesus could make a difference. Modesty becomes us now as never before. Our misfortunes are not the end of the world, only the end of the world as we understood it. It is a construction of reality that has changed not reality itself. So we have suffered defeat! Can you not hear other nation states rising up to say, "Welcome to the club."

In the body of nations we are only a part. Our systems and institutions are not normative for all. Nor are they desirable by all, or workable for all. Other states do not necessarily see our will as their peace. It is far from certain that either democracy or capitalism is best for all the countries in the world.

We need some of our pretensions exploded. Maybe on this upcoming Fourth of July instead of exploding fire crackers we could explode some of our self-serving presumptions. The main burden of what I'm saying is that we have taken ourselves too seriously.

That was the trouble with those early Christians in Rome and it seems to be our problem too.

What is lacking is a sense of proportion. And that's where humor comes in. It is humor that helps us to see the absence of proportion and laugh at it. As a people we could profit from Paul's light-handed references to the body and its members.

My experience in dealing with human beings, and in being dealt with myself, tells me that it is always a serious warning signal when a person has no sense of humor. Individuals who cannot manage a smile as they weigh the absurdities of life are in trouble. It is perilous for a nation to be in that fix too.

The British do a better job of this than we do. I shall always remember my visit to Canberra, the capital of Australia. The British Parliamentary system is followed. Sitting in on each House in turn was like being part of the Late Show! The Cabinet Ministers all come in for a period of questioning as the first item of business in each chamber. If there is some hanky-panky going on in education, a member of the House rises and puts a question to the man in charge of education. And he either answers or promises to get the answer. (I have always thought that Water-gate would never have developed as it did had we had a questioning of our Cabinet officials on a daily basis.)

When a member of Parliament gets up to speak there are usually a few heckling remarks to be heard. I recall a man getting up and saying, "I wish we had more time to study this bill before we vote." A voice rang out, "If you'd stay around on weekends and do some reading you'd know what's in the bill." Another voice responded, "If your hold on your constituency was as weak as his, you'd go home every weekend too." Why not? Why do we take political talk so seriously? Why do we assume that our Congressmen have just been to Mt. Sinai or that they have the Holy Grail in their hands each time they go before the nation?

Shakespeare in his plays always made room for the court jester. When the king got too big for his crown and his robes became too heavy the jester would come out with lines designed to show that his majesty was something of an ass.

It is interesting to note that the Hebrews had no jester for their kings. But they did have prophets. I suspect that one of the functions of the prophet was to keep the king from taking himself too seriously.

We could do with less obeisance before scholarship and expertise. "Leading authorities" keep reducing the pathos of life to soluble problems, and we keep falling for it. We want our anguish analyzed and dispatched. We need some jesters in academia, especially with commencement season coming on -- Good Lord, deliver us!

Again, the British have done a better job on this than we have. Robert Browning received an honorary M.A. degree from Oxford in 1867. It is the British custom for undergraduates to shout derisively from the galleries when someone is thus honored. Browning was a serious student of life and he had worked through to his own philosophy of life. He took exception to the heckling. But it's good, you know, because nobody is all that worthy of the reverence that is customarily given to an academic degree, earned or honorary.

Part of our trouble is that we keep investing our endeavors, our wars, our social theories and our programs with the rhetoric and aura of a crusade. Why, an individual with a Ph.D. participating in a forum on economics is capable of rank foolishness! Theologians can use high sounding language to justify the most iniquitous evils! And a man on television seated behind the Presidential Seal and before the American flag can, on occasion, speak arrant nonsense!

There is just one body. It is futile to attempt to so differentiate ourselves from other people as to suggest that we don't understand what makes them do

what they do. There isn't all that much difference between us. But, of course, when you go to war you have to magnify whatever differences there are.

It isn't hard for us to imagine how we would react if Central Park were being occupied by the Greeks. So why do we resort to a lot of ideological double-talk trying to condemn the Vietnamese for wanting the French out of their country?

If there is such an enormous difference between Communism and what we are about, why was it that RCA could hardly wait for the moment of detente to get into China to sell and install an electronics system? The hypocrisy is cause for laughter. If RCA had said, "We are interested in the dollar and this looks good," we would understand. But to fight Communism in Vietnam while we make money on Communism in China is an absurdity!

A friend told me something the other day that may or may not be true. He is convinced that the reason why the French insisted on staying in Indo-China was because of enormous pressures exerted by a major tire manufacturer in France who wanted to be sure that his rubber supply would be insured! Let's not laugh. Wars have been fought over less.

Maybe we ought to take out an insurance policy on our cartoonists and humorists. It may be that they, along with the odd prophet here and there, will keep this country from forgetting that it is but one member in the family of nations, and that we are not all that different from the others.

This is not a plea for us to drop our responsibilities in the world. Dorothy Parker once wrote a poem that I read every so often:

"When I was young and bold and strong,
Oh, right was right, and wrong was wrong!
My plume on high, my flag unfurled,
I rode away to right the world.

'Come out, you dogs, and fight!" said I,
And wept there was but once to die.

* * *

But I am old; and good and bad
Are woven in a crazy plaid.
I sit and say, 'The world is so;
And he is wise who lets it go.
A battle lost, a battle won --
The difference is small, my son.'
Inertia rides and riddles me;
The which is called Philosophy."

I do not agree that we should enthrone inertia and withdraw. I am saying that we ought to take our initiatives less seriously. We ought to have more flex and laugh a little when our politicians come before us as saviours of the world.

I thank God that I haven't always gotten my way -- at home, in the church or in the ballot box. Only God is great. We have "middle wisdom" on lots of things, but the first word and the last word on all things belong to God.

Before we commune today we will share in a litany designed to liturgically celebrate the end of the war. Just as that war ends politically and militarily, it should end liturgically as well. I want us to participate with great earnestness in that litany.

"By the grace given to me," said Paul, "I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think..." That's good counsel for individuals, and for nation states. For to see ourselves in the perspective of the whole is to take a giant step toward maturity.

CLOSING PRAYER

In one of Peter De Vries' novels he has a character by the name of Tillie Seltzer offer this prayer to God. I suggest we pray it now.

"O God, give us courage for our fears,
the wisdom to survive our follies,
and charity to bind up the wounds
we inflict on one another." *

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

FOOTNOTE:

- * Peter De Vries, The Cat's Pajamas and Witch's Milk, p. 291, quoted by Calvin De Vries in THEOLOGY TODAY, Vol. XXXii, No. 1, April, 1975

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