


SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

 THE PONCE de LEON ANXIETY

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THE PONCE de LEON ANXIETY

Juan Ponce de Leon is credited with the discovery of Florida. Chances are he arrived in the off season, else the rates would have driven him back to sea! But this Spanish Conquistador holds a fond place in our imagination not because he discovered Florida, but because he set out in quest of the Fountain of Youth. The Carib Indians of the Lesser Antilles told of an island called Bimini where gold abounded and much fruit, and a spring whose waters had the power to make the aged young again. It is not without significance that Ponce was fifty-two years old when he set out to find his fountain.

Those of us who have known the heat of forty summers or more can readily identify with Ponce de Leon in his quest. We fight the calendar the way a losing football team fights the clock.

"Backward, turn backward
O time in your flight.
Make me a child again
Just for tonight." 1

In our society we have made a fetish out of youth. We are obsessed with the passion to stay young. To this end we tint gray hair black again; invoke the skills and ointments of the cosmetician; eagerly purchase books that purport to tell us how to beat the system; buy clothes expressly designed for those who wish to look young. We can even be found drinking a soft drink that panders to our obsession by claiming to be bottled "for those who think young." Employers these days are more interested in hiring the young than they are the aged or even the aging.

On balance, one would have to say that this desire to resist the ravages of time is good. There isn't any reason why a man should roll over and play dead. I am inclined to agree with Leopold Tyrmand's

observation that: "The struggle with passing time seems to me one of the most admirable features of humanness. An effort to overcome time and remain useful, beautiful, wise becomes a glory and a price."² Why shouldn't we answer back! A doff of the hat then to Bernard MacFadden America's patron saint of this pre-occupation. And a more respectful "Amen" to Moses of whom the Scriptures write: "And Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated." (Dt 34:7)

But there is a sense in which Ponce de Leon's quest can become a serious sickness. It can grow into a paralyzing anxiety. It can harden into a mind-set or outlook that disqualifies us from participation in life here and now. The Ponce de Leon urge plays havoc with the human spirit when it degenerates into a morbid feeling that something vital has slipped away; that something has been lost that needs finding; that the way ahead lies in the way back; that salvation is to be found in a return to what used to be. At bottom, the "Ponce de Leon Anxiety" is a refusal to accept the present!

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One detects this anxiety in the life of the nation at large. How easy it is to nurse the memory of earlier years, to think nostalgically of the pure democracy of the New England town meeting; to reminisce about those times when the enemy was easily defined - the British and the Indians, and just as easily defeated; to dream our way back to those years when this country was not beset with intrusive questions from far away places with strange sounding names. George Washington had settled that for us, perhaps one morning after a bad breakfast, when he stated that the new republic should not become involved in "entangling alliances." Those were the times when the air was clean, when the water was unpolluted, when there were no welfare rolls, no graduated income tax, no bureaucracy in Washington bearing down incessantly on the human spirit. It is

the yearning of some of us all of the time and all of us some of the time to return to this!

At the risk of seeming unsympathetic and unfeeling I feel impelled to suggest that this manifestation of the "Ponce de Leon Anxiety" is both unhealthy and unworthy of us as Christians. Unhealthy because it diverts us from the problems that God wishes us to meet right now here in this time and place. Ours is a different kind of world. If Cuba and Vietnam have taught us nothing else, they have taught us that it is no longer possible for any one nation, however powerful, to have its way and force its will on the rest of human kind. This is the point that Marshall Fishwick makes when he says, "As a nation we are no longer heel-clicking and young, but cautious and middle-aged. Must we act as if our "youth" is perpetual? After all, it has been over 400 years since those swashbuckling Elizabethans struck out for the brave new world; 358 years since the Jamestown colony was planted; almost two centuries since the shape of our nation emerged.

"Could it be," he goes on, "that America's trouble is not so much blind conformity as a refusal to abide by what we see in the mirror? The United States has grown up, reached maturity, and, like the ex-athlete of middle age, is bewildered and resentful. Impulsive adolescent acts are likely to produce nothing more than stalemate - or worse. We still have Paul Bunyan's strength, but hacking out a workable policy in the tangled jungle of world affairs is quite different from cutting down virgin timber in Wisconsin or Minnesota. With Babe the Blue Ox to pull him through, youthful Paul could afford to take risks. None of his enemies had thermonuclear weapons."³

The wilderness is gone. The frontiers have disappeared. We can't keep moving westward from our problems. There are no badlands to clear, but there are cities to be rebuilt. There are no railroad ties to lay, but there are ties of brotherhood to forge,

between man and man and race with race. The Town Meeting has given way, and rightly so, to representative government, and so-called local problems are solvable now only on the regional level. All of this we must take pains to learn.

Moreover, the anxiety is unworthy of us if we have any fellow-feeling at all. In pressing for the restoration of what used to be, we generally forget that there are millions in this country who had nothing in the past that would make them wish it back. When we think of going back we are met by a counter force that wants not to go back - but to go on. We can learn from the past, as we should, but we cannot return to it. We must accept our age and act our age. No other way makes sense.

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One also detects this Ponce de Leon Anxiety in the church. I readily confess that we ministers are largely responsible that this is so. We have a none too subtle way of trying to badger our congregations into finer performance by making unflattering comparisons with the early church. How powerful and loving those early Christians were! Why to hear some of us of the cloth tell it, all who belonged to those infant congregations in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi and Rome were capable of prayer, committed to the total sharing of their resources, and able to live a life of unqualified love in the midst of a pagan world.

Our Roman Catholic friends have a way of yearning to return to the medieval church. Back yonder in the 12th and 13th centuries the church knew its greatest hour. There a remarkable synthesis of faith and reason had been achieved and the church was the organizing center of life in the western world. If this will not do, Protestants have a way of torturing themselves with references to the Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries. That era centering in names like Zwingli, Calvin and Luther, was the golden era. Never before or since did God speak so clearly or man seem so ready

to hear. The implication is clear. Something vital has slipped away. The church is going downhill. A nagging sense of guilt wells up to rob us of our strength for the work at hand.

Most serious of all, however, is the uncritical way in which we tend to exalt the American Protestant Church of a hundred years ago - The church of the Currier and Ives prints. You know the church I mean, "The church in the valley by the wildwood." The church that flung clean lines against a rural sky. The church that knew the gentle touch of the revivalist's hand each spring. The church whose peace was never disturbed either by the inner city or outer space. How we yearn to get back to that!

To all of this, just two comments. First, and rather obviously, those times were not quite all that we have made them out to be. Let's remember that there was an unseemly power struggle even among the twelve disciples. Those men demonstrated a capacity for division, desertion and denial. And if we zero in on any of those early congregations we are not likely to be pleased by everything we see. Corinth, for example, was known for its incest, its fornication, its factions and its heresy.

And that church of the Currier and Ives image that we become so sentimental about, must confess the shameful fact that even though it lived in a century of titanic social evils, it scarcely raised its voice. It slept through the decades of what Teddy Roosevelt called "predatory wealth," and meekly acquiesced.

Second, we should remember when we compare ourselves unfavorably with those Christians of the first century that our situation vis-a-vis the United States is so different from what theirs was vis-a-vis Rome that the similarity is hardly recognizable.

It must have been easier, in many ways, to have been part of a minority in the Roman Empire than it

is for us today to be part of a majority tradition that numbers one hundred and twenty-three million people in these United States. Many Protestants these days are disturbed because the church is trying to develop and sustain a sense of public reference. But, my friends, in the name of Jesus Christ we cannot turn in upon ourselves any longer, not with the numbers we claim in this country. Something of what we feel about race and poverty and war must be made known. We do not have the right to prevail, but we are under obligation to speak and act. No church today in my judgment has the right to give itself exclusively to intra-mural matters and be satisfied with developing a neat array of programs that will cover an individual from the womb to the tomb. It is ours to be responsible stewards, not only of the gospel that we cherish, but also of the power that we command.

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Finally, the Ponce de Leon Anxiety frequently intrudes itself on a man's personal experience of God.

"Where is the blessedness
I knew when first I
Saw the Lord?"

Where is the soul-refreshing
view of Jesus and His Word?"

I understood the harried business executive who confided in me on a plane one day "I wish I could go back to that little church in the country where I received communion for the first time." I don't know what your "first love" for Christ was like. I don't know where the attachment was joined. Perhaps you found him the all-prevailing truth as you sat with a church school teacher in some modest congregation miles from here. Perhaps your mind goes back to a summer conference where, away from the normal round of life - perhaps in a lake setting or in the woods, you heard the voice that made you say "I will." Perhaps it was at the graveside

of one that you had loved with all your heart. Perhaps it was in a Confirmation Class. We have a way of going back to the moment of faith's onset and feeling guilty that the ardor did not last.

I have no right to tell you that you cannot fall away. If there can be growth in Christian experience there can also be regression. But I wonder if we do not unfairly vex ourselves by entertaining expectations that belong more to the beginning than to the middle or the end of our Christian life. After all, a man can meet Jesus Christ for the first time only once! A missionary can go to his chosen field of service for the first time only once! You can be introduced to the mind of an Emmanuel Kant or a Blaise Pascal or a St. Augustine only once! To expect all subsequent encounters to produce the excitement and wonderment of the first is to expect too much. We need to develop expectations appropriate to maturity. Devotion to Christ should become the settled habit of the soul. Commitment as time goes on becomes more systematic and less eruptive. The early yardage that we make as Christians is rather easy to come by. But, as in football, the yardage gets more difficult inside the ten as we near the goal. Some who have walked with Jesus Christ for a long time and have known his joy in their hearts are wrestling now with the question of Christ and racism, or the question of Christ and affluence, or the question of Christ and arms control. Such struggling belongs to the middle and latter stages of the way and should not be lamented. Earlier experiences cannot be re-created, but the God of those earlier experiences can fill our present even as He did our past.

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Back in the last century a German scholar by the name of Max Mueller gave the world the term "Henotheism." Henotheism, simply put, is the belief that God is limited in sovereignty and presence to a particular place. In primitive times many tribes believed that when they

moved to a different territory, they left the jurisdiction of God.

I should like to coin a term that I think describes our hang-up. If you will, it would be the term "Chronotheism," the conviction that God is tied to a particular time already passed. Chronotheism is not Christian for it implies that the Holy Spirit who spoke at Pentecost has been mute ever since. Consider the point of the Scripture that was read for us this morning. Under the pressures of life in the wilderness the Israelites who had once been captives in Egypt yearned for a return to the land of their oppression. God had been more real to them in the past, they thought, than he was in the rigors of their present. But Moses would have none of it. He said to his people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord work for you today."
(Exodus 14:13a)

This then is my opening word to us as a congregation here at Riverside as we face into a new church year together. Let us beware the "Ponce de Leon Anxiety," that resents and resists the present and insists on going back.

"Our times are in his hand
Who saith, A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God:
See all, nor be afraid!"4

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord we have thanked Thee for other times and places

Help us now to thank Thee for this time and place.

Forgive our excessive nostalgia for days beyond recall, the time we squander leafing through back issues of the human story, the dullness that blinds us to furrows Thou art ploughing in the field of history now.

Sound Thy call again and give us ears to hear
Through Jesus Christ the same yesterday, forever
and today. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Allen Elizabeth Akers, "Rock Me To Sleep"
2. Tyrmand, Leopold, "Reflections," The New Yorker, p. 56, August 16, 1969
3. Fishwick, Marshall, W., "A Kind Word For Conformity," Saturday Review, p. 23, December 11, 1965
4. Browning, Robert, "Rabbi Ben Ezra" p. 383
The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning, Houghton and Mifflin, N.Y. 1895

