

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

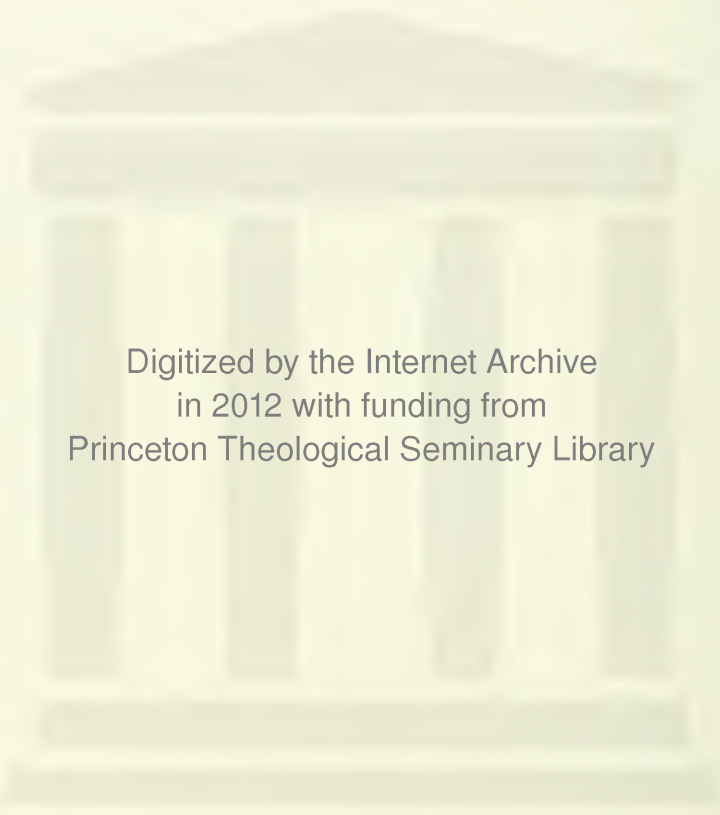
"THE SEE-SAW VIEW OF LIFE"

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"THE SEE-SAW VIEW OF LIFE"

A. C. Sectorsky in his book of a few years back, The Exurbanites, offers this commentary on American manners: "On the New York Central's commuting train down the Harlem Valley there are still seats aplenty at Chappaqua, and the courtly, old-world grace with which women are permitted to climb on board first would delight the most captious. By the time the train arrives at Pleasantville, however, seats are scarcer and only the most attractive or the most decrepit women are given any priority. Come White Plains and women are thrust aside; every man for himself."

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It's easy to be generous when there's enough to go around. But when supplies are limited this is quite a different matter. When there are three cars and only two parking places; five men wanting work and only four job openings; ten nations needing oil and only enough for nine. What then? It is in the crucible of scarcity that what we are and what we believe are most clearly revealed.

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The specter of scarcity is beginning to impose its eerie presence on the American way of life. Ever since Pilgrim days we have lived with the notion that our frontiers and resources were perpetually expandable. Settlers who couldn't make it in the east pushed on across the Alleghenies. Those who could not find land to their liking in Kansas could rig up their wagons and roll on to Oklahoma. Those whose prospects for the good life were stymied in Ohio could cross the Rockies to pan for gold or dig for silver.

The prodigality of nature was consistently assumed. If a man needed a house he chopped down enough trees to build one. When he was hungry he shot a buffalo or deer. If he dug for copper and exhausted a particular mine he would simply snap a lock on the front gate, pack up his gear, and go digging somewhere else. We were still at Chappaqua. There was plenty of room for all!

As industrialization set in, however, we began to feel the pinch of want, just a bit. Not having everything we needed we used our wealth to trade for vital resources. Every year this country imports more than fifteen billion dollars worth of goods - agricultural products, metals, and non-metallic minerals such as petroleum. The notion persisted that whether home-grown or imported we could get what we had to have. There was no reason other than mental stagnation or plain laziness why the Gross National Product could not go up, and up, and up each year! We were at Pleasantville now. Seats were not quite as plentiful as before, but if a man kept his wits and worked hard everything would be alright.

Now suddenly we are at White Plains! At the "every man for himself" stage. The frontiers are gone, geographically speaking. Much of nature that we ravaged enroute to our prosperity has been rendered permanently sterile. Old sources of vital foods and minerals are drying up. Countries that were once willing to trade away precious commodities to us are beginning to have second thoughts. Enormous pressures are being exerted on the United States by members of the third world - Africans, Asians, South Americans, and impoverished blacks, whites, browns, reds and yellows, of our own country. More and more people are wondering why those of us in North America who comprise but 20% of the world's population should consume 80% of the world's wealth.

My friends, what is new in our situation is a growing awareness that we live in a finite universe. God is infinite, but the world is not. This has always been theoretically true, but now it is actually and existentially true. We live on a see-saw. If one is up too high, another must be down too low. Whether I intend it or not, my indulgence in luxury may deprive a brother of some necessity. Asking for seconds at the table is harmless enough. Unless, of course, you know of a neighbor who hasn't eaten for three days. And especially if that neighbor's toil has helped to set your table!

This is what Adlai Stevenson was trying to lay on our hearts when he said: "We travel together, passengers in a little space ship all committed for our safety to its security

and peace. We cannot maintain it half fortunate, half miserable, half confident, half despairing, half slave - to the ancient enemies of man - half free in a liberation of resources undreamed of until this day. No craft, no crew can travel safely with such vast contradictions. On their resolution depends the survival of us all."

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What response can we make? What response should we make to all of this? Let me suggest some general and specific answers to that question. First, in a general way, we must insist that the issues involved are moral as well as economic. The balance of trade is in the picture. Import tariffs and quotas are in the picture. The law of supply and demand is in the picture. Hard money - soft money is in the picture. Inflation and deflation are in the picture. But these are not the only factors in the situation. The World Bank is important in all of this, but so is the world's conscience. We must not sit back to enjoy our privileges on the assumption that inexorable economic law will have its way.

This is why Pope Paul VI in his encyclical Populorum Progressio, "On the Development of Peoples" was moved to say: "No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need, when others lack necessities." 2

Moreover, we must ease up on our habit of blaming the poor for their poverty and crediting the affluent for their wealth. You know how it goes. "He's where he is because he's lazy and shiftless." "Modesty aside, I'm where I am because I'm good, and wise, and a hard worker." A professional football coach told it like it is the other day when he noted that the margin between a winning and losing team is very slight. The bounce of a ball. The fracture of a bone. A referee's decision.

In our better moments we know that the thinnest possible line separates the destitute and the affluent, and that this line was not of our making in the first place.

Moreover, still speaking generally, we must recog-

nize if we take our Scriptures seriously, we who stand in the Hebrew-Christian tradition, that God's sympathies are unailing and unalterably with the poor! Touch down where you will. Boaz telling his young farmworkers not to pick the grain too clean, Ruth needed some. Or the prophets telling the people in several generations to make provision for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Amos coming down hard on the wealthy for the way in which they had taken or extorted unfair pledges from the poor. And the Apostle Paul in the passage read this morning. "Let the thief no longer steal," (and all the law and order people said Amen), "but rather let him labor," (and those opposed to welfare said Amen), "doing honest work with his hands." But notice the purpose of our wealth, "so that he may be able to give to those in need." (Eph 4:28) That's what money is all about. And supremely, we have that awesome "inasmuch" of Jesus: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Mt. 25:40)

But to be more specific, these suggestions. There are some assumptions or axioms that we Americans have been living on that must be reconsidered. J. Irwin Miller, at one time the layman president of the National Council of Churches, once remarked that "History is full of tragedies of persons who didn't understand the world in which they lived, and who conducted their affairs as if in a world that had in fact been long dead." 3

I would suggest that we must re-open as citizens of this country such assumptions as; the unchecked expansion of national economies; the right of everybody to have as large a family as he wishes; the absolute value of human life over all other life.

But coming closer to home, there is something we can do as members of a given congregation. We can seek so to reorder our investments that the social betterment of men, rather than the highest monetary return may govern what we do. Most churches that I have known, including this one, have been too much oriented to Wall Street and too little oriented to the Jerusalem-Jericho road. We have been more concerned about the Dow Jones Average than the Good

Samaritan norm!

But even closer to home as individual members of this body. I believe that given the crisis of mounting scarcity it is incumbent upon us that we consider a simpler style of life. If some of our hippies have prodded us in this direction, thank God for their witness.

I heard the other day over the radio word that corporations are having a hard time getting executives to come to New York. It seems that New York City cannot provide them with the "amenities to which they have grown accustomed." This leads one to wonder what businessmen in France had the coziest amenities before the revolution.

It's so hard to come down once you have been up there. I interceded once for a man who was store manager for a nationwide chain. His salary was around the forty thousand a year mark. He had been weighed in the balances by top management and found wanting and was summarily fired. When I got to the president of the company I asked if my parishioner might be given another store to manage. The answer was "No, he doesn't have it." Could he not then be made a departmental manager in some other store? The answer was, "No. We've learned that psychologically this never works. Once you have been a manager you can't come down."

Is there no power in the Gospel? Is there no compulsion in the mercy of God? Is there no illumination in the model of Jesus Himself that could make us willing to come down if per chance it would help others to come up? Besides, does it not belong to the wisdom of the Gospel to give what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose?

I know of one denomination that has asked its members to consider this covenant: "In view of our common responsibility in Christ to share with all men the life and resources God has given us on the earth. I declare my intention to join in the following covenant with others.

1. I will encourage business and appropriate levels

of government to support opportunities for all people to participate in economic development.

2. I will involve myself in both study and action related to development of social justice and human dignity so that materially, socially, politically, and spiritually, we all may be free to be the responsible human beings God intended us to be.
3. I will contribute at least two per cent of my income annually for self-development of people in the world, including the United States of America. These contributions are to be a sign of my commitment and they are in addition to my normal gifts to church and community projects.
4. I will participate in confronting others personally with the idea of sharing in the self-development of people through a gift of two per cent over and beyond present giving."

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The see-saw is in effect. We may not be comfortable with this, but this is a fact of life. When someone is up too high, someone else is down too low. But with love, the love of God for us - His love in us, there is no see-saw model. The beauty of God's love is that the more it is lavished, the more it grows. The more we act on it the more we have. It is to this love that I ultimately appeal. I believe our country can do it. I believe this church can do it. I believe that severally and individually as members of this congregation we can do it. And I believe we should.

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I'm self-conscious enough to know that this isn't the kind of sermon that you came here expecting on this Thanksgiving Sunday. I confess that I could not raise my soul to prepare a message that would legitimize our gluttony, our greed, our affluence, and sanctify our advantages. I assure

you I have been talking as soberly to my own heart as I have sought to talk to yours.

Ministers who go to college campuses these days feel the resistance to the church, and deep resentments toward the church that many young people harbor today. I wasn't helped on a recent trip to Indiana when the gentleman who lead in the opening worship began with these words:

I was hungry
and you formed a humanities club
and discussed my hunger.
Thank you.

I was imprisoned
and you crept off quietly
to your chapel in the cellar
and prayed for my release.

I was naked
and in your mind
you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick
and you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was homeless
and you left me alone
to pray.

You seem so holy,
so close to God
But I'm still hungry
and lonely
and cold.

So where have your prayers gone?
What have they done?
What does it profit a man
to page through his book of prayers
when the rest of the world
is crying for his help?

God speed the day when that indictment of the church will be no longer true!

FOOTNOTES:

1. Sectorsky, A. C., The Exurbanites, p. 119
Lippincott, Pa., 1955
2. From the Papal Encyclical, Populorum Progressio,
"On the Development of Peoples," p. 18, by
Pope Paul VI, United States Catholic Conference,
March 26, 1967
3. Miller, J. Irwin, The Revolutionary Role of Business,
Saturday Review, p. 68, January 13, 1968

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