

September 8, 1974
Romans 1:1-12
Norman S. Ream

FIRMLY BOUND, FOREVER FREE

In spite of the fact, that I have now been preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ for over thirty years, I still get a thrill out of this particular Sunday in the church year. New beginnings are always exciting. Who knows what lies ahead, what great accomplishments may yet be made, what unexpected achievements may be ours? It is like waking in the morning and facing a brand new day. It is like an explorer discovering a new land. All that lies ahead is unexplored territory.

After thirty years of ministry I would have to conclude that this is probably my favorite Sunday for two reasons. It presents the church with great new opportunities, and on this Sunday we confront those opportunities refreshed by the summer's rest and recuperation.

Contemplating the relatively long ministry which lies behind me, I recall one of my seminary professor's remarking that in spite of the fact that he had been listening to chapel speakers for twenty years, he was still a Christian. I hope a large number of you who have been listening to me during one half of my ministry are still able to be Christian in spite of it, and perhaps a few of you because of it. I also hope that all of you share with me the same sense of hope and expectancy for the year that lies ahead. The tasks which confront our society are formidable indeed. Certainly no one could deny that. We are called upon to give of our very best. But God himself is with us. Jesus Christ is our example. Knowing that and believing that, our strength will not be unequal to our task.

II

Confronted by any journey or by any worthwhile challenge it is good to understand where it is that we wish to go and from whence we begin. In my reading this summer I came across a little poem by Walker Gibson, appropriately titled "Before Starting", and it goes like this:

A burro once, sent by express,
His shipping ticket on his bridle,
Ate up his name and his address,
And in some warehouse, standing idle,
He waited till he liked to died.
The moral hardly needs the showing:
Don't keep things locked up deep inside--
Say who you are and where you're going.

Let us begin by describing who we are. First of all, we are God's people, not just in the sense that we are his creation as are all people everywhere, but in the sense that we have chosen Him to be our God and declared ourselves to be His. We have what the Old Testament calls a "covenant relation" to God. We have said to the world,

"We are Christians. We are followers of Jesus Christ. We seek to serve God as Christ did. God's will as we see it in Jesus Christ is for us supreme."

By taking the name of Christian that is what we have said to the world, whether we meant it or not.

That means that we are a people of prayer. There is no way of knowing and understanding God's will for our lives except through prayer. Prayer is at once the source of our understanding and the ground of our strength, for knowing the will of God is not enough. Doing the will of God is our hope for the future and doing God's will in our world requires tremendous strength of character available only through prayer.

Now any one of us as an individual can be what I have suggested we as corporate members of the church should be. As individuals we can proclaim ourselves to be a son or a daughter of God. As individuals we can pray--as a matter of fact all prayer is a personal relationship with God. But there is something more required. We feel and understand that there is something we need beyond ourselves. We need fellowship. We need a sense of belonging. That is why we band ourselves together as a church. In union there is strength. Within the fellowship of the church we draw upon the strength of others when our own is strained and weak.

Earlier this summer at the National Association annual meeting in Tacoma the morning devotions included the singing of the hymn we shared together a few moments ago, written by Samuel Longfellow, youngest brother of Henry Wadsworth. As I sang the last verse of that hymn it occurred to me that it had a particular relevancy to those Christians who believe that the church is indeed "two or three gathered together" in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ:

"Holy spirit, Right divine,
King within my conscience reign;
Be my law, and I shall be
Firmly bound, forever free."

Freedom, as millions in the past have discovered, is something that must be paid for and sometimes at a terrible price. We are members of a free church, not bound by any ecclesiastical hierarchy. As the early Pilgrim Fathers put it, "A church without a bishop in a land without a king." But a price must be paid for that freedom. The price is a greatly increased sense of responsibility. If we are going to be "forever free" we must be "firmly bound"--bound to search for and to do the will of God.

I am of course acquainted with all that has ever been said about the weaknesses and the sins of the church. I lament the fact that most of what has been said is too terribly true. But then I contemplate what the church could be and what God wills it to become and I rejoice, for I am convinced that within the fellowship of the church is the very place where men and women everywhere can discover the Kingdom of God.

Malcolm Muggeridge, that English journalist with so much insight into human nature, tells us what our basic problem is. During World War II he served with British Intelligence. At one time he became so depressed and disillusioned with life and with the human race in general that he attempted suicide. Sometime later he walked into a church and his revelation there is one we all need:

"I found myself. . . staring, as I so often have, at the altar, as though I hoped that enlightenment would come visibly out of it to me; maybe as a voice, or a dove descending from heaven. This as I well know can never be. The process is the other way round; a purified heart has to be offered to the altar, rather than the altar dispensing purification." *

The church is our opportunity, not an idol that will save us. The church is a means of grace, not the dispenser of grace. And right here lies our opportunity for the church year that is ahead of us. You and I working together can make this fellowship, this church, a wonderful, glorious experience for all who are a part of it if we are "firmly bound" to the will of God and to one another.

I am occasionally disturbed by those laymen who speak to me about this congregation in terms of "your church". Even members of the fellowship sometimes refer to this as my church. It is not mine, it is ours. It is even more yours than mine, for in a sense I am but a hireling. When you say the word, I must go, but you are here as long as you want to be here.

I am certain that you want this fellowship to be precisely what I want it to be. When you are in trouble you want to know that here there is someone who cares; when you are lonely, in this fellowship there is someone who understands; when you are in sorrow and pain there is someone here who will share your grief. You want to feel that in this fellowship you and your family can learn and grow in the Christian faith. You have every right to expect all of this, but you also have a sacred responsibility to see that others get it also and to do all within your power to help those others get it. It's so easy to feel that all these other people are the church and I am the one they are here to serve.

* The Infernal Grove, p. 245

III

Go back to those words of Malcolm Muggeridge. Within them is the key to a great church:

"A purified heart has to be offered to the altar, rather than the altar dispensing purification."

The glory and the joy of it all is that when you offer such a purified heart in the service of God and man a richer, stronger faith is the consequence. That's the nature of God's grace.

An item in a Canadian newspaper once reported, "Sam Higgins was accidentally shot yesterday while hunting. One of the wounds is pronounced to be fatal, the others are not serious."

The wounds and weaknesses of the church through the ages have been many but they have not yet proved to be fatal. In this church we have been gloriously blessed with peace and harmony and our wounds have been negligible, but we have not craved safety above service and God grant we never shall. Let us in the spirit of Jesus Christ and by the grace of God seek ever to move reverently forward, "Firmly bound, forever free."