

## "A MATTER OF INTRODUCTION"

INTRODUCTION Not everything that matters happens in Washington or at No. 10 Downing Street or in the Kremlin or over at the United Nations. Not everything that matters makes the Ten O'Clock News or the cover of Time magazine. Scale is not a reliable test of significance.

We need to be reminded ~~occasionally~~ that much that's important in our world happens in a casual way down at the person to person level. What I have in mind are those tiny currents of influence that connect us to each other. These currents have as much to do with shaping people and events in our society as the formal public relations schemes of Madison Avenue.

One way we influence each other is through practicing the art of introducing. In at least three different ways this art can be a form of ministry.

SUBJECTS AND IDEAS First of all, think about all of those opportunities that you and I have to introduce others to subjects and ideas and interests that mean so much to us.

Teachers - to be sure - have a tremendous responsibility at this point. It's true, isn't it, that any subject can be made or broken for us - perhaps for life - by how it's initially presented. Good feelings and enthusiasm, as well as competence in a given field, are needed. Who knows? - perhaps this is part of the reason some adults don't enjoy Shakespeare....because of some butcher way back there in high school who introduced them to the Bard of Stratford.

This is something that moves out beyond the teacher in the class room. As I was preparing my notes for this sermon I thought of this in terms of my own life and of some interests and ideas that have been introduced to me by others.

Right away I thought of my next door neighbor in Maine in the Summer time. I said to him three weeks ago this afternoon as we prepared to drive off the 10th tee over water....~~blue sky, green grass~~..."It's a good thing, Bill, that you didn't introduce me to golf twenty years ago...it sure could have upset my Sunday ministry back in the City". How grateful I am to him for that introduction to golf in recent Summers and for his patient tutelage. But it's a tough game for ministers...we don't have the weekends, and we don't have the ~~vocabulary~~. *right words - the vocabulary, i.e.*

Then, too, I doubt whether I would have taken time last Spring to read Tom Wicker's book on the Attica uprising "A Time To Die"...if I hadn't heard Bill Bradley of the Knicks speak on the need for prison reform one February night back in 1969. I doubt whether I would have gone to Carnegie Hall last December to hear the Oratorio Society present Handel's "Messiah" under Lyndon Woods's fine direction....if Dorothy Mellick, the organist in the church where I grew up, hadn't bothered to introduce a number of unruly high school boys to Handel's Messiah.

It was a young instructor by the name of Tom Reynolds who handled the weekly discussion groups for the freshman course in Contemporary Civilization at Middlebury College who introduced many of us to the NY Times. I recall there was a student rate for the Times in college, and when we entered his classroom there was usually a big stack of papers on the desk. He'd nod for us to take one. It was always a mystery to me how they managed to get the NY Times up to that little Vermont town by eight in the morning, but it was there.

There was something about the way that Tom Reynolds would hold that paper (the way some people hold the Wall Street Journal). There was a shine on his face, or a certain look in his eye as he would direct us to an article or a quotation from a column. He brought in one of the tabloids one day and laid it beside the Times and made some telling comparisons that sold us forever. It wasn't simply the fact that another newspaper, new to us, was passed out. His own inherent commitment and excitement switched us over. Because of that introduction, I was later brought to the writing of James Reston. And how many times have preachers in recent years quoted "the word" according to St. James!

A casual remark did it. It was dropped by a Professor of Old Testament on a balmy Spring day at the University of Edinburgh as seven or eight of us were trying to go through the Book of Job together. Toward the end of that long hour, the professor drifted to Gray's "Elegy", and he remarked to us that those lines in his judgement comprised the finest poem ever put on paper. I went back and read that poem in a new way and weeks later I had some peculiar vibrations when I visited that little churchyard in Stokes Poges outside of London where Thomas Gray is buried.

Think of those opportunities we have to introduce others to subjects, ideas and interests that mean so much to us. They have enriched our lives in many ways. Influence is a resource and we must be good stewards of its use!

#### FRIENDS

But come along for there's more to the sermon. Second, think of the opportunities we have to introduce our friends to others.

It's so easy to be selfish and possessive with our friends. Over the years, some of you have accused me of being a bit of a "match-maker". There is that instinct in all of us. I used to do quite a bit of this in my early years here. It didn't always work, but I can recall a number of weddings here that happened as a result of some introductions I had a part in. The only trouble was that the couples would move out shortly thereafter, and so I began to wise up and slow down on this pastoral oversight. I was trying to attract members, not lose them!

But this instinct deserves a wider field of application. I need not tell you that for all of its crowdedness, this city can be a desperately lonely place. Many there are who live on the outer edge of great frustration - they're tight and turned in upon themselves. Many of these lonely people are but one friendship away from a happy and satisfying life. If only some of us who have an abundance of friends would only share one or two for the benefit of those who have no friends at all. If some who are living in these miserable, lonely flats could only know that a friend would call every day, that coffee would be shared, that a trip downtown would be arranged.....what a difference it would make. Breaking in and breaking through is so difficult.

There are a couple of "second-stringers" described in the Book of Acts for whom I've always had admiration. Ananias and Barnabas. They practiced this art of introducing to a remarkable degree. You'll remember that when Paul of Tarsus was unhorsed on the Damascus Road, he was full of fury and threatenings to the church. But God took him on because he wanted him for a mission in the world.

How was the early church to know that this man's life had been really changed? Saul had some "entry" problems. The one who did it, who made the primary introduction was a man called Ananias. He went over to this man who was still dazzled by what had befallen him and said to him,

"Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road sent me that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit".

But the earliest believers were still unconvinced and needed some additional assurance. And so we read a little later on in the same account that "When he (Saul) had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples (the church, that is) and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe he was a disciple". At this point, Barnabas (Barnaby for short) took him and brought him to the disciples. Introducing him around, he said, "Brother and sisters....I'd like you to meet the late Saul of Tarsus....the new Paul that Christ has claimed for Himself". Barnaby was practicing the art of introduction. Neither Ananias nor Barnabas was what we would call a ten-talent person, yet each made a solid contribution to a cause at a crucial moment.

Putting people in touch with each other is a gift that keeps on giving when the introduction has long since passed. This is something that a fellowship like ours can do and do well. As people come to this city from all over this land and from distant corners of the world and find their way in here, I'm reminded of that sign I saw on the wall in that coffee and doughnut shop in New Hampshire back in August, "There are no strangers here. Only friends who have not met!"

A SOUL TO GOD      ~~Ideas and subjects.~~ ~~Friends.~~ Third, think of the opportunities we have to introduce another soul to God and to the concerns of our faith.

Introducing another soul to God. Well might we tremble with awe at the prospect. It is fitting on a day when we have baptized a beautiful child to think about this responsibility as it rests upon a family. But this is where it begins....in moments such as this....and it goes on and on...the nurture and development.

Several years ago at the door of the Church following a similar service where the Sacrament of Baptism had been celebrated, Arnold Simuchimba, from the "third-world" country of Zambia put his hand on my arm and said the most beautiful thing,

"Thank you. Thank you so very much for introducing Mukandala and Miriam to our dear friend, Jesus".

I think of that word whenever I baptize a child. I think of it, too, as we see children from other lands and cultures in our fellowship....some of them future leaders of "third-world" lands. We should tremble with awe at the prospect and the responsibility that rests with us...~~as we think of those tiny currents of influence.~~

But it goes beyond the ties of home and family. This ministry of introduction is a mission to which all of us are called. If some of us have grown so wise in the faith and so sophisticated in our explanation of the faith that we don't know just how to introduce another soul to God, then we ought to go back to the beginning and start all over.

We have to have some enthusiasm ourselves for this. If God is a dreary business and the church a heavy weight to us then there is no way that we will be effective in introducing others.

I heard a story recently that I hope with all my soul is not true. It has to do with a mother who knocked on her son's door one Sunday morning and said, "It's time to get up". The son said, "I don't want to get up". The mother said, "Come on now - it's Sunday. You must get ready for Church". The son replied, "I don't want to go to Church - the music is a drag, the prayers are a bore, the preaching is dull and I can't stand the people". But the mother, not to be denied, went in and shook the corner of the bed and said, "Get up and no nonsense about it. You're 47 years old, and you're the pastor of the church and you must be there!" If there is that kind of weariness on the inside, then there isn't much hope for the Church of Jesus Christ.

One of the things that bothers me is that for all of our sophistication, we believe that somebody ought to communicate our faith. We have our Boards and our Agencies. We have "farmed out" this ministry of introduction. What we need is to "personalize" this endeavor and, if you please, "de-professionalize it". We can't pay some Board Secretary or even some pastor to do it for us. This ministry of introduction belongs to every Christian - no matter what the age, the sex, or the place he or she may be on the pilgrimage.

EACH BELIEVER I like to believe that each believer has a "sub-parish" for which he is responsible. Within that "sub-parish" there are men and women, boys and girls, for whom he has a particular responsibility under God. Because of a whole series of circumstances and associations that is your church in a way that it cannot be the church of another.

I heard one time of a professor of botany who made it a practice once each course to give every student in the class a three foot length of rope. They were then to go out into the field and make a circle with that rope and describe in an essay everything that they saw within it. Look sometime at one of the greens in Central Park. Just grass, you say, but make yourself a three foot circle, become observant and you'll find that your little patch is different from all the other. Observation. Concern. Intensity of interest - these make a difference.

A gentleman in England made an analysis of conversations that took place. He did this with the help of many associates and discovered that in an ordinary day the average person talks about business 70% of the time, sporting events 10% of the time, investments and bets 10% of the time, anecdotes and jokes 5% of the time. The remaining 5% of daily human conversations, at least in this survey, was given to cultural subjects. And in the whole analysis, religion - God, Christ, love, faith, grace - were never mentioned.

What holds us back from speaking the informal, casual word? Fear? Mis-guided sense of tolerance? Do we feel incompetent? One need not know the chemical properties of water to commend a lake to a friend. One need not have an understanding of botany to speak ~~excitingly~~ of a rose. One need not master the intricacies of theology to speak lovingly and convincingly of God.

To speak of God - formally - in the church is one thing and a good thing to be sure. But to speak of God - informally - on a coffee break, over lunch, across a desk, on a bus can matter even more. I believe that one of the finest achievements possible to a Christian is this ability to speak naturally about God - friend to friend. Everytime I learn of a suicide in this city, I say to myself, "Was there no friend along the way who could have spoken of the Lord? - and shared the word of love, of concern, of care, of hope, of encouragement?"

The text for this sermon is from John's Gospel,

"Andrew first found his brother Simon, and said to him, 'Come....we have found the Messiah'"

The art of introducing. Some of us can do more than Andrew, but all of us can do as much. Shall we pray.

PRAYER Forbid it, Lord, that we should elevate silence to a virtue in a city where many starve for want of a word. As we enter this day into a new season of service, help us to share with others during the weekday that word of love, of hope, of faith, of encouragement. We bless thee for those who brought our souls to faith and ask for courage and grace to do as much for others. Amen