

## "ACCENTUATING THE POSITIVE"

### INTRODUCTION

But some will say - how can one be thankful in 1968? What a tragic year it has been in so many ways - and we still have a month to go! Two of our foremost leaders were assassinated; race riots were fewer, but polarization between blacks and whites has increased; the haves and the have-nots seem further apart; youth and their elders pass in the night as the generation gap widens; we talk peace, but fighting continues; a new administration now moves into Washington with the vote of 43% of the nation. Can such a divided people be governed? And to all of this we add the tensions and the tragedies that have touched our own personal lives.

Every now and then I feel a sermon coming on which seeks to focus more on the positive than on the negative in the contemporary scene. Alike in the pulpit and in our own personal outlook, we can become so accustomed to dwelling on what is wrong that we lose our perspective, our sense of balance. To be sure, there is a great deal to be disturbed about in our time, but sometimes our vision becomes so adjusted to the problems we face that we completely miss the promise.

Shortly after Samuel Johnson published his famous dictionary, a woman said to him: "Dr. Johnson - you have put some very vulgar words in your dictionary!" To which Dr. Johnson replied: "Madam - if you found them, it's because you were looking for them!" And therein is a little parable for us to think about. It is true that we can develop such a sensitive vision to what is wrong that we never see, or hear, or say what is right. We need to have a sharp eye for what is wrong - I'm not disputing that - but how important it is for us never to be blind to what is good and gracious. And so today - on this Sunday before our national day of Thanksgiving - I would like to be positive in my approach and accentuate three things for which we can give thanks as we come to the closing weeks of a hard and difficult year.

### PEOPLE

I would like to begin my own gratitude in terms of people. We know that there is in modern man an abundance of hatred and hypocrisy, corruption and cowardice, evasion and irresponsibility. But decidedly - this is not the whole story. We need to be reminded of the other side of the picture - that there is a great deal of goodness and kindness, courage and nobility in people - young and old alike. It is there. I have felt it and found it among so many of you. There is warmth and goodness. At times I am amazed that there is so much of it especially here in the city where life can be so cold and impersonal.

Not too long ago there was a fire that destroyed the historic St. Paul's Church in Antwerp, Belgium - a 16th century church that had been famous for its rich art treasures. An article appeared in one of our papers about it. The account said that before the police and fire-fighters could arrive on the scene, more than 60 young people - most of them colorfully attired hippies - dashed repeatedly into the blazing church and saved ten millions dollars worth of masterpieces. Said a bearded art student: "We had no choice. We've been brought up with Rubens and Van Dyck. And risking our lives was the least we could do". One of the police officers said: "I've never seen anything like it. The kids never hesitated. They just jumped in and got to it". The point is that there are many people today who are risking their lives in good causes....jumping in and getting to it.

For those of us over thirty, who perhaps sometimes wonder about the younger generation, we need to be reminded that there is some magnificent strength developing in many young people. There is courage of various sorts - the courage that displays itself on a battle-field in Vietnam - the courage that volunteers for summer work in the tough ghetto areas of our cities - the courage of responsible dissent. There is honesty - in probing and persevering. There is self-giving - in less concern about

affluence and advantage - and a response to human need. There is a willingness to dream "The Impossible Dream" among so many of our young people and in this we see hopeful signs of what Eugene Smith has called "creative newness".

"To dream the impossible dream  
To fight the unbeatable foe  
To bear with unbearable sorrow  
To run where the brave dare not go  
To right the unrightable wrong  
To love pure and chaste from afar  
To try when your arms are too weary  
To reach the unreachable star  
This is my quest:  
To follow that star...."

And for those who may be under thirty, and who look across the generation gap from the other direction, into what sometimes may seem to be tired minds and arthritic spirits, consider that there might be a few lights on the other side of the canyon as well. There's a sizeable amount of nobility and deep concern in people - and a minister is often in the position to see it and to feel it - quiet courage in suffering, steadiness in sorrow, honesty in searching, compassion in another's troubles, understanding in another's mistakes, a generous giving of time, energy and money to cause that represent a forward thrust in life. And how I was made aware of this once again on Thursday night of this past week as I visited with a number of our elderly people at our Methodist Church Home. How grateful we are in this church to a number of older persons who with great determination and dedication kept the doors of this church open during some hard and difficult years.

My experience has been that you do not have to look very hard to find the good that is in people. Oh, to be sure, God knows we're not saints. We have every reason to be concerned about our sins and stumbles and blind spots - but without in any way minimizing the darker side, this morning I would celebrate that goodness, that kindness, that nobility, that courage, that steadiness, that warmth and concern that is in people - in young and old alike. My friends it is there, and perhaps this is what Carl Sandburg was singing about when he wrote those lines:

"The strong men keep coming on,  
They go down shot - hanged - sick - broken.  
They live on fighting, singing...  
Call hallelujah, call amen, call deep thanks,  
For the strong men keep coming on"

THE CHURCH And then in the second place, I think I would want to say a good word about the church. I happened to be in the Cokesbury Book Store on East 55th Street two weeks ago and a book on the display shelf entitled, "The Trouble With the Church" caught my eye. Similar books have been published in recent years on the same theme and I'm sure that many of you could probably write your own diagnosis of what's wrong with the church. "The trouble with the church is... denominationalism, traditionalism, irrelevance, isolation, human frailties, out-dated creeds, dull sermons...."

But sometimes I think that a voice ought to try to say loud and clear "What's right with the church". I would appreciate hearing someone talk about the grandeur of the church - the steady persistence of the church across the ages - through attacks from within and criticism from without. I want someone to talk about the wonder of

worship in the church - as men and women, in generation after generation, have re-discovered who they are and something of their worth as children of God. I want someone to talk about the church's ministry to human need - its influence in the field of education, healing, social concern - its response to human suffering half-way around the world and half-down the city block. I want someone to talk about the exciting things that are happening in the church today - the joining of hands across the old Protestant-Catholic barrier in new trust and respect - the steps toward greater unity among Protestants - the new kinds of ministry and new forms of worship - the new life in those churches that have opened themselves up to the secular world and received men and women into their fellowship regardless of the color of their skin or the length of their hair.

Now no man can begin to predict what the church will be like - a century from now or even a decade from now. It may be changed beyond recognition from what most of us now know as the church. But that there will be a church - a fellowship of Christians - we need not doubt. Last April there was an essay in TIME magazine entitled, "ON Being a Contemporary Christian". You may remember it. The man who wrote it is also partly responsible for the article in the latest issue of TIME that deals with the changes taking place in the Catholic Church. But here is a secular magazine dealing with and detailing some aspects of the revolution in religion and this is what it said:

"The faith commitment of the Christian also implies the need for allegiance to a church - or at least to some kind of community of faith. Theoretically, it may be possible for a Christian to survive without any institutional identity - but the majority of modern theologians would agree that to be an "man for others" there must be others to be with - and that faith is sustained by a communal structure".

A lot of you travel a great deal up and down and back and forth across this land. As you do, you probably notice the church spires and the houses of worship in every town and city. You can know that every one of those churches that you see bears its scars and even now is having its own particular set of problems - and that not one of them represents the "perfect" church. But you can also know that there is something of greatness and glory about those churches - that there is something gloriously right in their enduring witness to the values that are abiding and eternal.

There is a needed word in that rejoinder of the French theologian, Theodore of Beza, to a scheming Duke set upon destroying the church:

"In truth it belongs, Sir, to the church of God - in whose name I speak - to receive blows and not to give them. But you would do well to remember that the church is an anvil that has outworn many hammers!"

#### COUNTRY

The third verse of this hymn of praise has to do with our country. This does not mean that we are about to indulge in a flag-waving, self-righteous defense of "my country - right or wrong". Most of us have long since departed from the blind rigidity of that slogan. We have spoken out when goals seem garbled - when truth has been lightly treated in international relationships - when justice and human dignity have been neglected at home - when politics have won battles over principles. Again - most of us have rendered our own version of "The trouble with our country is....."

Only let us remember that this is a "lover's quarrel". Recall those lines from Robert Frost:

"And were an epitaph to be my story  
I'd have a short one ready for my own.  
I would have written of me on my stone -  
I had a lover's quarrel with the world"

A "lover's quarrel" - from time to time this, I suppose, is what we have with our own native land. There are times when we emphasize the last word of that phrase - "quarrel" - but there are other times when we need to stress the first word - "lover's". We need to be careful lest our criticism sour into cynicism. We are in danger of turning over such a word as "patriotism" and such a symbol as our "flag" into the hands of the super-patriots for their exclusive use, when the word and the symbol should be shared gratefully by all of us.

And so this morning I would have you celebrate the grandeur of America. We celebrate a history in which there has been demonstrated again and again a deep concern for human freedom and dignity - a history highlighted by such heroic names as William Bradford, John Adams, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and in more recent times John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

We celebrate a system which our forefathers developed - with responsible checks between the legislative, the judicial and the executive branches of government. We celebrate the freedom of worship and press and speech and dissent which we take so much for granted. We celebrate the opportunities for education and fulfillment which so many millions of people have found here. We celebrate the promise that still persists in our political systems. We celebrate the adventuring spirit, the pioneer strain, the readiness to run risks - all of which are a part of our heritage.

There are those times when we sit down to write our letters of protest, or when we speak against something in our national life in the name of Christian conscience. So be it. But let it be known that it is a "lover's quarrel" - and that there is a great deal for us to be thankful for in America in 1968.

Let me try to summarize all that we have been saying this morning by that familiar couplet:

"Two men looked out of prison bars -  
The one saw mud - and the other stars!"

There's plenty of mud - and I'm not asking you to overlook it - only sometimes, remember to look for the stars.

"This is 'our' quest:  
To follow that star  
No matter how hopeless  
No matter how far  
To fight for the right  
Without question of foes;  
To be willing to march into hell  
For a heavenly goal;  
And I know if I'd only be true  
To this glorious quest  
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm

When I'm laid to my rest  
And the world will be better for this  
That one man scorned and covered with scars  
Still strives with his last ounce of courage  
To reach the unreachable star"

PRAYER

Grant us, O God, the vision and the perspective to keep things in balance - to find fault when necessary, but also to develop the grace of gratitude and appreciation, and to give thanks. Help us - in our daily lives - to keep them in balance. Remembering Jesus, we ask this in His name. Amen

## "ACCENTUATING THE POSITIVE"

### INTRODUCTION

This sermon had its start in a word picture of our generation that I came across this summer in reading a book by Dr. Merrill Abbey, a professor at Garrett Theological Seminary. I put his words before you in the way of a text:

"We tend to lose any depth of conviction about what we are for,  
and live by our hatred of what we are against."

Certainly his statement rings true when we test it by a number of thermometers of human reaction. For instance, read the "Letters to Editors" column in almost any newspaper or magazine and you'll see that the voices raised in protest generally outnumber the voices raised in support. Or scan almost any campus newspaper and you will know more about what our college students are against than what they are for. Observe almost any deliberative body in action - from Congress to a church conference - and the dissenters are frequently more vocal than the affirmers. Even in the forum of our own minds and motives, the antagonisms seem to shout out the affirmations; we major in grumbles rather than in gratitude. I'm sure you will agree that there's truth in this statement.

### RIGHT TO PROTEST

To be sure, the right to protest, to cry out against is a treasured part of our faith and freedom. It's as old as the prophets, crying out against the paganism of their day - or Jesus calling out against the self-righteous Pharisees of his day - or the fathers of the American Revolution protesting against the tyranny of George the III and throwing the tea into Boston Harbor. When we were in Boston this summer that was the one thing our seven year old son wanted to see - the place where they dumped the tea into the Harbor. (Oh, how he loves that story - the dumping of the tea - something in that that appeals to him. I don't know why, unless that he's got some rebel blood in his veins). This right to protest is part of our faith and freedom; in this respect, church and state are of one mind. And it will be a sad day for democracy and for religion when that right is taken away.

But - do you see the truth to which Dr. Abbey is calling us back. Simply that before we say "I protest" we should be able to say "I affirm" - that without the right affirmations our protests become odd-shaped obsessions. What we are for is basically far more important than what we are against. Consider this truth as it relates to three areas: the nation, the church, and our own individual lives.

### NATION

First off, as a nation, we do well to pause before that statement. Consider our opposition to communism. Of course, we are against communism. How can a people with our heritage help but cry out "I protest" when God is denied, when freedom is forbidden, when human rights and truth and life are trampled on.

Yet, is it enough to simply proclaim that we are against communism? I think not. Strange things can happen to a person if his antagonism toward communism is not grounded or rooted in some great affirmations about democracy and religion. A person can become so vociferous and vitriolic in his attack on communism that in the process he distorts the truth, defames the innocent, curtails freedom and stirs up an atmosphere of fear and suspicion - and so adopts the very manners and methods of the communist conspiracy that he professes to battle. Basic to our opposition to communism are some great affirmations that we must constantly review about the sovereignty and justice of God, the dignity of the individual, and a persistent concern for truth and freedom.

Beware of these radical right wing groups that are more anxious to tell you what they are against rather than what they are for. There are quite a number to be found across our land; they stir up hatred with inflammatory statements. A letter or pamphlet from one group came to my desk recently and as I read it over it appeared to me that it was against just about everyone who was not a white, Anglo Saxon protestant.

Or consider, for a moment, our stand against racial discrimination. One of the hopeful signs of our time, I feel, is the growing number of people who are willing to stand up and be counted in their protest against discriminatory practices whether in voting or housing, whether in north or south. What were isolated solo voices a few years ago have become great choruses of outrage at injustice.

But here again, let us never forget that what we are against must be grounded and founded in what we are for. Conviction - not contention - must undergird the civil rights movement; reconciliation - not revenge, not reckless, irresponsible rioting such as took place recently in one city.

Some predict that when the historical perspective of these troubled times comes clear that Martin Luther King will be remembered as the modern Moses who stood on the foundation of faith and principle to exert his leadership. Some of us who heard him speak last May in the Cathedral will recall how again he demonstrated eloquently that what he is for is the basis of what he is against. Before he cries, "I protest" he cries "I believe". "I believe" he says "in the unity which we have in Christ - for in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, Negro nor white". "Therefore - I protest". "I believe" he cries, "That love is the most durable power, the strongest force in the world". For him, as it should be for every person who is a Christian, civil right is first of all a matter of Christian rightness.

In illustration of all that we have said here, we find a rather good object lesson in the Declaration of Independence. Included in that document is a long recital of protests and grievances against England - but at the beginning of that document there is a glorious affirmation:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"

Before they protested, they affirmed. And their affirmations continue to ring as a kind of liberty bell to people all over the world. And so today the best defenders of democracy are those whose protests are rooted in great affirmation: that all men are created equal, that all men are children of the same God, that life, liberty are sacred, that truth and justice are to be lived where we are. It is not enough for a man to be counted against communism and discrimination. It is more important to know what he can be counted for, and whether that includes democracy and brotherhood.

CHURCH Carry this truth now to the second area - the church. "We tend to lose any depth of conviction about what we are for, and live by our hatred of what we are against". Too often across the centuries that has been an indictment of organized religion.

H. L. Mencken once defined Puritanism as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy and having a good time". This is not entirely fair to the Puritans, but it is accurate to the degree that Puritanism was identified with negative, narrow restrictions all in the name of religion. Who was it who said, "The stern rockbound coast of New England felt like an amateur when it saw the faces of the Pilgrim fathers". Cotton Mather's brother once wrote in his diary:

"Of the manifold sins which then I was guilty of, none so sticks upon me, as that, being very young, I was whittling a stick of wood on the Sabbath day, and for fear of being seen, I did it behind the door".

Traces of this same negative, restrictive attitude still persist in some churches. Catherine Marshall in one of her books reports that sometime after the death of her husband she received a letter which read:

"Dear Catherine Marshall:

You and I have so much in common. I don't smoke either; I don't swear, nor play cards, nor dance the rumba. I feel so close to you".

About which Mrs. Marshall said, "Reading this, I couldn't help but think of Peter Marshall's reaction to such a negative approach to Christianity. To this type of person, he was inclined to say, 'Well now that's fine. But there's a difference between being good and being good-goody. You have to be good for something. You don't do this and you don't do that. What do you do?'"

Which rejoinder has the ring, of course, of New Testament authority. Remember that Jesus came into a world in which organized religion meant so many restrictions. There were restrictive rules about eating, dressing, Sabbath day observances - a religion of "Thou shalt nots". And into this musty mausoleum of organized religion Jesus came like a breath of fresh air and a burst of light. To be sure, he took stands against evil that threatened individuals and society, but before his protests, men could see his affirmations: the caring of God for all men, the worth of the individual, the joy of service. For him, religion was not a matter of weights, but of wings; not a matter of gloom, but of gladness.

The stature of any church depends in part upon the people and upon what they want their church to stand for, what they want to do with it. If first and foremost, we seek to stand for and to grow into "the mind and spirit of Christ" - then, THAT church can never be narrow, negative, little spirited. I think of this in regard to this church on this HOMECOMING SUNDAY; I think of those who have been a part of this warm fellowship over the years - 128 years. I think of those no longer with us and of what they have wanted this church to stand for - their sense of conviction, their deep affirmations. This church is entering a new day and I hope and pray that you who are the church now will see to it that it stands for something great, that it will be something of a beacon light in what it stands for: for a fellowship that is inclusive of all men - inter-denominational, interracial. That it have a quality of worship, service and study that are clear channels of the lifting, liberating power of the Gospel of Christ. Make it stand for something.

INDIVIDUALS Perhaps our text finds its greatest relevance when we apply it, not to the nation, or the church, but to ourselves as individuals. "We tend to lose any depth of conviction about what we are for, and live by our hatred of what we are against." Place that statement along side of this remark I heard a psychiatrist make some time ago: "As a people, we have become more adept at hating than loving". He was saying the same thing: that for many a personal antagonism is a more powerful motive than an affirmation or an affection.

One does not have to look far to see evidence of this negative, antagonistic approach to life. We see it in angry youngsters who are contemptuous of people and law and order and property - in East Hampton among the privileged as well as on the lower East side of NYC among the under-privileged. We see it in frustrated oldsters who will tell you of so much that is wrong with little that is right. We see it in the hatred of faces, alike of Black Muslim and of White Citizens Councils. So many today are motivated more by what they are against than what they are for.

You see it in people everyday. You meet one person and it's like running into a pelting hailstorm of complaints and cynicism; he feels that everyone is against him, and so he returns the compliment. Another person you meet and it's like walking into the warm sunshine of assurance and gratitude. It's not that the second person never protests, never rebels - but it is that he lives on a foundation of great affirmations and convictions regarding life, and you sense that what he is for predeces and pre-scribes what he is against.

I think you should be able to tell a Christian - not so much by what he is against as by what he is for. This is the measure of the mature person. And at the end of his days, you should be able to measure a Christian's life, not so much by his negative complaints as by his positive contributions. Something like this, perhaps: "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren - the cold, the hungry, the desperate, the under-privileged - you have done it unto me". The question is: where do you stand in all of this? It's a personal question, one that must be answered personally. And now, I feel, is a good time - as we make a fresh start, begin a new season, a time when we make a silent re-dedication of our lives to a way of life shared with us long ago; resolving to serve <sup>in</sup> his cause with the same ardour and devotion that we give to causes and concerns far less worthy, far less deserving. Where do you stand in all of this. What we are for is basically more important than what we are against.

LET US PRAY      Speak to each of us, O God, in our own way. And out of this meeting may there come a new sense of commitment, a high resolve, that will lift our lives and the lives of those with whom we are in touch throughout the days of the week that is ahead. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

The title of the sermon may remind some of you of a song that was popular back in the 1940's - remember how it went: "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative". I always like to have our music and sermons tie together in some general way in our worship; I even toyed with the idea of asking our choir director to have one of our soloists sing that song here this morning. I knew, however, that I might meet with some resistance. It would have added something less than a positive note. But those of you who find things rather routine week after week in our worship might have been sitting on the edge of your pew. It would have ~~silk~~ stirred things up....