

"HERDING THE WIND"

INTRODUCTION

The title of today's sermon is "Herding the Wind". The phrase is not original with me. It comes from the prophet, Hosea. In the 12th chapter of his book, he is commenting on the tendency of his nation to run about seeking all sorts of political alliances and he makes this comment, "Ephraim herds the wind and pursues the east wind all the day long".

What Hosea is saying is this: that his kingdom is running after the wrong things, that although they attempt to form political alliances with many nations, it will in the long run come to naught. It's like "herding the wind" he says... running after something that cannot be reached, trying to hang on to something that turns out to be as impermanent as a cloud in the sky.

DEVELOPMENT

"Herding the Wind" - we have an expression here that helps to describe one of the major problems we face in our lives. We do a lot of running about, but in the end it may be that we have been "herding the wind", and sometimes we wonder whether or not anything will come of it.

Some of us feel that in our jobs we do nothing but herd the wind...spending our days getting things organized only to have them come apart so that we begin again with the feeling that we can never really get on top of things and just keep them there as they are.

We see families where the members are trying to do their own thing and going off in so many directions separately that they lose all contact with each other, which might be the most important thing in their striving.

I think students are apt to herd the wind, too. Uncertain about their futures, they wander through the educational process taking a little bit of this and that which catches their fancy at the moment, becoming involved in this activity or that without any meaning or real purpose.

A church can herd the wind, or let me be specific, this church can herd the wind when it tries to respond to every kind of human need around it instead of asking which needs should have priority given the setting and the resources.

This is a convenient, picturesque phrase to express the frustration that comes to us when we run and run, but can't seem to get what we're after...when our striving produces not satisfaction for us, but frustration and discouragement.

You may feel on top of things right now having returned from vacation. Your energies are fresh. As we turn the corner into a new season, perhaps this is the time for us to take a good look at how we will cope with the pressures of the coming Fall and Winter to avoid "herding the wind".

WE HERD THE WIND WHEN THERE IS NO PURPOSE

For one thing, I believe we herd the wind when we really don't know why we're doing what we're doing, when the things we're involved in have no purpose to which we are committed.

This is one of the problems which our particular age has thrust upon us. It was quite different for our parents and grandparents, tied to the land, rising at dawn to grow their crops and put them away against the coming Winter. In times past, the mere act of existing made fantastic demands upon their life's energies. It was a harder life physically, but it had one great advantage: it had a clear and visible purpose. This labor was a necessity if the family was to survive.

I think we of this generation have lost a great deal because we can no longer see this kind of direct relationship to life. We're no longer so closely tied to our purposes. We have more leisure, but little sense of how to use it. Having less to do to survive, you would think we would be more free. But many people are really more anxious because so many of the necessities which in former days put structure into life are gone. Now we must make them for ourselves.

If you want an example, here's a good one from the Employee Regulations guide for Wanamakers in the year 1894. This will help you to see what I'm driving at.

1. The stores must be opened at 6:30 am, and must remain open until 9:30 pm the year around.
2. The stores must be swept; counters, base shelves, and show cases dusted, lamps trimmed, filled, and the chimneys cleaned; pens made, doors and windows opened, a pail of water and a scuttle of coal must be brought in by each clerk before breakfast, if there is time to do so and attend the customers who call.
3. Any employee who is in the habit of smoking Spanish cigars, getting shaved at the barber shop, going to dances and other places of amusement, will surely give his employer reason to be suspicious of his integrity and all-round honesty.
4. Each employee must not pay less than \$5.00 per year to the church and must attend Sunday School every week.
5. Men employees are given an evening a week for courting purposes, and two if they go to prayer meeting regularly.
6. After 14 hours of work at the store, the leisure time must be spent in reading good literature.

Presumably in 1894 nobody questioned the right of an employer to make such rules for employees, and it certainly must have increased attendance at prayer meeting, but can you imagine people today standing for such regimentation?

We can look at that time and think how it impossible it must have been to live with such regulations and restrictions on our freedom, but at the other end of the spectrum, we seem at times to be no better off. At times we have so much freedom that we don't know what to do with it. We make our own schedules, and this is where many get into trouble and difficulty because we begin doing things without asking why. We slip into meaningless activities that have little or no relationship with each other and add little depth or purpose for our lives. I think it's good from time to time to examine the things we're doing to see why we're doing them. It may help us to avoid "herding the wind".

WE HERD THE WIND WHEN WE CANNOT SEPARATE

A second point I wish to emphasize grows out of the first: I believe we are destined to herd the wind when we cannot separate the things we want from the things we should leave behind.

Making choices and mapping out priorities - this becomes a stumbling block for many of us. At times life becomes somewhat like standing at the counter of Baskin-Robbins and trying to choose from their 33 flavors of icecream. We find it

difficult. We find it hard to limit ourselves because we want some of everything. I usually have to sample two or three flavors (much to my wife's embarrassment) before I make up my mind. And isn't this our problem with life too. We want to be good student, but we don't want to miss a TV program or a telephone call or a social event. We would like to have a meaningful job that fulfills and uses the best in us, but we don't want to spend more than 40 hours at it if possible and less if we can. We would like to have social justice for all, but we don't want to give up any of the privileges we have in order to make it available to others.

Life is continually asking us to choose, and so often we refuse because we don't want to give up anything in order to get something else.

Stephen Leacock has a delightful story about a man named Mr. Juggins. Mr. Juggins fell in love with a girl and planned to marry her. However he was not the kind of man to rush into such an important relationship without proper preparation. It occurred to him that one thing he could do to further equip himself to be a good husband was to teach Sunday School. Soon he realized, however, that he was lacking in his understanding of the Bible - its history and geography. So he did what any self-respecting man would do. He set out for the Holy Land for some first hand study and experience. Once there, he found that there was so much he needed to learn that he ended up staying there for two years. Finally he felt himself thoroughly educated and ready to be a good Sunday School teacher so that he would be a better husband. Now he felt ready to propose to the girl back home. The only trouble was that by the time he got back she was married to someone else who didn't know the difference between Moses and Methuselah.

We smile at the story, but the truth is there are a lot of us who can never focus our lives much better than did Mr. Juggins, who never close the door on some choices in order to gain something else. Recently I attended an Open House for the new Smithers Alcoholism Center that has opened on East 93rd Street in the old Billy Rose mansion. Brinkley Smithers and Roosevelt Hospital receive credit for it. I saw a quotation framed, hanging on a wall near the front door that caught my attention. I copied it down and share it with you: "A person knows what he wants when he knows what he must give up to get it".

Jesus had some hard words for those in the flats of indecision. He said that nobody who put his hand to the plow and then turned and looked back over his shoulder was fit for the kingdom of God. And how could he be when he wouldn't know whether he was coming or going? Nobody ever had more temptation to run through life "herding the wind" than our Lord himself. So many different things pulling, tugging at his life, competing for his time, energy, attention. If He had tried to respond to them all he would have been herding the wind. Instead he deliberately chose, and then He shut the door firmly on other possibilities. And because of that the record of his life is not one of helter-skelter aimlessness, but a pattern of one of the most unified, productive and single-minded lives lived.

IF WE ARE NOT GOING TO HERD THE WIND

If we are not going to herd the wind in frantic running around, then we must be clear on what we are doing and why we are doing it. We must be honest about what we will choose and what we will leave behind. And there it makes a big difference what criterion you use as you are making your choices.

Something that Harry Emerson Fosdick once wrote in reflecting upon life at Riverside Church is helpful to us in this regard. Suggesting that a great church had best periodically stop and examine its base, he wrote:

"Everything depends upon the criterion with which one starts. If one thinks primarily of the church as an organization and tests the various elements of our program by their immediate and obvious contribution to the church's welfare - its growth in membership, or to the increase in financial support, one kind of result follows. If instead, one takes Christian service in general as one's criterion, thinks of the city and the nation and the world first, and of persons to be helped regardless of their possible usefulness to the church, another evaluation of our program is sure to follow. The real reason why so many churches are more dead than alive is that they are self-centered"

Good words for a church. Excellent advice for us, too, as individuals. The Christian faith has been quite clear from the beginning that we are saved from aimlessness and purposelessness because we share the purpose of God for our world, the purposes which He revealed in the life of Jesus and which we are summoned to continue in His name. One of the most important things that has commended Christianity to so many across the generations is its desire to be of service to others. And the Church has always been at its best when it stopped asking how it could become successful and began instead to help people.

HOMECOMING: SET THE DIRECTION

I would suggest that on this Homecoming Sunday when we establish the direction and set the tone for the coming months that the foremost criterion in your mind ought to be how you can make your life useful in the world - not what can you do for yourself, but what can you do for others. Not how your life can be enriched, but how you can enrich the lives of others. Not what you can get, but what you can give. And in the strange mathematics of heaven, it is discovered that in serving, we ourselves are served. In helping, we ourselves are helped. In blessing, we ourselves are blessed. For it is in giving that we receive. Said Jesus, "For he who loses his life for my sake, shall find it".

About fifty years ago a class in sociology at John Hopkins University made a study of one of the worst slums of Baltimore. They went into homes, noting every conceivable good and bad influence. They tabulated lack of recreational opportunities and made careful estimates on scores of intangibles. At the end of this study were 200 cards, each marked with the name of the youngster, which were labeled "Head for Jail". Their background, their life, their environment all pointed in that direction. "Headed for Jail".

The cards went the way of so many such studies, into a file. Nothing happened. Then 25 years later, another class came across this bundle of aging cards. They decided to follow up, as far as possible, the fortunes of those 200 youngster. To their surprise, they found that only two of the 200 had ever gone to jail, and the reason, they discovered, was a Sunday School teacher in that slum whom everyone called "Aunt Hannah". The stories of the 198 who had never been to jail ran to a consistently similar pattern. "Aunt Hannah" had made the difference, had turned them toward something better. A doctor told how she had kept after him after school and told him he was too smart to get into trouble with the law. She took him home to dinner and after that he just never had the heart to let her down. A business man told how he had been caught stealing from a store where he worked. Aunt Hannah had interceded for him, made him pay it back. And he went on to buy the place. And so on. Each youngster paid tribute to Aunt Hannah as the decisive influence.

I submit that this is not the record of a life that has been spent in herding

the wind, but one that knew where it was going and what had to be done to get there. As we reflect upon the pressures that the coming weeks will be placing upon us, let us stop herding the wind and focus our lives. Do it now, for we know not what tomorrow may bring forth, but only that the moment for serving God is at hand.

PRAYER Our lives are not always easy, O God, and we ask for strength, for faith, for perspective to meet the difficult things that the coming days may bring to us. Open our eyes to the shining things that lie ahead of us. Help us to put the past behind us, and pour all our energies into the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes always steadfastly on Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Amen