

"IS THAT YOUR BUSINESS, PETER?"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
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### INTRODUCTION

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Remember the fable about the Devil stalking the desert. He came upon a group of friends who were trying to tempt a pious, holy hermit. They tried him with the seduction of the flesh. They tried to sour his mind with doubts and fears. They told him that all of his suffering was worth nothing. But the holy man did not flinch. Then said the Devil as he moved into the scene, "Have you heard the news? Your Brother has been made the Bishop of Alexandria." And with that word a scowl of malignant jealousy clouded the serene face of this holy man.

### PETER ACTS OUR PART

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Jesus went on to indicate what was ahead for Peter. Here it is in the words of the Gospel,

"When you were young, you fastened your belt about you and walked where you chose; but when you are old you will stretch out your arms, and a stranger will bind you fast, and carry you where you have no wish to go. Jesus said this to indicate what manner of death by which Peter was to glorify God."

Over the years to follow, Peter would gradually surrender his self-will, and eventually die as His Lord had died, on a cross in the city of Rome.

Now this was a heavy word and Peter responded by saying in effect, "Why me?" As he saw John - that most intimate of the associate of Jesus - trailing them, Peter could not resist playing "comparative Providence". He turned to Jesus and asked, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus replied, "If it is my wish for him to stay until I come, what is that to you". Or, as the J. B. Phillips' translation has it, "If I wish for him to stay until I come, is that your business, Peter?" And then these two words, "Follow Me!"

### DEVELOPMENT

Now the roots of some of our discontent come from comparing ourselves unfavorably with others. There's always someone around us that we point to whose lot seems far happier than ours. In so many different ways we find ourselves pleading with God, "What about him, Lord?" And back comes the answer, ever the same, "Is that your business, Peter?" "Follow me!"

Have you ever questioned the right of the 10th Commandment to be there? I mean after all those juicy sins like stealing and adultery and murder. Whoever put those commandments together didn't have much of a sense of climax. He should have started with the "throw-away" sin of coveting and worked up to the bigger stuff.

And yet it is true that this commandment, "Thou shalt not covet" finds us all at some point or time. Whatever our bag may be - whether we're a hard-hat or a home-maker, an accountant or actress, whether we work the academic field or the financial field, we can testify from experience that the covetous spirit, the jealous attitude, the envious disposition can render us unable to step up to life and enjoy it for all it's worth.

OTHERS ARE NOT AS TROUBLE-FREE AS THEY SEEM

Next time you're tempted to lodge a complaint with the management about your lot in life there are a couple of things you would do well to keep in mind.

One is that other people aren't as well off and as trouble free as they might be. Mind you, appearances can be deceiving. Albert Camus has found us by suggesting that we are all addicted at times to what he calls "nostalgia for other people's lives". He explains it this way,

"This is because...seen from the outside, they form a whole, while our life, seen from the inside, is all bits and pieces."

"Nostalgia for other people's lives". For instance, Peter's nostalgia for John's future. The almost incessant desire to swap our providence for somebody else's. The play the old game, "What if..." if not "why me?"

There's some truth, if not a great deal of poetic worth, in these lines,

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How many would our pity share, who have our envy now!"

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The point is: much is not always better. All that glitters is not gold. Who was it who remarked, "poverty is the greatest wealth and obedience the greatest freedom". Really...who's to say whether John or Peter had the easier lot. Indeed, it may be more difficult to live for Jesus than to die for Him. "Lord, what about him?" And Jesus replied, "Is that your business, Peter?" "Follow Me."

HAPPINESS COMES FROM INSIDE OUT

And related to this observation is this word.

I believe that authentic happiness comes primarily from the inside out, and not for the outside in. This is not a popular word in a day when so many are working hard to alter the external conditions of life. And yet, the fact that it is not popular adds to the urgency to say it. Authentic happiness comes from the inside out, not from the outside in.

In a very helpful book called, *Psychotherapy And a Christian View of Man*, David Roberts describes a tendency we all have to fix the blame for our unhappiness on outside forces. He writes:

"When an individual is not aware of the seriousness of his conflicts, this may be due to the fact that he has projected them on to people and to circumstances outside himself. Then the trouble always lies in his opinion with his wife, the boss, the world situation, the Jews, the communists, etc.. And if these external annoyances could be straightened out, he assumes, everything inside himself would form a serene harmony."

Whatever it is that represents our assignment in life, there are "plusses" and "minuses" to it. The big thing - as I see it - is to take this combination of the "yesess" and the "noes" and make them stand up and serve the glory of God and the needs of others - to the best of our abilities.

TAKE PLEASURE IN THE BLESSINGS OF OTHERS

Happiness is something of an inside job. My final word would be this:

as mature Christians we must learn to take pleasure in other people's blessings. And I concede that this is easier said than done.

I believe a certain sharing of talent and experience belongs to our Christian faith. Those early Christians back in Jerusalem following the Resurrection did some experimenting in sharing. You'll recall that on Pentecost after the Holy Spirit came that those early believers held all things in common. In those early Churches the attempt was made to have each member enjoy the talents and the blessings of others.

One of the sadder parts of our American legacy is that we do often see each other as competitors. We so often assume that some one else's capacity implies an incapacity on our part. Thus we have a tendency to debunk others in order to shrink the difference between their gifts and our own.

I was talking with a clergy friend the other day whose predecessor two back was a man widely acclaimed for his pastoral care. He was an outstanding shepherd to his flock. The younger man who is now in that place dismissed the whole achievement with one short comment. He said, "It filled a deep need in his life to do that sort of thing". I thought to myself, "How cruel". That's the way - a very subtle way - in which we write each other off and put each other down in order to build ourselves up.

When you find someone who surpasses you in the ability to give, in the ability to sing, in physical appearance, in longevity, in family situations, or what have you - be thankful that we have these gifts in our midst. And get into the habit of building up the other person instead of tearing him down.

Paul laid this procedure upon the Christians in Corinth who were seriously divided. They had several "fan" clubs going in that Church. There were some who thought that Cephas was the man. Others thought that Apollos was. Some thought Paul was the "top dog". A holier than thou contingent announced that they belonged to the "Christ Party". The Apostle Paul pleaded with them saying,

"All things are yours - whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world of life or death, or the present or the future - all are yours. And you are Christ's and Christ is God's".

CLOSING

"Lord...what about him?" asked Peter. "Is that your business, Peter?"  
Then the redeeming imperative. "Follow Me."

It was back in the 16th Century that a Polish astronomer discovered that the earth was not the center of everything with all the heavenly bodies rotating around us. Called the Copernican revolution, it revealed the truth that the universe was found to be heliocentric - with the sun at the center and all of us revolving around it.

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"Peter, lovest thou me? Feed My sheep. Follow Me!"

PRAYER

Let the life that was in Christ Jesus, Our Father, be also in us, and let it be radiated from us to others. Give us the power and the peace now to go out into the world and to live as though Christ were living in us. Help us to follow Him in all we do and say and think, the our world - like Him - may be raised up from death to new life. Amen

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