

"ON LEADING THE PARADE"

TEXT: "They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory" Mark 10:37

INTRODUCTION

We all have the drum major instinct, the secret desire to lead the parade. We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction. Or - as Carl Sandburg once put it - "we all want to play Hamlet". Alfred Adler, one of the fathers of modern psychiatry, names it the dominant impulse in human nature; he thinks the desire for recognition, the wish to be significant, is stronger than that of sex, which Freud put first. And while we may be provoked with James and John for asking Jesus to put them first - like soldiers holding up the battle until they have made sure of their promotion - we should in fairness admit that in a thousand subtle ways we too have tried to be the drum major.

DEVELOPMENT

We begin early to ask life to put us first. Our first cry as a baby was a bid for attention; even as we ran the gauntlet of bottles and safety pins, we learned cute and clever ways of getting ourselves into the spotlight in the center of the stage. All through our childhood days, the drum major instinct was a major obsession; unashamedly we would ask life to grant us first place. I remember an incident in my own life. I was six years of age at the time and giving my first piano recital. I had only been taking lessons for three or four months. The recital was held in the upstairs hall of the Fire House in a small town in upstate New York. The teacher, Miss Diggins, had given me instructions to play only one piece - the first piece in the book. I did this and everyone applauded. I enjoyed their enthusiastic response and so I turned around and asked them if they wanted me to play some more pieces...that I had also memorized the second, third and fourth piece in the book. I played them. Needless to say, my parents were greatly embarrassed by my desire to be in the spotlight.

Children are like this. Without any formality whatever and often without any courtesy either, they push themselves to the front reaching for the insignia for social approval. They strive for recognition as though their very security depended upon it. If they can't find prestige in the harsh world of reality, they seek it in the fairy land of fantasy. "All my dreams" said one little girl, "come out the same way. I'm always somebody important"

The classic story of boyhood is Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer. Tom was playing drum-major all the time; actually, he wasn't drum major at all (Aunt Polly saw to that!), but in his day dreaming he was always somebody important, his mind playing with the most delightful possibilities and romantic situations in which he was the center. He was the great general returning from the wars, riding his great charger, with the whole town turning out to cheer him; there stood Becky Thatcher, with her lovely curls and soft eyes, worshipping her hero - and Aunt Polly, too, repenting that she had treated him so cruelly. He had shown the world that had so blindly misunderstood him, and now enjoys his moment of triumph. But whether in humiliation or victory, he always lead the parade; always the center of ardent, envious admiration.

ADULTS HAVE IT

In adult life we still have it; we never quite grow out of it. Why do we sing solos, paint pictures, preach sermons? To help people, of course. But that is not the full reason. We would be surprised to see, if we could analyze objectively, how much the drum-major instinct enters into everything we do. We like to do something good, and we like to receive praise and recognition for what we do. Most of us are not quite sure of ourselves, or of our place in the esteem of others; we welcome praise because it re-established ourself esteem - or as Dr. Fosdick puts it, it gives us a temporary lift over the low opinion we have of ourselves. Praise has never made anyone unhappy; we like it even when we know that we don't deserve it. We like it when we don't believe it and, as someone has said, we dislike it only when we hear it bestowed too much on others. Bishop Berry used to say that if a man can enjoy hearing his predecessor praised or his competitor complimented, he is qualified as an authority on the doctrine of entire sanctification.

The presence of this instinct explains why we are so often taken in by the advertisers; these gentlemen of verbal persuasion know all about our consuming desire to feel important. So the "man of distinction" tells us about the liquor we should drink to get that way, the car we should drive to make our neighbors envious, the lipstick we should wear in order to make us lovely to kiss. I had a letter the other day from the subscription manager of a newly launched magazine. He started off beautifully: "As you undoubtedly know", he said, "Your name is on several mailing lists in which you are classified as 'highly literate, progressive, interested in world affairs and good reading'. Therefore I know you will be interested in what I have to say". Of course, I was interested. We get pushed into so many things by people who understood our craving for significance.

It explains why so many of us are joiners. If we are not very important persons we can become important by joining lodges or clubs that are. Herbert Doran tells of a man he saw two years after the World's Fair had closed in Chicago, still wearing in his lapel a giant sized button which said, "I attended the Century of Progress". The Fair had taken out of him the humdrum monotony of life as a hired man on a farm and with a token of attendance, for a while at least, he was somebody. He was no ordinary man; he was a man who had attended a World's Fair. Don't laugh at him. Napoleon, you may recall, ran his empire on buttons, ribbons, medals and titles. We fail to understand people until we understand that they are all driven by this dominant desire to be somebody, to lead the parade.

BACK TO JAMES AND JOHN

In Matthew's Gospel, it is the mother of James and John who sought the promotion of her sons. This makes the story more human, for parents have their daydreams, too. What we fail to achieve as parents we cherish for our children. It isn't all that bad; after all, it's a poor hen that won't scratch for her own chicks!

The mother of James and John dreamed, as all Hebrew mothers dreamed, of a coming Kingdom of Israel who would set Jerusalem free,

establish his court on Mount Zion, and in righteousness rule the world. What honor could her sons have greater than to be the envy of all the mothers in Israel? "Command that these my sons may sit on thy right hand and on thy left hand in the Kingdom"

What a monstrous tyrant it can be - this ego that wants to always lead the parade, that wants to wield all the power, that ruthlessly elbows other people out of the way in the struggle to be number one. This is where so many of life's bitter and tragic experiences begin. Pride - false pride. It's a sin, a major one.

HAVOC IT CAUSES

Consider the havoc it causes. Think of how this drum major instinct has contributed to the snobbishness of the world, setting man against man, group against group, even as it set the disciples quarreling, two against ten. It's this kind of strife that stirs things up and gets the blood boiling. When some of us get the idea that we are better than others, when we get the idea that we are just naturally superior and ordained by the Lord to be first - this is when trouble begins. Witness, if you will, the spectacle of the civil rights issue going on in our country today: is this not rooted in the idea that some of us, by reason of our lily white skins, are ordained by God to be first? This is a harmful notion, entirely unChristian, to harbor in a world in which the Communist is bidding for the man we are shutting out. Sometimes this snobbishness gets into a hooded uniform and becomes sinister in the little masked men who assume superiority in order to deaden the pain of their own mediocrity.

Sometimes it gets under black shirts or brown shirts and sets out goose-stepping to terrorize the world. Mussolini's official biographer, Margherita Sarfatti, writes that one day as the great man was pacing his room in the palace she asked him what his ambition was. He said: "I am obsessed by one wild desire. It consumes my whole being. I want to make a mark on the world with my will. A mark like this....." And then with his fingernails he scratched a chair back from end to end. "Like the claw of a lion" he roared. You see what lengths this perverted instinct that we all have can sometimes take us.

THE ANSWER OF JESUS

But lay hold now on the answer of Jesus. Our familiarity with the words of Jesus has made them almost common place, and that is not good, for they are highly significant. We would expect Jesus to lash out at the two selfish ones with some strong and stinging words of rebuke - inasmuch as he was on his way to the cross. But he didn't do that at all. Instead he indicated his awareness of the presence of this universal craving for importance in their natures. Far from rebuking it, or ignoring it, or even curbing it, He lifted it up above the immediate occasion and said in effect:

"You want to be important. You want to surpass others and be great among men. All right then. But be sure that it is real greatness you are after. Be sure it is a greatness worthy of God. If you would excel, excel in goodness. If you want to be first, be first in moral excellence. Make the strong force of your ambition the servant of high spiritual enterprise."

He was suggesting that we use this human instinct that we all have and dedicate it to worthy ends and high goals. Some cynic has said that "Neither an egg nor an ego is any good until you break it". I don't think that our Lord would have believed that. The truth is - He spent a great deal of his time teaching plain people that they were highly important, more important than they realized, and that it was sinful for them to be content with being nobody. God had made them great. Furthermore, He encouraged on his followers the ambition to be superior. What do ye more than others. You must be better than others; except your righteousness exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees you are not fitted for God's Kingdom.

We are told that there was a house painter, during the days of President Taft's administration, whose wife, knowing the President personally, kept pestering him to appoint her husband to the post of Secretary of Commerce. The genial Taft tried to cushion his refusal tactfully by suggesting that so important a post required a big man, a man prepared by long training to meet its demands. That didn't faze her one bit. That would take care of itself. If the president would just appoint him to the position then he would be a big man. That may have been in the minds of James and John. Once seated on the left hand and the right hand of Jesus, they would be big just because they sat there.

I'm sure it must have troubled Jesus in that the men of his time were so slow to understand the difference between appearing to be big and being big. All around Him were men laboring under unworthy delusions of grandeur. The Romans of His day lording it over the weaker ones of the world, trying to appear more important than they were. ~~The souls of men were made for greatness but they were missing it because they were searching for it in ways that never lead to it.~~ They all wanted to play Hamlet, and it must have been hard for them to understand what He meant by greatness, and by what he meant when he said: "Whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

HIS MESSAGE TO US

His message is clear to us. We, too, are made for greatness. God has given us all the equipment wherewith to become genuinely important. Far from disparaging our hunger for importance, Jesus acclaimed it as a movement of God in the soul. He saw that so great a force must be dedicated to worthy ends. The "SELF" is not a worthy end. The self must not be the goal. If we use it merely to promote the self, we shall be frustrated. "He that exalteth himself shall be abased." we had better take the verdict of Jesus, for it is the verdict of life itself. Let him who would be great among you - ~~him~~ whose burning ambition is to be important - let him learn to be a servant. That is the only way.

The late Samuel Grafflin used to tell of a man who had lived out his life in a small mid-western town. He was a nobody, a most inconspicuous man, little education in his youth except the education of a delivery boy in the local grocery stores.

"Yet (said Dr. Grafflin) he was easily the town's first citizen. Everybody called him 'Joe', and when he prayed at the church or in Sunday School something happened in people's hearts. In his small house on a back street people turned to him for that intangible something that puts hope into life. I shall never forget the morning he died of a fever. The stores did little business, and there was a hush in the streets. The richest man in town had just ordered a new carriage, and he went down himself to offer it to Joe's widow. The florist denuded the greenhouse of its choicest flowers and banked the little parlor with a wealth of beauty. The county undertaker drove fifteen miles over the hills to offer his services, free. For he said, 'I was a drunkard on these roads until one day Joe got hold of me and told me of the saving grace of Christ'. And so they came. The old toll-gate keeper said, 'I've been keeping this toll-gate for 35 years, but never before have I seen 1200 carriages come from all over the country to pay tribute to one man."

This is a greatness that is within the reach of all of us. Let us try to be leaders in this worthier and far greater parade....the parade of those who follow Jesus Christ. Let us compete with each other and try to surpass each other in generosity, in kindness, in service, in compassion, in Christian understanding. Let us bring the force and the power of our ambition and let it be tamed by the power of the Person of Jesus Christ.

LET US PRAY: O God, who hast shown us the perfect life in Christ Jesus, help us as we are drawn to that unattainable ideal. Give us the strength and the wisdom to go steadily on our way, cultivating the qualities we admire and reaching out for help that can come from Thee. By the power of association may we grow more and more like him as we are more ready to recognize our shortcomings. Amen

....and let it be the servant of high spiritual enterprise.

This reminds me of something that happened last Sunday morning near the end of the coffee hour. My three year old daughter was on the stage in Fellowship. Her brother stood off to one side, pulled open the stage curtains, turned on the light and Catherine stepped through. And waving her hand she called out in her small voice to those in Fellowship, "Hello, everybody... look at me....look at me". I'm sure she gets this from her mother...