

Protagonist Corner

Smashing a Scratched Record

by Rush Otey

St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Tucker, Ga.

The year 1983 means among other things that it has been a decade since ordination for some of us, people who decided to "go into the ministry" during the 1960's, whose time in seminary was marked by Viet Nam, whose first sermons were shaped by our reaction to Watergate and by whatever we could (nondirectively) sneak in from the human potential movement without departing too far from our exegetical, Niebuhrian superegos. A decade is not all that long, and ten years does not give us either the wisdom or ecclesiastical stature of an E. T. Thompson or a Rachel Henderlite; but a decade does prompt one to ask whether it was wise to have followed such a vocation as ours.

There have been days when the answer seems to be decidedly negative, when the whining heart twangs its self-pitying solo. Here are the recurring chords: (1) The church and we are ineffectual in solving the world's problems (Amen to Jesus' statement, "In the world you shall have trials and tribulations. . . ." I forget the rest of that.) (2) The church and we are more intent on self-perpetuation than proclamation and self-giving. (3) There are too many meetings, too many reams of newsprint, too many neurotics in pew and pulpit, too many conflicting demands and expectations. Joseph Sittler in his book *The Ecology of Faith* has a chapter on the "Maceration of the Minister." Sittler asserts that "A minister has been ordained to an Office, and too often ends up running an office. . . . (Ministers) recall with a sense of joy the occasions when honest work and unhurried reflection gave a strange victory to their efforts. But these occasions are infrequent, set amid great stretches of guilt-begetting busyness" (p. 84). (4) Too few churches offer lawyer's wages. (5) Idols proliferate.

But, after ten years and more, I do not wish to hear that song any longer. It reminds me of a record which has a deep scratch on it and keeps repeating the same meaningless syllable over and over. I want to throw it away, after smashing it good.

There is an affirmation of ministry which needs to be more proudly, more intentionally stated more often. Rene Dubos, the scientist and writer, ended what was to be his last book *Celebrations of Life* with these words:

We may differ in our tastes and goals; we may even despise much of what we see around us, but most of us would join in Thoreau's clarion call in *Walden*: "I do not propose to write an Ode to Dejection, but to brag as lustily as Chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roof, if only to wake my neighbors up"—for a Celebration of Life. (*Celebrations of Life*, 253)

I stay in the ministry as freely as I entered it. No one hogties me to the pulpit, or forces me to ponder theology instead of the Georgia legal code, or drags me

to the hospital or the night shelter or the homes of parishioners, or pushes me to my knees for prayer, or drafts me to work for a nuclear freeze.

There are at least four chords to this affirmation.

(1) *The ministry offers freedom within a community of grace.* To be sure, this freedom may be the undoing of some, the beginning of maceration for others. Granted, it is not unlimited; it is in order to a greater power; it needs measures of discipline, action, suffering, death (Bonhoeffer, *Stations on the Way to Freedom*). But we cannot finally ignore the glad call of Galatians, "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). We have a unique opportunity to shape and order our own vocational lives and to enter the lives of others. We can in effect change careers in several directions without changing vocations. We can be interdisciplinary in our inquiry. We can be creative in our expressions of whatever truth discovers us.

The basis of this freedom in human terms is the community of grace. I take seriously the notion of Bonhoeffer that the gospel can be found concretely in a group of people. "It is to the communion of the saints that the Word is given, as both creating it and as the instrument of its activity. Where the communion of the saints is present, the Word is not ineffective" (*Sanctorum Communio*, 161).

The saints have at times disappointed me, chagrined me, chastened me; but they have never let me down or let me go.

(2) *The ministry offers an opportunity for dealing with both ultimate and penultimate reality.* One minute someone walks in asking for twenty dollars for groceries. The next visitor wants to pray before a difficult decision. One child is born healthy, another seriously deformed; they are both baptized. A drunk asks at 3 a.m. in the night shelter, "What in the hell are you doing this for?"

Somehow I'd be bored and lonely on Wall Street after this. It's better to live with few illusions; tickertape mystifies me.

(3) *The ministry offers a chance to reconcile, to "build bridges."* In a decade I've seen fellow ministers (lay and ordained) at work in hospitals, bars, universities, corporation board rooms, governor's offices, slums, suburbs, farms, death rows, newspaper offices, classrooms, textile mills, Appalachian hollows, even the Soviet Union. Most of them did more construction than destruction. They were in the midst of significant events, alongside their neighbors, grappling with fundamental issues. As a prison inmate once said about a Christian friend, "Some people talk about what is. Others talk about what is what is. He talks about what is what is what is!"

(4) *The ministry offers a sense of joy and humor.* Perhaps joy is the gift of laughter in the midst of maceration. The imperative to rejoice in Philipians is all the more empowering because it was written from prison to people who were facing persecution and death. At their best, ministers do not take themselves too seriously.

Recently at a Presbytery meeting there was a resolution that in view of the economic depression in the land, all clergy should voluntarily take a 5% cut in salary and give the money to the unemployed. We were trying to weasel out of such a program while maintaining decency, dignity, and order. But then one

minister rose in support of the motion, saying, "This proposal asks us to give up 5%. Jesus asks us to give up everything. I think we should vote for the motion since it represents a 95% savings!"

The motion failed, but the truth was heard.

There is a passage from Luther's *Table Talk* which I do not have on my bulletin board because I've not been in much danger of forgetting it since reading it a few years ago:

Unless those who are in the office of preacher find joy in him who sent them, they will have much trouble. Our Lord God had to ask Moses as many as six times. He also led me into the office in the same way. Had I known about it beforehand, he would have had to take *more* pains to get me in. Be that as it may, now that I have begun, I intend to perform the duties of the office with his help. On account of the exceedingly great and heavy cares and worries connected with it, I would not take the whole world to enter upon this work now. On the other hand, when I regard him who called me, I would not take the whole world not to have begun it. Nor do I wish to have another God. (November, 1531)