Septuagesima Sunday
Rolling Meadows, Illinois 1971

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IN NOMINE JESU

I Corinthians 9: 26, 27: [Phillips] I RUN THE RACE THEN WITH DETERMINATION. I AM NO SHADOWBOXER; I REALLY FIGHT! I AM MY BODY'S STERNEST MASTER, FOR FEAR THAT WHEN I HAVE PREACHED TO OTHERS I SHOULD MYSELF BE DISQUALIFIED.

The SUBJECT of my SERMON today is the HOLY MINISTRY. Ministry MEANS SERVICE. THE HOLY MINISTRY means to be in the SERVICE of the HOLY GOD. In a sense, EVERY CHRISTIAN is CALLED into the HOLY MINISTRY. EVERY CHRISTIAN is CALLED into the SERVICE of the HOLY GOD. But I want to SPEAK SPECIFICALLY about the SPECIAL MINISTRY of those who are CALLED and ORDAINED to SERVE THE HOLY GOD in a GIVEN CONGREGATION or PARISH.

For whatever REASONS, it is quite OBVIOUS that the MINISTRY of the CHURCH is in TROUBLE. FEWER and FEWER YOUNG MEN desire the ROLE of MINISTER in a LOCAL CHURCH. GIFTED young men who USED to take up the HOLY MINISTRY as a LIFE'S WORK no longer want to be IN it. Some who ARE in it want to be OUT of it. In almost ALL Christian denominations, the NUMBER of young men ENTERING the SEMINARIES is going DOWN - DRASTICALLY - by the THOUSANDS.

Some seem to FEEL that their TALENTS and GIFTS can be USED in OTHER VOCATIONS - sometimes MORE creatively and SATISFYINGLY. Some are UNDOUBTEDLY INFLUENCED by the fact that the MONETARY REWARDS of the MINISTRY are NOT up to those of OTHER PROFESSIONS - but they NEVER were. That CAN'T be the WHOLE REASON! I think PART of the REASON lies in the DECLINE of the LOCAL PARISH as a CENTER of INFLUENCE and IMPORTANCE in the COMMUNITY, and young men are SAYING to THEMSELVES, "WHO WANTS TO BOARD A SINKING SHIP?" Whatever the REASONS, the fact REMAINS that OUR CONGREGATION, in spite of its VAST numbers of YOUNG PEOPLE, like MANY other congregations, has NO ONE PREPARING for the HOLY MINISTRY.

Next week I am going to BEGIN a SERIES of SERMONS about what it TAKES to be a CHURCH. The THEME will be: "WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS TO THE CHURCH!" But TODAY I want to TALK about WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A MINISTER - a PASTOR of a LOCAL PARISH.

The CRISIS of the MINISTRY is EMPHASIZED by the FACT that of the young men NOW PREPARING for the MINISTRY - as many as 3/4's in some SEMINARIES - have NO PLANS to go into the MINISTRY of a local congregation AFTER their GRADUATION. MANY have NO PLANS to be ORDAINED. They PREFER to MINISTER through some SECULAR OCCUPATION - not that there is anything WRONG, or anything the MATTER with secular occupations. The POINT is that they are FLEEING the PARISH. They would just as soon TEACH, or engage in SOCIAL WORK, or become active in BUSINESS, or in the INSTITUTIONAL CHAPLAINCY. But they want NO PART of the PARISH MINISTRY.

ADD to this the FACT that LITERALLY THOUSANDS of PASTORS are LEAVING the FULL-TIME PARISH MINISTRY EVERY YEAR. A national organization, with OFFICES in 14 cities, is DEDICATED to HELP EX-MINISTERS, EX-RABIS, and EX-PRIESTS obtain secular employment. The organization is VERY SUCCESSFUL. Most ministers seeking CIVILIAN EMPLOYMENT FIND THAT the BUSINESS COMMUNITY considers them a MAJOR UNTAPPED MANPOWER SOURCE with STABILITY and brainpower. They easily get JOBS as SALESMEN, MANAGEMENT TRAINEES, OFFICE MANAGERS, SYSTEMS ENGINEERS, JOURNALISTS, ADVERTISING MEN, ECONOMISTS, and PERSONNEL DIRECTORS.

I don't know what has CONTRIBUTED MOST to the WHOLESALE DESERTION OF THE MINISTRY by so MANY men - but I have an IDEA it has something to do with the SUPERFICIAL kind of CHRISTIAN that is JOINING the CHURCH TODAY. In today's

EPISTLE St. Paul compares the LIFE of a CHRISTIAN to the LIFE of an ATHLETE. It takes something to be a REAL ATHLETE. It TAKES something to be a REAL CHRISTIAN. In some ways, what it TAKES to be a REAL CHRISTIAN is VERY similar to what it TAKES to be a REAL ATHLETE. You HAVE to be IN the GAME - otherwise, you are NOT playing at all. You have to STRIVE for EXCELLENCE - otherwise you are going to be just an "ALSO-RAN." You have to go into TRAINING - otherwise you are going to be JUST a NOBODY. You have to RUN to WIN - or you are NOT in the GAME at all.

When St. Paul WATCHED the ATHLETIC GAMES going on at CORINTH, he did NOT see MEN and WOMEN just GOING THRU THE MOTIONS. They were OUT TO WIN! They RAN with a PURPOSE! Determination was in their EYES - backed by MONTHS of HARD TRAINING! The BOXERS whom he watched were NOT just SHADOWBOXERS. They were READY to PLAY the GAME - at WHATEVER COST to THEMSELVES!

St. Paul had a GAME PLAN for his OWN LIFE. He was going to FOLLOW CHRIST! As a MAN, Paul was not ALL STRENGTH with NO WEAKNESSES. He KNEW very well just where his weaknesses lay. But he HAD a GAME PLAN! He undertook to FOLLOW CHRIST! He was NOT going to RUN AIMLESSLY. He was NO SHADOWBOXER. He was in TRAINING - like an ATHLETE OUT to WIN. "I RUN THE RACE.....WITH DETERMINATION. .....I REALLY FIGHT! I AM MY BODY'S STERNEST MASTER, FOR FEAR THAT WHEN I HAVE PREACHED TO OTHERS I SHOULD MYSELF BE DISQUALIFIED."

St. Paul was QUITE a MAN - EDUCATED, yet COMPLETELY MISGUIDED - IMPETUOUS and HOTHEADED - UNPREPOSSESSING in APPEARANCE and NOT particularly IMPRESSIVE in MANNER. This man GOD PICKED to be a MINISTER of JESUS CHRIST.

St. Paul did NOT HESITATE to APOLOGIZE for himself. He NEEDED the GRACE of GOD as MUCH as ANY MAN - and he NEEDED to be FORGIVEN MORE than others. He did NOT HESITATE to call himself "THE CHIEF OF SINNERS" - but PAUL NEVER APOLOGIZED for JESUS CHRIST.

Paul PREACHED CHRIST in all His GREATNESS and GLORY. With PASSION and PERSISTENCE he PROCLAIMED the fact that CHRIST had DIED for ALL MEN, and that He had been RAISED from the GRAVE to be the LIVING LORD of HEAVEN and EARTH. "I DELIVERED UNTO YOU FIRST OF ALL THAT WHICH I ALSO RECEIVED, THAT CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES, AND THAT HE WAS RAISED AGAIN FROM THE DEAD ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES." Neither PAIN nor PERSECUTION could PREVENT him from PREACHING CHRIST the SAVIOR to ALL MEN. He had only ONE fear, that having "PREACHED TO OTHERS" he should be DISQUALIFIED.

Laid the card right on the table!

It did NOT bother St. Paul that PEOPLE were ANGERED by his PREACHING. He SPOKE forthrightly, CLEARLY, BOLDLY, and WITHOUT EQUIVOCATION! * As he himself says, he was DETERMINED "TO KNOW NOTHING EXCEPT JESUS CHRIST AND HIM CRUCIFIED!

That is what it takes to be a MINISTER. A MINISTER has to be a man who LOVES GOD, and WANTS to HELP PEOPLE. A MINISTER has to be a man of CONVICTION and COMMITMENT. He HAS to be READY to get down on the PLAYING FIELD and RUN and FIGHT! He HAS to KNOW in whom he BELIEVES! He HAS to KNOW for WHOM he STANDS - and he HAS to SPEAK for HIM with AUTHORITY! A MINISTER REFUSES to let others DICTATE the MESSAGE HE BRINGS. He is a PROPHET - SEEING things as they are - as they REALLY ARE! He has to TELL it, as the YOUNG PEOPLE SAY somewhat UNGRAMMATICALLY, "LIKE IT IS." God WANTS him to DO THAT. He SPEAKS for

GOD, and he PREPARES the WAY for JESUS CHRIST.

Maybe the MINISTRY is in such a CRISIS today because PEOPLE can't STAND MEN who DON'T BEND in the BREEZE of PUBLIC OPINION - who can't wait for the MAJORITY to DECIDE what it is going to do. Too many people EXPECT a minister to be a CARBON-COPY of the SWEET-TALKING, UNCTIOUS, CONFIDENCE MAN - a SORT OF CORPORATE VICE-PRESIDENT in charge of public relations - whose job it is to KNOW what PEOPLE want to HEAR - and then to OFFER it to them in the most ATTRACTIVE PACKAGE POSSIBLE. The IDEA is to PLEASE as many people as possible, and the WORSE POSSIBLE THING is to ROCK the BOAT!

St. Paul ROCKED the BOAT! He ROCKED the NATIONAL BOAT, the COMMUNITY BOAT, the CHURCH BOAT, and the PERSONAL BOAT. He did NOT think it was his BUSINESS to make people feel COMFORTABLE. He called them to get down on the PLAYING FIELD, to RUN the RACE, to FIGHT!

ANYBODY can SIT on the SIDELINES - ANYBODY can be an ARMCHAIR or a ROCKING CHAIR CRITIC - but it takes a REAL FOLLOWER of JESUS CHRIST to HELP a MAN, a man who is a MINISTER, to be the MAN CHRIST ELECTED HIM TO BE! It takes a REAL FOLLOWER of JESUS CHRIST to get down on the PLAYING FIELD and RUN the RACE!

I am in the MINISTRY BECAUSE I WANT TO BE. I have TWO PRAYERS. First, that I may RUN the RACE with such DETERMINATION that when I have PREACHED to OTHERS I should myself NOT be DISQUALIFIED. Secondly, that perhaps on the BACK, DARK CORRIDORS of HEAVEN, there may COME SOMEONE - just one - out of the CORNER to SHAKE MY HAND and to SAY, "THANKS, Pastor, THANKS for BRINGING ME to CHRIST - for HELPING ME to RUN the RACE. THANKS for MY BEING HERE." AMEN.