DON'T WALK THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW PATH

--A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself."(Mt. 6:34a)

We have received intelligence here that in certain parts of the country the locale of Cambridge is being viewed with increasing suspicion. Cambridge gave the world the Ivy League look some years ago, and that was all right. But now it seems that Cambridge has given the world the New Morality and LSD. And that's not all right, according to many.

So the impression is growing that if you want your son or daughter to walk the straight and narrow path, you make sure he or she doesn't come anywhere near Cambridge. Actually, the impression is almost totally wrong. In few other places, it seems to me, do so many people walk the straight and narrow path so relentlessly and so efficiently, -- the pre-planned, well-calculated straight and narrow path into the future.

This is of concern. This is of concern not because of what people across the country may or may not think of Cambridge, but because of what it means for our humanity. From a biblical perspective, at least, we all ought to be wandering and lingering much of the time, and not be bound all the time to the straight and narrow path.

Let's begin by considering that pathway into the future. Perhaps we'd better call it a roadway or a super-highway. In many respects being a member of our society, specifically the academic community, is like being a driver or a passenger in an automobile speeding along the turnpike. You're on your way somewhere, -- perhaps on the way to real life. Real life is at the end of the pike, past the last toll station.

You study hard in secondary school to get into college. You study hard in college to get into graduate school. You study hard in graduate school in order to get the right job. And so on. And sometimes it seems as if the turnpike is never going to end.

The sociologist, Max Weber, long ago labeled this kind of approach to life as the Protestant Ethic, or more exactly, we can say, the Puritan Ethic. In its popular forms puritanism has always been an approach to life emphasizing preparation, and then more preparation. You live today in order to build a better tomorrow. Today is a period you pass through as quickly and as efficiently as possible, with no waste of energy, in order to be prepared for tomorrow.

A rather prominent area in which this attitude makes itself felt, as everyone knows, is the area of sex. Sex simply doesn't fit into the puritan's scheme of things. After all, it takes time. I mean, if it's right it takes time.

And let's give some credit to our puritan forebears and our puritan neighbors at this point. Puritanism had and has a high view of sex, at least in this respect. The puritans knew, and they still know, that sex is much more than a hasty meeting in the back of a car.

The trouble with the puritans is that they face themselves with a very narrow alternative: either bad sex or virtually no sex. And they choose the second.

-2-

It seems that they don't have the time for all the involvement which good sex entails.

Now it's easy for us to poke fun at the so-called puritans, especially when we discuss sex. But are we all that different?

According to the depth-psychologist, Rollo May, we're not. In an unusually perceptive article in last March's Saturday Review Rollo May argues that the so-called liberated sexual mores of today actually represent a new version of puritanism. The chief idea is that people are trying to have as much sex as possible, and that means moving from one partner to another with an increasing frequency.

Of course this makes it virtually impossible to enter into a depth relationship with any one person. That, after all, takes time. As May says, "The Victorian person sought to have love without falling into sex; the modern person seeks to have sex without falling into love." In a word, for the modern so-called liberated person sex is a series of so many quick stops along the super-highway. The puritan, we might say, decided not to stop along the way. The modern neo-puritan stops. But they're both on the same road, and they're both on their way in a hurry.

I might add that in a turnpike existence things can become pretty meaningless after awhile, especially when the road goes on and on as it sometimes can. This, I guess, is what Henry Miller means when he says on the first page of his Tropic of Cancer: "Not the slightest indication of a change anywhere. The cancer of time is eating us away."

So it's no surprise that both the puritans and the neo-puritans have to look for kicks. You get together and you burn witches. Or, you get together and you take LSD. You have to do something to cancel out the boredom and the monotony of the road.

You'd think that we would know better. I mean, those of us associated with the academic community. The university is, after all, predicated on wandering and lingering, not on the perpetual following of the straight and narrow path.

This is clear in the humanities. At the least the humanities mean stepping back and gaining some perspective. You do something totally irrelevant like studying Plato's Republic, and then maybe you'll understand our government a little better. You wander through the classics.

At first glance it's a different matter with the natural sciences. We have the image of the natural scientist as one who rigorously follows a set method. We see him as a fellow who constantly keeps his eyes on the road. But that's not the scientist, as almost any scientist will tell you. His work is full of hunches and guesses and intuitions. The scientist may keep his eye on the road for awhile, but sooner or later he wants perspective, too. So at times he comes to a full halt. And he looks around at the hitherto unexamined scenery. And that's when many of the major discoveries occur. In 1929, for example, an English physician happened to notice that spores of bread mold had gotton into a culture of disease germs he was growing, and that around each spore was a clear area where no germs grew. This was the discovery of penicillin.

So I say, you'd think we in the academic world would know better, that we'd realize the shortcomings of the turnpike approach to life more than we do. But we don't, I guess, and perhps that's a sign of our human condition. Not a few of us continue to march along the straight and narrow path, even though the basic thrust of our academic discipline wants to slow us down and have us look around.

In this respect things don't seem to have changed much since New Testament times. Jesus presumably had the condition of the people of his day in mind when he spoke about being frantic over the future. When he said: "Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" ...I take it, by the way, that we are permitted to add here: "Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'With whom shall I go to bed?'" We can rightfully add this here, since Jesus is referring to the total life of a person.

As he says in summary form, "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself." I venture to translate this: Don't relentlessly follow the straight and narrow path into the future. Don't let this be the determining factor in your life. Don't always be on the way to life. Rather, come to a full stop and begin to live. Wander around. Linger here and linger there.

With this willingness to linger comes a new sensitivity for other people. You don't stop to withdraw within yourself or within your own group. You stop to be yourself, and that means being with other people wherever they are and whoever they are.

Here we can surely learn from those students who have been finding time to participate in the Civil Rights movement or in tutoring or in similar projects, doing this in spite of the many surface pressures of the straight and narrow academic road.

But taking time off is only the beginning. The real art is to be able to fill the whole day with a new sensitivity for others. That means your relations with your roommates or your colleagues, your date or your marriage partner, as well as your relations with those people whom we call social outcasts. For example, some are in such a rush to get through the school year, that they never really get to know their roommates. That happens more often than people realize.

In the very special area of sexual relations the direction of our text, very simply expressed, is this: take your time. This is one of the commendable features of the so-called New Morality, as distinguished from the new puritanism. Although it is problematical in some respects, the New Morality does emphasize deep abiding personal relationships. And that means mutual knowledge and commitment. Such a relationship, of course, is not something that can happen overnight.

In this connection we all may be well-advised to read or re-read the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament. Here's a sample:

My beloved put his hand to the latch,
and my heart was thrilled within me.
I arose to open to my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with liquid myrrh
upon the handles of the bolt.

Lest there be any doubt, biblical faith is <u>not</u> puritanical. Nor, of course, is it neo-puritanical. Biblical faith leads us to linger with the sexual relation and to savor it. It leads us to commit ourselves deeply to the other person, -- not to dash again and again to a new partner. Compare the Song of Solomon with the <u>Tropic of Cancer</u> sometime. It's a very illuminating comparison.

Yet a question remains unanswered. How is it that in a variety of ways we're <u>able</u> to stop, to linger, to wander? Why don't we continue to march along the straight and narrow path into the future?

Let's ask this question. How is it that a child can play? For many reasons, of

-4-

course, but one reason is of the essence. The child can play because he knows and can rely on the affection and the care of his parents. He knows, for example, that his father will provide the food he needs for tomorrow. So he doesn't have to worry about tomorrow and he can play today.

This kind of imagry is the foundation on which our text is built. The text says, don't be frantic about tomorrow. Why? The answer comes earlier in our lesson: "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

The New Testament in general and our text in particular presuppose that the whole vast drama of life is held together by the affection and the power of God the Father. He will take care of us tomorrow. Ultimate reality is loving care.

This, then, is finally why we don't have to be frantic about tomorrow. This is why we can afford to linger in the present and be sensitive to the presence of others.

This is why we don't have to follow relentlessly the straight and narrow path into the future.

"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself."