

# IF YOU DON'T 'GET THE PHONE,'

## YOU WON'T GET THE WORD

A sermon preached on the occasion of my 55th anniversary of ordination

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Fifty-five years ago today, clergy hands were laid on my head to induct me into the guild of preachers of "the Word." Besides sermonizing, many other things were & are expected of me; but preaching is the heart of Christian ordination. What is preached is called the "sermon," which is short for the Latin *sermo domini*, "a word from the Lord" (or *sermo dei*, "a word from God").

Now, whether a sermon is *for you* a word from the Lord, a communication from God, requires of you more than that you listen to the preacher. The sound from the preacher is your phone ringing: if you don't get it (pick up the phone), you won't get it (God's word to you through the sermon).

A sermon is two phones ringing. Think of God with a phone in each ear, waiting for the preacher & the hearer to answer his ring. If the preacher doesn't lift the phone, whatever he/she says is no sermon even if the bulletin says it is; just so, it's no sermon *for you* unless in your innerness you pick up the invisible phone labeled "This line is for the Lord's exclusive use." Which brings me to the problem we have with this sermon....

By our pastor's interview design (the questions in **boldface** are his, as will be further remarks addressed to me during the sermon), this sermon is to center in me, else it won't be a celebration of my 55th anniversary of ordination: but if it doesn't center in God, it won't have been a sermon! (The wording of the questions is what he gave me over the phone a few days ago: he's of course free to change.)

### **What forces & influences impelled you toward & into the ordained Christian ministry?**

Just after my 17th birthday, I heard a sermon. Both invisible phones were in use--the preacher listening to God, & I listening to God while looking at & listening to the preacher & hearing the same message directly on my phoneline that I was hearing indirectly, through his being, from his phoneline. The Holy Book says "How shall they hear without a preacher?" (Ro.10.14 KJV, the whole passage --vv.5-17--reflecting Deut.30.10-20; & hear the echoes of Is.: 52.7-53.12; instead of "preacher," NRSV has "someone to proclaim him [ie, the Lord]"). (If you want to "get it" better, study these passages prayerfully at home: copies of this sermon-Thinksheet are at the rear of this room.)

Growing up in a liberal Protestant home of ambiguous, indefinite affiliation, I wandered among the churches of various mainline denominations; but that sermon was in a evangelical, so-called "Bible-believing" new & tiny church. The sermon was a radiant proclamation of a grace greater, as a gospel hymn has it, than all our sins. We are disobedient, forgetful, fretful children of a heavenly Father who will take no for an answer if we keep insisting, but who does everything he can to win us back from our wandering: he suffers for us even "to the point of death--even death on a cross" (Phil.2.8 NRSV, leading to v.11 NRSV: In response, we should "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father").

Confess. In the Lord's Prayer, we confess both our sin & our faith, knowing that confessing our sin without proclaiming our faith would be depressing, & confessing our faith without confessing our sin would be fatuous. See, now, how the two come together in Ro.10 just before the words "How shall they hear without a preacher?" Vv.8-9: "'The word is near you' [not, in the Deut. context, in heaven or overseas],...because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" from your sin (of wandering away & forgetting God) & sins (disobedience to God's will & way).

All this I'd *known* before that sermon, but through that sermon I *heard* it. Besides being a faithful worship-&-study churchgoer, every day since age 12 I'd read the Bible, often more than an hour; & I'd tried to teach myself Greek so I could read the NT instead of only reading translations of it. I'd been working on the invisible phonelines, the one from the Spirit to me & the one from the Word to me. (We truly hear the Word if we yearn to hear the Spirit in & through the Word.)

Back to that sermon. Its message was the most important thing I'd ever heard, really heard. And I wanted to tell it: wouldn't you want to tell the most important thing you'd ever heard? Now notice, in Ro.10, the very next words after "How shall

they hear without a preacher?" Here they are: "And how are they to preach unless they are sent?" God used that sermon to convince me I was sent. Everyone who truly hears the gospel is sent to pass it on. But some of us are sent in a manner the church recognizes as, to use the traditional Protestant phrase, "a call to the [ordained] ministry." The church, the churches, believed I was, & am; & I have never doubted my call, which I have sought, though sometimes haltingly, under the judgment & guidance of the Church in the Spirit, to exercise.

**The world has seen momentous changes since you were graduated from seminary & ordained in 1940. Which have you participated in, & how?**

My mother used to say "A man must participate in the actions & passions of his time, on pain of not having lived." Well, I've participated, & experienced the pains of having lived as what the subtitle of my book FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT names me: "a contrarian Christian." I've been a disturber of the peace, an uncomfortable presence to those in power. I got caught using Communist money to subvert the House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee, an artesian well of fear & hate. Wars I passed up: my eyes were too bad for chaplaincy; but I was always, one way or another, embattled on the homefront & getting myself fired for being too radical about this or that--in the civil rights movement, & for being too liberal in conservative schools & too evangelical in a radical school. My National Council of Churches debate with Billy Graham (1966) helped moved resurgent evangelicalism into taking more account of the social implications of the gospel. When five years ago I went blind in one eye & was told I had only a 50% chance of not losing the other, I was slowed down, but not much, & not for long. But answering this question is beginning to bore me, so let's move on to the next. I've been a quietistic activist, as I believe Jesus my Lord was. And, as I said in a recent letter to the Cape Cod Times, I've tried to make it harder for people to forget God. It wasn't published. When our children were little, we read to them Rilke's STORIES OF GOD FOR GIRLS AND BOYS. After one story, Rilke's child-audience asked him to tell a story & leave God out. He said "Even if I did, he'd come in after the last period." Soon the world will have to get along without my living voice & wordprocessor, but I can relax: God will always come in after the last period where he can't get in before. I often quote Augustine's prayer, "God, I'd not have sought you if you hadn't found me." When I leave it for another, this universe will still be in good hands. Meanwhile, how can I not trust God, seeing there's so much good in the world?

**The new year is upon us, our congregation's 200th. What words of wisdom do you have for us as we enter our third century?**

I'll grab a handful of thoughts & hope that at least one of them will be wise....(1) To "be of love a little more careful than [of] anything [else]," an e.e.cummings quotation I often hear from the old clergywoman I live with, as she often hears from the old clergyman she with, this quotation from Jn. of the Cross: "When the evening of life comes, we shall be judged on love." Love is not an additive to our churchly existence but is the essence of it: love for one another (1Jn.4.20: "those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen"); love for neighbors near & far; love even, as our Lord commands us, for enemies (Mt.5.44, L.6.27,35). The church, & the Faith it enshrines, lives by love as a fire lives by burning. If S.CongregationalChurch is not careful of love, a caring church, who will care for it? It will, & should, die....(2) To be a training-school for God-awareness. God gets us, frees us into inner peace & joy, saves us, only if he gets & holds our attention. To get & hold our attention, God has given us the Bible. By neglecting it, our society has gone to rot in morals & manners. As our church's spire points upward, our church can be a Noah Shelter for world-weary souls, while not neglecting service to needy bodies. A sermon is to point to God: our church can be a sermon to our community & beyond....(3) To learn to do with other churches whatever can be better done in cooperation....(4) For the rootless, to offer our roots, our lore, our church's heritage & hope....(5) To be people & a church of the Lord's Prayer--daily to pray/think/feel/live it....(6) Without neglecting others, to focus on young families....(7) Joy is the flag love waves, the flag human beings rally around. A loving, & therefore joyful, congregation has a future. For "the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Neh.8.10).