

Hear Sirens, Think Chase (I Timothy 6:11-16)

Robert W. Bertram

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The noises down here on Grand Avenue are different from the noises we used to hear at 801. Out there, in the quiet seclusion of that lovely campus, about the only noise that ever competed with chapel services or classroom lectures was the sound outdoors of the power-mower grooming the spacious lawns. Down here it is one huge semi after the other shifting laboriously into the next gear on its way to the warehouses nearby, or the blood-curdling sirens of ambulances and patrol cars in their race against time.

I've learned something about these new sounds. I used to think sirens were intended to clear the traffic. But that is too obvious. Their real purpose, I am discovering, is to serve as a call to prayer—a call to prayer more compelling even than those chimes up above us in the belfry of the College Church. There is a reason the ambulance goes by way of Grand Avenue: not just because that is where Firmin Desloge and Incarnate Word and the rest of the hospitals are but because that is the street where all those waiting students and profs are, crowding the curbs on both sides, with who-knows-how-many-of-them praying that puffing ambulance on its way: “Please, God, for Jesus’ sake get the dear wino there on time, or the lead-poisoned baby—go, man, go.”

What is more, as I discovered from my New Testament last evening, those sirens have still another purpose. This time I mean the sirens not on the ambulance but on the patrol cars, as they respond to a radio call to an armed robbery in progress and take off on a hazardous chase, a chase that could prove fatal for the officers themselves. I learned something yesterday about that sort of chase, and I learned it from this epistle lesson for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost. From now on, whenever I hear one of those police cars from the Fifth District racing by in hot pursuit, I'll be directly reminded of I Timothy 6.

In this text the one who is called out on the chase is Timothy, who really of course is you. The resemblance is striking when you recall that he, too, was a young minister as most of you are. And even if some of the rest of us are a bit older, we are all of us still awfully new at ministry. Timothy is all of us, and we have all been called out on the same chase. The apostle who writes Timothy his orders is like the police sergeant at headquarters who radios the call and monitors the chase as it proceeds. I did not realize until I heard this apostolic monitoring how much I needed that. Now that I have heard it, I think my chances might be just a little better than before. I mean my chances in this clergyman's chase. And what a hazardous assignment that is!

What is it we are called to chase after? We had better begin, as the apostle does, by saying what we are not to chase after. Paul puts it very simply and very bluntly: We are not to chase after money. Now I would never have thought to mention that to you this morning, I would never have chosen money as the thing to warn you against, had I not

been assigned this text. In fact even until late last night I was still resisting the pericope's preoccupation with money's being "the root of all evil," as the apostle says, on the grounds that that seemed to me an exaggeration or even downright moralistic and trivial. Especially did this warning seem unnecessary for clergyman and seminarians, all the more so if they are in exile. After all it is a standard joke among them to laugh at how underpaid they are and how ridiculously precarious their financial futures are—almost as precarious as that of most lay-people. Obviously Seminex people who can laugh so hard at money must not be chasing after it.

Or is that so obvious after all? Might not the laughter be telltale, at times a bit hysterical? Really, what Paul is warning against is not money itself but the pursuit of it, the nervous preoccupation with it, the gnawing insistence that we ought to have more of it than we do. The enemy is within. What Paul says about the ministers he condemns is: "They think religion should yield dividends; and of course religion does yield high dividends, but only to the man whose resources are within him" (6:6, Barrett's translation). What did you expect from the ministry? To make a profit? It is that false and phony expectation that sets us off on a wild goose chase, pursuing the wrong prey. You don't have to be affluent to be afflicted with that expectation. In fact, the affliction might even be worse among the poor. I wouldn't know. My own guess is that the pursuit is most feverish among those who, like many of us, are just badly in debt and up to our ears in installment payments, with both mates working and the 30-day spending cycle stretched to the breaking point and the recession mounting. To be preoccupied with money, whether it is the money you have or the money you don't have, is like the cop on the chase who is faked out by a decoy and in the end is gunned down from behind. With ministers, says Paul, that chase is fatal. That is the chase to shun. Call it off.

If not that, then what? What is the chase really after? What is it that is truly worth pursuing? Well, the apostle does speak about "the good confession." And that phrase does have an appealing ring about it, especially to folks like you and me who think of themselves as "a confessional movement." As you can see from your bulletins, the phrase did catch the fancy of this week's chapel preachers. "The good confession"—is that what we are being called out to chase? Well, not really. For as Paul tells Timothy "the good confession" is what you have already made. You made that confession publicly at your baptisms and again at your confirmations and again at your ordinations. You made the good confession, just as publicly, when you came with Concordia Seminary In Exile, and you will probably make it again and again in the presence of scores and hundreds of witnesses, when the verdict is announced against Dr. Tietjen tomorrow or during the week of Operation Outreach. But that, that "good confession," good as it is, is still not the goal of the chase. "The good confession" is already presupposed. It is that point of departure from which the chase takes off. It is only the beginning.

What the chase is really after, says Paul, is the carrying out of "the good confession"—the chase in you, within you. Paul describes the chase in three stages: the actual pursuit, the grabbing ahold, the wrestling to the floor. But all of that, and not just once but over and over, is essential if "the good confession" is going to be anything more than just a

good beginning, just words. The pursuit itself is well-nigh every thing. For look at what elusive prey the chase is after: “righteousness, piety, fidelity, love, fortitude and gentleness.” Every one of them seems constantly to outrun us. How much easier it would be just to stand up and be counted at the level of words. How much harder, how much more hazardous to have to struggle with those words in hand-to-hand combat until you really believe them yourself (if ever you fully do), until you can utter the good confession with “fortitude” and not just bravado and, at the same time, without ever lacking “gentleness.” That is what the real chase is after: “righteousness, piety, fidelity, love, fortitude and gentleness.”

Talk about a chase that is fatal. If ever there were a killing assignment, then this would seem to be it. Who could ever keep up with it? But that is what the call said. You heard it yourself. And that is the call you accepted when you made “the good confession.” See to it, says Paul, that you are a credit to the force and that you don’t disgrace your orders. The alternative, very clearly, is dismissal.

Most of all, the chase—this chase—is so dreadfully lonely. It runs down streets and alleys where no one is around to line the curbs and to marvel at your speed and to cheer you on. The chase goes through the dark night of the soul, and all alone. Or so it seems. How much more dramatic it would be if just someone were watching, even if it were—as Paul says—the Pontius Pilates, whose very hostility might at least incite us to a bit of boldness, a bit more heroism. But no, this fight—“the good fight of faith”—is reserved to absolute solitariness with no onlookers at all. Or so it seems. Not even God and His Christ are anywhere in sight. So it seems.

But that is only the way things seem. That is why this chase, this fight, is “the good fight of faith.” What you and I cannot see but what we can believe is that Someone else does see—this very God and His Christ. And His invisibility is not a reflection on Him. If it is a reflection on anyone it is a reflection on us that we cannot see Him. But that is not important now. What is important is that He is invisible just because He is so blindingly glorious. He is faster than the speed of light. His code-name should be Starfire. His voice, though it speaks to us constantly, is supersonic and comes through on one feeble receiver—sets only as the voices of other people. He is so infinitely close to us that we actually cannot perceive Him.

What is most glorious of all is that He is so intensely near with His love. He hovers over every inch of our chase not like a desk-sergeant perhaps but like the policeman’s wife, like the waiting father. He is consumingly interested in our speed and our progress. “Consumingly,” yes! His very love, His passion for us consumed Him in our behalf. That is why He had to make and did make “the good confession before Pontius Pilate”—for us men and our salvation. He had to answer for His interest in us. And He did answer for it, way beyond the call of duty.

Is He near, this God and His Christ, watching and cheering? He is better than that. He is Himself the prey! He is what you already have ahold of and are now wrestling to the floor—the only, “immortal” God, Paul calls Him. It is His life that is at stake, but for

you. For what you are pursuing and dragging onto and not letting go of, says Paul, is God's own "eternal life," the only life that lasts.

But will He ever step right out and show Himself? Of course, says Paul, and "in His own good time." Meanwhile, listen for the sirens and be of good chase.

Robert W. Bertram
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