

## On the Sidewalks of New York

### 20. Beginning at the Beginning

In the Fall of 1949 I entered Union Theological Seminary. My acceptance into the incoming Junior Class set before me the question: What kind of ministry should I prepare for in the Presbyterian Church? My original plan, when I first applied to Wooster in the Fall of 1944, was to prepare for a radio engineering ministry in mission.

In the Fall of 1944, I paid a visit to the Board of Foreign Mission offices of the Presbyterian Church at 156 Fifth Avenue. I had an appointment with Dr. Herrick Young, the Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions. I had come to talk to him about service in mission overseas. When I reflect on this meeting with Herrick Young, I am amazed at my aggressiveness. I was nineteen years old, still waiting to be accepted by the College of Wooster. I had heard about the work of radio evangelism at a young adult conference which I attended as a representative of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. I had been working for Fred Waring for almost two years and thought this experience should qualify me to work for a degree in radio engineering.

The secretary of Dr. Young brought me into his office. It was a huge, high ceiled room with dark wood panels. Dr. Young, a bald large framed man, greeted me from behind a large-sized mahogany desk. He asked me the purpose of my visit. I told him about my work with young adults in the church as an officer in the New York Synod of Westminster Fellowship. I explained my interest in the mission of the church, particularly in radio evangelism. I had heard about openings in Latin America. I mentioned that I had been working for Fred Waring for several years and recognized the impact of radio on reaching large numbers of people. He listened politely. After I had finished, he told me that he welcomed my interest and would like to hear from me after I had finished my studies.

I had expected more encouragement. Herrick Young's non-committal response didn't dampen my resolve for a radio ministry nor did it cool my

intention to get on with my education. My original plan to work overseas led me to take Spanish at Wooster, a subject in which I could do no better than a "C" grade. After my four years at Wooster, I had developed new thoughts about my ministry in the church.

My Wooster experience helped me to look at myself in a new way. I had been forced to think about a ministry for which I did have credentials. My new-found grasp of history as movement and my leadership in the Student League for Industrial Democracy pointed to a gulf between the church and working people. I had seen this gulf in my grandfather's and my father's story. I had come to see in a new light that my life had prepared me to take seriously the work of the church among industrial workers.

As I prepared to enter Union Theological Seminary in September, I looked forward to classes with Reinhold Niebuhr. He was one of the reasons I had decided to attend Union. I identified with Niebuhr. His German background, his early ministry among the automobile workers of Detroit, his early socialist affiliation all gave me a feeling of kinship.

In the Summer of 1949 I had my third summer at the Welfare Department of the Dress Joint Board of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. By this time I was a veteran, so they assigned me to research on the background of the people in union locals 22 and 69. When several members of the office staff of the Welfare Department discovered that I was entering Union Seminary they expressed great interest. I thought this was strange. The leadership of the Dress Joint Board was Jewish. Why would they be interested in my attending Union Seminary?

Their interest was even more specific. What did I know about Reinhold Niebuhr? When I told them I would be studying under Niebuhr, they became even more inquisitive. They asked questions about his theology and particularly about his political involvements. By now, I had tracked down their curiosity about Niebuhr. One of the officials of local 22 was Will Herberg, educational director of the Union. Will Herberg had been a Communist during the 1930s and had given up on Judaism. He had found a

new faith in the ideology of Marxist-Leninism and in the events in the Soviet Union.

In the late 1930s Herberg became disillusioned with the party line of the Communist International (COMINTERN). Most Jews were particularly irate over Stalin's pact with Hitler. Like many of his comrades, Herberg lost the "faith." Herberg had nowhere to turn. Then Herberg heard about Niebuhr and the political sharpness of his critique of an "absolutist" Communism. Herberg also became intrigued with the theological foundation which Niebuhr provided for this critique. Niebuhr had reestablished a ground for religious faith which Herberg had lost.

In the process of discussions with Niebuhr, Herberg was directed to a fresh understanding of his relinquished Jewish faith and of a biblical critique of all ideologies which supplant faith in God. Herberg, who along with Richard Wright had given up on the "God That Failed" (Wright's own literary analysis of the idolatry of Communism), returned to his Jewish faith. Herberg soon was to become a theologian in his own right. He went on to write a popular book "Protestant, Catholic, Jew" and was called to teach at Drew Theological Seminary. It was this conversion of Will Herberg that interested many of his fellow unionists at the Dress Joint Board. I spent my coffee breaks during that summer explaining what I knew of Niebuhr's theology.

Always in the background of Herberg's reconversion to Judaism through his association with Niebuhr lurked the question: "If Herberg believed in Niebuhr's theological analysis, why didn't he become a Christian?" The answer to that question, which many people consider apocryphal, is that Niebuhr convinced Herberg that he had a calling to bring his fellow Jews, many of whom had an experience of Communism similar to Herberg's, back to their ancestral Jewish faith. I do not believe the story is apocryphal, I believe it is pure Niebuhr.

This summer experience only heightened my eagerness for the enlivening environment of Union Seminary with its strong tradition of Christian engagement with the world. Niebuhr was in his prime in 1949. His

reputation as the United States' best known theologian was undisputed. TIME magazine had put Niebuhr's picture on its Twenty-fifth Anniversary issue on March 8, 1948. He had become a major figure in Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) - the political think tank which drew together the liberal left in the Democratic Party. His influence reached well beyond the theological community. He could count among his friends many of the policy makers within the U.S. State Department and the Democratic Administration. He carried on a regular correspondence and conversations with Allen Dulles, George Kennan, Chester Bowles, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Felix Frankfurter. In 1949, he was a regular invitee to the policy discussions of the U.S. State Department. He had been invited to the summer 1949, meeting of George Kennan's Policy Planning Staff of the State Department.

In September I moved into the sixth floor of Hastings Hall at Union Seminary. My roommate, who put up with me our three years at Union Seminary, was James MacNaughton from Glens Falls, New York. He had just graduated from Bowdoin College in Maine. Jim was a blessing from the very beginning. He was amiable and steady, not a person to jump off the deep end. We hit it off immediately, even to agreeing who would get which bed. Physically, his tendency was toward being overweight, but that matched his good-natured spirit. In our three years at Union, we never had an argument or spoke a harsh word to one another.

Jim came from solid Presbyterian stock as one would expect with a name like MacNaughton. His family was of Upstate New York Republican allegiance. Jim began as a Republican, but like many others at Union, moved closer to a Democratic or independent persuasion before he graduated. After I told him about my political affiliation, he was nonplussed: "I don't think I have ever met a socialist before."

The entering Junior class at Union Seminary in 1949 was a unique mix of people. Many of them had served in the Second World War. There was a wide spread of age since many had been in other professions before deciding to attend seminary. Entering a religious profession had not been on their agenda before the war. The war had stirred in them the need to search out the ultimate issues of life. Some had come to Union because they were attracted

to particular professors on the faculty. I was among that number. I soon learned that many had come to study under Paul Tillich, whose theology was viewed as a breakthrough in religious existential thought. I was surprised that there were not more students who were as strongly influenced by Niebuhr as I was. For many Niebuhr was not considered a theologian but a Christian ethicist. Ethics was a relatively new field. It was not as easily applicable to either the concerns of the pastorate or to professional academic pursuits. These were not my main considerations. Applied Christianity was my concern, so I would stay the course with Niebuhr.

The incoming Junior class was a heterogeneous group of people. Many had chosen Union to train for the pastoral ministry. Others were preparing for a variety of professional pursuits. Some wanted to teach, others were preparing for overseas service, some were entering the new field of counselling, those with music skills were studying in the School of Sacred Music, and still others came to study theology and then return to their previous professions.

The first classes at Union were basic fare. Beginning at the beginning . It was assumed, and rightly so, that none of us had engaged the biblical faith at any depth. Biblical illiteracy was an established fact in the United States. Old Testament was the beginning point. What better place to begin than in the Garden of Eden! or what better narrator than James Muilenburg! Muilenburg's name is not well known today among Old Testament scholars, nor is he known for writing any popular books or monographs.

James Muilenburg was a teacher par excellence. The Old Testament came alive under Muilenburg's touch. He had the face of an Old Testament prophet. Slightly bent in body, with sharp aquiline features, white hair pushed back against his head, piercing eyes, head thrust forward, he strode relentlessly back and forth across the front of his rectangular class room. His clear, sharp words recreated for us the place of our innocence and our sin -- the first Eden. It didn't matter that Muilenburg belonged to the school of Form Criticism. He did not take the Bible literally. But he believed deeply in the human predicament and in the salvation message of the Bible. This is where he engaged us. He slowed his pace across the room. An air of

expectation surrounded him. Suddenly there in the garden, God is walking, "Adam, Adam, where are you? What have you done?"

That's the way it began....my education at Union Seminary. We pursued human sin and Divine redemption for the next three years. We pursued it in all our courses and in all our conversations. Nothing was left out. Every corner that existed in human society was open to the quest: the politics of power, geo-politics and international relations, the arts and culture, the struggle for racial equality and for economic justice, inter-personal relationships, the inner personal life, the market place, the factory floor and the commercial office. All were intertwined and all were fair game.

It always amused me that those from the more traditional seminaries considered Union Seminary outside the pale of Christian orthodoxy. "Do they teach the Bible there?" I was asked by more conservative brothers. (There were not many sisters then). In these latter days, when the heat of the liberal-conservative battle still rages, I look back at my time at Union with great appreciation for getting on with the ultimate questions of life. Tillich's words, spoken in his thick German accent, still hang in the air: "Vateffer ist your ultimatt loyalty, dass ist your Gott." From the first day at Union when we started the quest, we were assured of one thing - that if we were true in our search, the quest would be with us through all our life.

Muilenburg was only one of the uncelebrated among Union's faculty. Union's drawing cards were Niebuhr and Tillich. They had made names for themselves. Niebuhr because of his incisive understanding of U.S. and global politics, and Tillich because of his upsetting the traditional Christian theological apple-cart. There were other less well known figures who were part of what became called "the Golden Age" of Union Seminary. John Bennett, an ally of Niebuhr, was, in his own right, one of the U.S.'s abler Christian social ethicists. John Knox made the New Testament an exciting venture and intrigued us with his analysis of Apostle Paul in shaping early Christianity. Some of us felt that John Knox had spent so much time studying and writing about Paul, that he had become his alter ego.

The same could be said about John T. McNeill, one of Union's church history professors. McNeill was prominent as a Reformation scholar, with a predilection for John Calvin. McNeill's teaching style was scholarly, which was saved from heaviness by his dry sense of humor. One came away from his course on John Calvin with the confidence that through MacNeill you had a first-hand experience of the inner workings of the earliest Reformed theologian.

I came to know John MacNeill more personally through an incident at the time of New Year's 1951. One of his graduate students came knocking at my door after Christmas. I was working on a paper due in early January. "How would you like to do John MacNeill a big favor?" was his question. "What kind of favor?" I asked. "Take out his niece from Toronto on New Year's eve?" That's not how I want to spend New Year's eve, I thought, having to think up places to go. "What about you, why can't you do it?" I asked. "I would take her out myself but I'm already engaged. Let me tell you she won't be boring. I'll take care of any expenses you have, within reason. And McNeill will love you for doing this." he told me. Since he was under duress, I finally agreed.

When I picked her up at the MacNeill's apartment, she turned out to be very blonde and very sophisticated. John MacNeill was obviously grateful to get her off his hands. "Now where do I take a very sophisticated Toronto woman?" I thought. Why not the old neighborhood, I know that territory. I took her to Yorkville and the Gay Vienna, the local family restaurant and bar on Second Avenue. Fortunately, we were able to squeeze in among the neighborhood crowd. The zither player was in great form that night as he warmed up the celebrants with a medley of popular American and Germany songs. We topped the evening off with a trip down to Times Square an hour before midnight. We joined the celebrative crush of people waiting for the ball to drop to usher in the new decade and the next half century. By the time I got her back to the McNeill's Seminary apartment her sophistication had evaporated. She was excited about being at Times Square. "Wait 'til I tell my friends in Toronto where I was on New Year's Eve." Her parting words to me: "I never thought I could have such a good time on New Year's eve without getting tight. Nor did I think I would spend it with a seminary

student." When John T. McNeill next saw me in the Seminary hallway, he thanked me warmly for devoting my New Year's to his niece. He told me what a relief it was that she had had a good time in New York. From then on John T. always had a special word for me in our casual meetings in the halls of Union.

Psychotherapy and religion, as a field for seminary study, was in its earliest stages in the late 1940s. Union was among the first seminaries to give the field serious consideration. Another one of Union's unsung professors was David E. Roberts. His personality leant itself to dealing sympathetically with the hidden suffering in other people. He was a warm individual, non-judgmental, who brought a healing touch to the discussion of the deep struggles which go on within the souls of all human beings. He was in the midst of writing a book on "The Grandeur and the Misery of Man" which was the basis of his lectures to us. It was published in 1955, the year of his death at a young age. I could not help feeling that his own suffering had provided the deep insights which moved many of us in his class room.

One of the benefits of studying at Union, particularly if you were preparing for a preaching ministry, was the availability of the nation's most able preachers for the Homiletics course. New York pulpits, in the Forties and the Fifties, drew some of the great preachers in all major denominations. After having sat under George Buttrick as my home church pastor for so many years, Union provided me with the opportunity to take his preaching course. Now I would be able to get inside his sermon preparation and his preaching style which had held my attention during my teenage years.

In 1950, while I was at Union, LIFE magazine ran a special issue on the ten great preachers in the United States. Listed at the top of the list was George Buttrick. George Buttrick's ascendancy among preachers can be attributed to a unique mixture of qualities. He had a command of English literature and the English Bible. He had an arresting preaching style. There was a nervous tension in his delivery which he would punctuate with hand movements. Each part of the sermon had a part to play in getting and holding attention. One point he made in class, and which I recognized from his preaching, was that the preacher had to get the congregation's attention in his first minute in

the pulpit. "If you cannot get the congregation's attention in the first minute, you will have lost them for the rest of the sermon."

One learned quickly from Buttrick that sermon preparation was a serious business. It required a vivid imagination as well as a deep commitment to the study of Scripture. His imagination was evident in the provocative sermon titles which he drew from the Biblical text and in the illustrations he used to get to hold the congregation's attention. He brought our class to his apartment one afternoon to give us the context in which his sermons were written. He brought out his long legal pad and illustrated how each section of the sermon had to be outlined and how continuity had to be made between each section. Buttrick, had one advantage in his career as a preacher, a gift not given to many people, he had a photographic memory. He remembered what he had read. He remembered stories, and poetry and occurrences which added life and inspiration to his sermons.

One of our assignments in his class was to prepare a sermon giving our outline and showing our sermon development. He chose one of the sermons we had handed in to illustrate both the adherence to his teaching as well as the deviation. When he wrote the title of the sermon he had chosen on the blackboard - "The Eternal Stranger" - it straightened me up in my seat. It was the one I had handed in. He made no mention of whose sermon it was, but went straight to work on critical comment. I had chosen the title from an article entitled "The Great Foreigner" I had read in THE NEW YORKER magazine about Albert Einstein. The article had made the point that Einstein lived in a world by himself. His quick mind and his insight into the theory of energy and matter had made him a stranger to many other people. I changed the title and applied the idea to the life of Jesus. I led off with the thought that Jesus by who he was and how he lived was the "eternal stranger" to us. "So far so good," said Buttrick, "good beginning. You got your congregation in the first minute."

"But then the sermon preparer goes astray." Buttrick continued. "The illustrations he chooses are too general, too far away from the daily existence of people." I had thrown into the fray the fact that our political, economic and social systems, in true Poethig style, represented deviations from the

spirit with which Jesus lived. Buttrick found some good illustrations I had used among the abstractions. He made some other points about needing to pay more attention to continuity. Then he came to the end of the sermon. ""This is the clincher. This is what saves this sermon."

At the end of the sermon, I shifted my theme. When we look at our lives and how we live them; when we see the mess we have made of ourselves and our world; when we grasp the fact of why God created the world in the first place, then it is we know that we are the ones who are strangers....we are the eternal strangers and not Jesus. "That reversal of field," Buttrick said, " is like picking up a fumble on the one yard line and running it back one hundred yards for a touchdown."

That made my day. I said to myself as I left class, "After all, I learned it from listening to the master. "