

Daily Lenten Devotional
Wednesday, April 9, 2025
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36—Behrenberg/The Pulpit



Rev. Dr. Adolph Behrenberg preached in Metuchen from 1942 until he sent copies of his sermon to be read with a note about "laryngitis" in the Fall of 1977. He had just returned from China on what would be his last trip around the globe. In his diaries he notes how he was not allowed to fly home until his health improved. In the last few years of his life, his diabetes and angina was compounded by a terrible cough that was only in the last months of his life diagnosed as cancer.

If we do the math and subtract the Sundays he was away in the summer he usually preached 40 sermons a year. Over thirty-five years that means the collection of his papers have 1,400 sermons. In my visits to Princeton I read a few hundred. Encountering his homilies this way it was easy to see patterns as it was exciting to find outliers given how consistent he was. One of his habits was to be "political." This was not his description; this was the critique he received and would mention in sermons from time to time. If I were to suggest an alternative, I would describe his sermons as "polemical." He was fighting trends, worrisome developments in the church, in society, and the world. His sermon writing was part critique, but also part warning. Too often what Behrenberg saw as he looked out at America was false confidence. Many people in the pews believed the good life of white suburban America was not jeopardized by the plight of "the negroes."

The danger of this false confidence was a persistent theme and a distance he felt between him and the congregation. You could hear it in a sermon after his return from abroad where he described the declaration of a staff member. She hated everything Behrenberg said from the pulpit. He recounted in a sermon how this staff member so many times she wanted to get up and walk out. But she stayed because he was speaking his conscience and he was stirring up people who were complacent.

Another theme and target of his sermons was the Roman Catholic Church. Not too many weekly sermons went by without his taking a swing, a jab at the Catholics. It was as if he took his role as "protesting Protestant" with absolute conviction. Perhaps the way to express this is how in one sermon he wrote "Jesus never would have envisioned the church as what it had become in Rome."

Yet, of interest was his claims regarding Christian theology. First and foremost Behrenberg believed Christian theology was fully articulated in the "genius" of Paul. It was our job to simply clarify, articulate the theology Paul put forth in his letters. This claim was made in his first sermon at Metuchen and the same claim was made as plainly 35 years later. This of interest because of the freedom such a view afforded. Behrenberg saw his ministry as motivational; he was there to bring people into the freedom and theology Paul offered. This focus was the second part of his sermons. We know what to do. His work was to get you up and running, living what we believed.

Although this might be influenced by reading the diaries, I could sense his sermons after the election of Richard Nixon changed in tenor. Where before he was bombastic with a healthy dose of trepidation, now he was guarded in his critique. Part of the reluctance, perhaps, was a growing divide in the political landscape of the borough and the state. What were once big swings became more of a jab.

In considering how to best capture his voice from the pulpit I want to try something different. Below you will find my notes as they were recorded while reading his sermons. I wrote down what jumped off the page. This is not all the notes, but it is representative. Moreover the

notes seem to capture the tenor of the sermons over the course of 25 years. They do not include any of the first sermons or the last ones, but the notes seem to capture his voice. I considered putting these into my own words, but in the end, I felt these captured him more as they are.

Here are my notes from the sermons:

November 4th 1973

"Are You ever Discouraged?"

Your Christian duty to vote
We cannot vote for liars/war mongers/lack compassion
even for those in prison
Candidates of Christian principles
Abortion legal, not religious question
Vietnam is illegal
Right to resist

November 11 1973

"Will Wars Ever Cease?"

Cannot excuse the aggression of Israel
Billy Graham blasphemer
Eisenhower: great president, ended Korea
We must envisage a time of peace
War is against the will of God
not no-action pacifists

July 7 1968

Legitimate protest of materialism
Mark Rudd UDS
Elders are not seeking peace
UN not consulted about Vietnam
Allies don't stand with us
War cannot be won
We have not learned to live
Legacy of how we treated negroes American Indians Orientals
Kerner Report
Burn down cities/wreck universities

July 14 1968

Is not rioting inevitable
Children of God and sinners
Slavery in Liberia
Violence in India
Violence is not a characteristic of race
Racial riots Newark and Detroit
Kerner Report
Dignity, Respect, Acceptance not offered in the US
James Baldwin—stingy
Higher taxes
Warren Court
Police Brutality
Must work for Change
Brooke and Powell

10 23 1963 (sermon had two stars in my notes)

"True Tolerance and Bigotry"
note in bulletin sermon is a "starting point"
for protestants not romanists
America is the only plural society
70% of negroes are mixed
all need equal rights
Christians have right to urge open debate
Frank discussion
survival: recognition of difference
long diatribe against the RC

9-10 1960

we are a suburban church
Barth good theologian bad social policy
Put productivity into gratitude
No simple reading of history right or adequate
we must work
America will become useless
attitude of others
abundance = indolence
enough for everyone
not enough for negroes Puerto Ricans
presidents urge compassion

share

10 30 1960

Reformers speak out
monks call for repentance of protestants
church is dead
Protestants should
 take life seriously can't save ourselves
 we know but cannot do
 salvation is an act of God
 Justification by faith
 Only grace

against Papist "we are not a new church"
Jesus would never have conceived roman catholic church
we are a fellowship

10-2-1960

Sputnik money is disgusting
changes of the generation unthinkable
greatly shrinking world
denominations are silly
all protestants are one
Not Romanists/Catholics are silly/mischevious
No races either
One people

10-16-1960

Our common hope:
God is
still guides the course of history
ultimately right will triumph
we have material comforts
but we have a heavy depression
speeches at the UN
fear hangover/thoughtful
don't panic/be hysterical
Hydrogen Bomb hangs over us

Krushchev, Mao, Hydrogen Bomb
work for the day of peace
hypocrisy of communists
one faith
history lies in the hands of God
no depth of faith
lip service

9 25 1958

The Dedicated Life
Selfishness versus Dedication
Selflessness
Constant attendance
Church is built on your effort, faith
must pray
all part of a divine plan

10 5 1958

Place does make a difference
Some did not relish growth
don't feel wrong about it
Built a beautiful place
without ostentation or ornamentation
Church made beautiful by sacrifice

9-12 58

Over population and starvation
India and China
land of milk and honey was a dream not a reality
Harvest home not thanksgiving
Does a suburban church have a right to hold a harvest home festival?
Christian must gag over his over-supply

10-19-58

"The Roman Catholic Church in Politics"

Church has a right to engage in controversial subjects
We support Jews, Blacks,
But we oppose the Roman Catholic Church
RC opposed state hospital

but they are gambling joints
RC=communism
Undemocratic
"An arrogant Church"

10 26 1958

Reformed Principle and Life of the Church

Religious practice would bring no spiritual value
We broke from Rome
From England
to escape tyranny
Why we oppose communism
We must continue to protest

11 2 1958

Pope should have known better
Pope had a vision because of drugs
not the Holy Spirit
Those who are niggardly in their general giving
are narrow and bigoted

Those who are in favor of entrenched privilege
will not easily surrender their privilege

11 9 1958

"Christian and Peace"

Pacifists were naive
"I was one of them"
Church has a function to be alive to all the issues of the day
It must raise controversial issues

If it does not go the way their prejudice determines
then they get angry and say let's preach the pure gospel
not politics
vote for candidates of peace

9-19-48

"Protestantism and the Gospel"
Roman Catholic Church refuses any and all cooperation

Constant protesting
Rediscovery of the gospel 19th century heresy
Man is a sinner
Bilbo?
Anthropological answer is negative

10-10-48

Protestantism is fighting for liberty
Direct line from Luther to Hitler
core of Protestantism = core of democracy

all are God's children
all are sinners
Are slums inevitable?
If we can spend billions on alcohol, guns, tobacco, cosmetics
we can spend billions to clean the slums
Legitimacy of trade unions
effort of justice
racial question the same
"Love"
Principles for real justice lies in the hands of Protestantism

10 24 1948

ACLU secular force doing a religious cause
Priests are prone to tyranny
civil liberty begins with religious freedom
Protestant protects inalienable rights based on being a child of God
People in the pew wish all clergy dead
Why does the pastor keep talking about negroes
oppression of negroes threatens all
Each man is a child of God
groping for a higher standard of truth
Protestants eternally rise to fulfill our destiny in carrying through
the struggle for civil liberties for all

I would only add one theme that was mentioned but not seen in abundance, pacifism. This was a key theme of his sermons in the 1940s. Behrenberg was an ardent pacifist before 1942. He came to see this untenable and would refer to this change now again through the decades. It was perhaps the only true shift to be found.

I hope you can sense and hear his voice. Before we turn to the manse I will remark how often I wondered when I read his sermons, "would I be fired for saying this?" Quite often my

conclusion was positive. After reading so many of his sermons, when people remark to me that a sermon I gave was too political, I must confess I laugh and want to say, "let me show you what was said 70 years ago from this pulpit."

