

Pastor's Desk: 1989 – 1993

Boredom

"Aren't you bored? What do you do with your time? Can you keep yourself occupied?" I have been asked these questions repeatedly since my unplanned retirement. No. I am not bored. I had to rearrange my priorities, rethink my function in God's kingdom. In what capacity can I still serve my Lord? My retirement gives me the chance to take needed regular rest periods. For the first time in years I have the time to work in my library, sorting out books, papers and files. In the process I have discovered items I didn't know I had, including a diary I kept in the sixties when I studied at the Free University of Amsterdam. I also threw out dated materials. My library will keep me occupied for some time yet. I can indulge in some reading I couldn't get to before. Book reviews and research for articles are also time consuming. And I have time just to be. So as you see, I am not bored. Ever since I was asked "Aren't you bored?", I planned to write on boredom, but I was so busy that I didn't get around to it until now.

What is boredom? Boredom is a relatively new word. Peter Kreeft notes that the very word boredom does not exist in any pre-modern language. Boredom is a modern spiritual disease. It is a form of emptiness, a void waiting to be filled. People try their utmost to avoid it. They can't stand to have an idle moment. Thomas C. Oden defines boredom as the state of being wearied or annoyed by the present. He says that to be bored is to feel empty. He even claims that boredom is an anticipatory form of being dead. Boredom comes when the present is felt to be devoid of values, when no meaning is found in what you do. Viktor Frankl calls boredom an "existential vacuum." He writes that boredom is now causing, and certainly bringing to psychiatrists, more problems to solve than distress. Frankl claims that these problems are growing increasingly crucial as progressive automation will probably lead to an enormous increase in the leisure hours available to the average worker. And, says Frankl, "The pity of it is that many of these will not know what to do with all their newly acquired free time." In the last century Arthur Schopenhauer said that mankind appeared to be doomed eternally to vacillate between the two extremes of want and boredom. Frankl observes that our affluent society has given vast segments of the population the means, but people cannot see an end, a meaning to live for. They never had so much leisure as today, but nothing meaningful on which to spend it. And when meaning has gone out of life, we become victims of boredom.

To relieve boredom people try to kill time. The modern entertainment industry is busily inventing new ways and measures help kill time. Time killing describes the dark side of our modern popular culture. Ernest van den Haag has asked the question "Who is slain when time is killed?" Kenneth Meyers observes that his answer implies that when we kill time, we are really killing ourselves. Some day we will have to give an account of the way we have used our time. The time we have killed may very well testify against us. The apostle Paul speaks about "redeeming the time, because the days are evil"(Eph.5: 16).

Because of industrialization, development of high technology and automation, work has become tedious for many workers. With industrialization came urbanization. To find work people move from their villages to the cities. And since industrial work was often monotonous, there was a desperate search for diversity. Jacques Barzun has suggested

that the compensation for their boredom is the culture of cities, rooted in the newspaper reading and by degrees to spectator sports and organized betting. Ken Meyers observes that if these workers had been in the village from which they came, they might have relieved the tedium by enjoying the pleasures afforded by activities rooted in folk culture: barn dances, playing with extended family, traditional music, story telling, hunting and fishing.

Thomas C. Oden, who spent some time in Russia, points out that boredom takes on different forms in different cultures and nations. He notes that in Russia, they are more likely to be bored with an hour-long daily commute on a packed subway than Americans, who are more likely to feel bored with the slightly uneven quality of the stereo system in the comfortable car in which they make their twenty-minute commute to work. Oden also makes this interesting observation. He says that while the late modern Soviet worker has been prone to be easily bored by daily factory routines, the emerging postmodern Soviet worker is more likely to become bored with the rhetoric of atheism and revolution, and to spoof its comic side. Recent developments in the former U.S.S.R. offer abundant proof. It is now searching for its soul. Unlike Canada, it is experiencing a religious boom. Unfortunately, because of the many years of atheistic indoctrination, there is little discernment. The Salvation Army, the Baptists as well as the Hare Krishna, the Mormons all find a renewed hearing.

Since boredom is a spiritual problem, a sense of apathy the inability to take an interest, it can only be relieved by the development of ideals and values.

Our popular culture cannot relieve restless boredom. Our society never had so much diversity, such multiple choice in entertainment as now, yet we never had so many feel utterly bored. Our popular culture is incapable of filling the existential void. Even the constant search for thrills eventually loses its novelty. Such diversion becomes weary for mind and soul. No one can keep his time filled with distractions. Ernest Van den Haag comments, "In popular culture even the second coming would become just another barren 'thrill' to be watched on television till Milton Berie comes on. No distraction can cure boredom, just as the company so unceasingly pursued cannot stave off loneliness. The bored person is lonely for himself, not, as he thinks, for others." When boredom is not relieved, it turns into despair.

Boredom can be overcome by finding our meaning for living in God. St. Augustine testified how his restless heart didn't find rest until he had found it in God. This still holds true for today. Our society is restless and anxiety ridden because it has lost sight of the God of the Scriptures. When we have fellowship with God through Christ, His Son, life has value. Each moment is lived then in His presence. The summary of His law takes on new meaning. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the great and first commandment: And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself." When God comes first and when our neighbour's interests and needs are not forgotten, there is no time for boredom. Even entertainment takes on a different perspective. Christians celebrate life. Wholesome diversion is also part of its celebration. In Christ God offers Himself. Sigmund Freud once wrote in a letter to Princess of Bonaparte, "The moment one inquires about the sense or value of life, one is sick." Freud was dead wrong. Our society is sick because

so many don't value life or don't see any sense in it. When we value life as God's gift and break through our self-centeredness and reach out to people who are hurting and lonely, we won't have time to invent means "to kill time." In our daily acts of serving our neighbour and in our quiet time with our God we find joy. Thomas C. Oden remarked, "One who glimpses anew the present moment as an overflowing gift of divine grace cannot remain bored."

Am I bored since I became "minister emeritus?" Not at all I am running short of time. Living within the perspective of eternity gives meaning to my present.

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