

November 27, 1974

The New Church

It has been said that we live in the period of the Dark Ages. Once again the church is faced with immanent destruction, a fact that we don't need to document in any great detail. If the theme of the 50's was " God is dead", then the theme of the 70's, or the objective, verifiable fact which most sociologists report is that "The church is dead." And here we are, you and I, in the church, called to be the People of God. Now what does that mean? How is it that we can rediscover in our age, as every generation has had to rediscover, what it means to be the People of God. It is about that that we want to spend some time this morning, looking at precisely the darkness of the situation in which we find ourselves and the reality, the ultimate reality which is that very darkness, the tools which are at hand, and the indicative task which is before us, as we decide to be the People of God in our time.

But, first let me remind you of the scripture which was read earlier in the service, particularly one verse of it. From the First Letter of Peter to the scattered and disturbed and distracted Christians of his age, he wrote in these words, 'You are God's chosen generation, his royal priesthood, his holy nation, his peculiar people. All the old titles of God's people belong to you. It is for you now to demonstrate the goodness of him who has called you out of darkness into amazing light. In the past you were not a people, now you are the People of God. In the past you had no experience of his mercy, now it is intimately yours.'

When was the peat? A thousand years ago, or a hundred years ago, or was it this morning as you got up. The past, the darkness out of which we have been called, it not something which is far removed from us. The darkness is here. The darkness is in the very collapse of the church. The darkness is in the closing doors of the church. In one Methodist church the size of a cathedral in Manchester, they consider it a good Sunday if 15 people turn up. One of the major denominations in the United States recorded that in 1973 there were 9,000,000 fewer people attending church services than in the past. To see, as you see in New Orleans, over a beautiful Baptist church, a sign "For Sale" 18 not uncommon in any city across the face of this globe, not Just in this particular city.

We are living in a time of darkness in the Christian Church and there is no consolation. We find ourselves here within the walls of this building and somehow feel we've been deceived, that we were called to a glorious destiny, and here we are with doors closing. And we get weary, don't we, weary of the traditions that we're bound to, weary of being loyal to that which is apparently going down hill. We tried everything' We've tried shifting the hour of our service. We've tried including the sort of music that is popular with the youth. We've tried changing our architecture. And nothing has worked, Congregations go, as one in Cleveland I visited last week, from 1100 to 35 in membership over a period of 15 years. And we come to the service today, not with the excitement or glory which we feel that we should have, but with a sort of "ho hum" , it's Sunday again, I'd better go, sort of attitude.

And here we are again with no zeal, with weariness at the demand that is laid upon us, and feeling that all that we have done, that all our passion in the past has been totally ineffective. That we are ineffective in our mission outside. That we are ineffective in dealing with ourselves as a body, as a people. We are no people in our common experience, either in our thrust into our community and the society in which we live, nor in our relationships with one another. The United Methodist Church used to require of its missionaries before they were assigned, that they write a statement of what they believed, but that got to be embarrassing, so they stopped having them write such a statement. And now they're wondering, after some of the fiascoes that have resulted, whether indeed they should write such a statement. But that sort of sugary, sugarsweet "what are we about" spirit is within the church. The total sense of being ineffective, and at the same time spending hours and hours and hours deciding about something which we know is insignificant whether we will pay \$25 to get some new piece of equipment for the kitchen people argued over that for weeks, knowing all the time that's not what our concern needs to be. We have no common story, no sense, no feeling of being a people at all. Sort of a chronic sense of disappointment, I want to say, a sort of futility in our efforts. One of my friends who is an active minister received a letter of congratulations from his seminary professor when it was rumored that he was going to leave the active ministry of the church. We have the collapse of the missions, missionaries are fewer in numbers. Concern for schools, for hospitals is decreasing on every site. City churches are going out of existence in spite of all the concern that we have. And the judgement of God seems to be upon the church. The blackness of the night is around us and we see nothing but the darkness.

Yet, if you look a little closer you see, in the very midst of that darkness, the very mercy and the very possibility. For when everything is gone, then we have nothing to lose. Then it is that we can begin to look again. When the foundations have been shaken till only that which cannot be shaken survives, then we have the freedom to build. And do you see, have you looked around? Have you seen the new image of the church that is already in being? Have you talked as loudly about the startling signs of hope in our day? The missionaries who are pouring in to the United States from Japan, from Korea, from the Philippines. People who are coming to share the word, and finding that they do have a word to share. Have you experienced the fact that where ever you go on your holidays, on your vacations, in your travels that you find a church, that you find a church still in operation. And you find within that church, not Just Westerners, but peoples of all races.

As you look into the community and look at the activity that is going on there are groups in the church that are moving out again to give status to the concern of mankind for mankind. And the church, I want to say, is on the move again. The popular figures who are

coming into the limelight in our day are rehearsing classical Christian themes. I think of John Glenn talking about the Dark Night of the Soul as though he were talking in the age of Teresa or in the 16th century. Look at the struggle of women wanting to get into the clergy at the very time when they are asserting their power and their position. Why on earth the clergy? and when you ask them this, they say the whole movement for equality began here, the movement for concern for children and for women began here. This is where there is movement going on.

It strikes me that you look at the church today and you are overwhelmed by the globality which is there at a time when there is no globality anywhere else. The sort of geographic spread, the sort of universal reality which is in the church today. Bishop Mathews said recently that whenever he went to a church meeting, that he was struck by the fact the whole world is in the room. And if McLuhan says that today we wear humanity like our skin, that is certainly true within the church. The races of mankind are present, and within the church as nowhere else we have a feeling of the unity of all mankind, and the objective reality of that before us. Partly, this is due to the mobility of people which has brought many people to our shores and sent us around the world. Wherever you go the reality of the global community is there and the people who share in the same symbols and same stories are simply there in our time in a way, I would suggest, that has not been true in any other age of mankind.

And the whole relationship with history is there in a new way that you can hardly grasp. Perhaps this is due again to the mobility of men. I cannot forget going through Canterbury, and having the usual tourist spin about Thomas a Becket, and he was chased here, and he was slaughtered here, and all the rest of it. Well, when I went down into the catacombs of that place and walked through where Thomas a Becket had struggled with what it meant to be the church over against the nation, the church over against the secular society of his day, I was struck deeply with the pathos, and the anguish and the pain in that it is to be the creative minority in your time. And Thomas a Becket walks with me these days, as does Abraham, as does Moses in a new way. I have kinship with them.

Or, you come into a meeting like this, and there is Vinod Parekh here. Now I don't ever see him without remembering the first time I really got to know an Indian. She was assigned to live with me 20 years ago in seminary. And I am so very righteous, and here I was a long established Christian sharing a room with this dear convert. Until she informed me that she was of the Mar Thoma church and that her ancestors had been converted in the first century and when did I suspect that my ancestors had been converted? Well, that sort of history long relationship is just before us today, and we are overwhelmed in our day with a new understanding of the contact, and we can sing as we never did before, " Like a mighty army, goes the Church of God. We are treading where the saints have trod. " And the

And the very pathos, and the very struggle of our time, is that which has allowed us to grasp again that we are indeed a people, a people with a task and a destiny in history. We are intimately involved, intimately experiencing the mercy of God. And this allows us to reinterpret the task which is ours, not out of the immediacy of those of us gathered in this place, this morning, but out of the long sweep of history and out of the globality of our times. I was out in Los Angeles last week, and had a young man come up to me, talking about why it was, after having been a social rebel and having experienced the dropout from school, and having graduated from that into social reform and working with the left, he had decided to go back into the Methodist ministry. He wanted to study to become a local church pastor. And he said, " It has become clear that all the rest is useless unless it is grounded in a community which can do the job globally and do it out of the content of the lone struggle of mankind.

I don't know if you people sense this new possibility. A part of the glory of being that new people is that we have the tools. We have the tools of the twentieth century which allow us to move in a new way into the very demands which are the given of our situation. We have the tools of the theological reawakening. We have the renewed context for talking to the world at large and for realizing that the church is a one with the world at large. We have the new powerful translations of scriptures such as the Phillips which we read and the New English Bible and on and on. We have the new media, which is a powerful tool. We have allies in the use of these media with films such as Serpico and Posideon Adventure raise to us the possibility of dealing with man's life seriously in his present given situation. And we have become clear in our day, through the theological revolution, that every issue is a theological issue. That the church has to speak in every situation, not to every situation, but in every situation.

The job of Sunday School has been done in that mankind is moving on into society to proclaim in secular terms, in a secular world that man is significant and that the fringes and superficial world of our time is not enough. We have done a spirit brooding Job which now allows us to move on and reappropriate the very symbols of our faith. The use of banners everywhere in the churches wherever you go, the use of the sort of art work that Sister Corita made famous is all reappropriating the symbols of the past. All giving us power again to move on as the People of God. Church after church after church today you find the passing of the peace and following through with the old tradition of the kiss of peace, as people turn and shake the hands of their neighbor or in a formal way of greeting each other. ~ U ready we are convinced of renewal of the symbolic reappropriation of our time.

We are convinced of the spirit motivity and we have the tools as never before for reflection on what is going on. It is recapturing the objective awe as never before of life itself in every moment. As we go to wedding services and funerals today, we find that the old forms are still there, but very much in the background. You go to weddings today and you find that people have inserted a scripture reading which is not in the order of worship, which they took from a modern poet. You find people as never before inserting their own being their own understanding into the forms of the church which is a regrasping of the motivity and the wisdom of the past.

We find in the very structural organization of the church the shifts that are going on are enabling the mission once again. We find a congregation in Austin, a United Methodist Church, which has taken all its congregation and assigned them to task forces. And not to keep the coffee pot hot on Sunday morning, but to get jobs done in the community, to enable the mission of the church, as once long ago it was. In a Congregational church in New Jersey, the congregational list comes out each year complete with the tasks and the abilities of the congregation so that they can be plugged in to the mission of the church.

It is exciting that we are ready to move. And what we need to do is clearly laid before us by the very situation in which we find ourselves. The very crisis of our day tells us where we need to work. The very collapse of the social structures calls us to be concerned about the sociological care of all of society. And this is happening. This sort of care is illustrated by a church in Canfield, New Jersey, for instance. A minister of mission was appointed this year. New his job wasn't anything to do with missionaries in some far distant land, but the mission of the congregation in the community. The large preschool to meet an obvious need, to pioneer, in really freeing the children to be human beings. All of these are signs of sociological care, are answers to the claim of our present social society upon us.

We have a new secular language in which we can give the secular witness, in which we can proclaim the word in secular language. And we can write songs, not just "The Street Where You Live", but the streets of Montreal where you walk, or of Houston. There was the Dairy Queen which found itself in a neighborhood where the streets were dilapidated and run down and riots were more common around the place, which was once a friendly family gathering place. He was at his wit's end, and he decided, in consultation with his staff, that he would not close like every other Dairy Queen, but he was going to take hold in that situation and create in it a new sign of possibility and growth in that very difficult and complex, rundown situation. And what came out of that was a new node, a new way of dealing with the inability of our society to communicate. The very cynicism which we run into every day, the very pain of our neighbors is in itself the objective demand.

We used to say in the mission field, that if you want to know what your call was, well then Just look at the need. The need is the call. The need is the call in our day, and the objective situation is the claim that is laid upon us. And the claim that is laid is the indicative and is no demand from the outside, but the possibility to be the new style.

To be and represent what a society of new humans could look like. To provide the context. To dare to be the ones who risk. For we stand as that global community, for we stand as those who have learned to deal with life precisely as it is. We stand as those who are totally adequate, totally capable of doing the impossible deed in our time. One church in Toronto, down in the inner city of that great city, called the weakest and most ineffective minister they could find because they were sure they were about to die, and therefore why waste a powerful man there. And they call Bill Riesbury to be the pastor of that church 19 years ago and the church hasn't died yet! In fact, at the last meeting of that Diocese, the Bishop pointed to it as the one possible sign of new life and new hope in the entire Anglican Church in the Toronto vicinity.

That is what is happening and that is the possibility which we find. For it is a glorious thing to be the church when we are recapturing again what it means to be the people of God. We are discovering that we know all we need to know, that we have all we need to have to freight the word of possibility again in our generation.

Nan Grow