ROOTS IN GOOD SOIL:

GOD IS LOVE

---a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
Flower Sunday, Wellesley College
September 11, 1977

You probably know the story behind this Sunday. But it's worth repeating. It was the first Sunday of the academic year a hundred years ago or thereabouts. A visiting preacher began the year with a whole sermon full of hellfire and damnation, a subject that fascinates some preachers. Henry Fowle Durant, who was in attendance, was shocked.

Mr. Durant directed that henceforth and ever thereafter the first sermon in the new academic year should concern itself not with hellfire and damnation, but with the love of God. It was under his influence that these very words were etched in stone right above our heads here, in the center of things, lest anyone might ever forget: God is love. Which is a theme I gladly accept this morning.

But I propose to approach the subject via a somewhat circuitous route with the help of the parable of the sower, recorded in the Gospel of Mark. Perhaps there is such a thing as "love at first sight," in the world of romance. Perhaps. But I doubt whether there is such a thing when it comes to our relationship with God, who, if anything, is invisible, intangible, and ineffable.

This, I take it, is precisely why in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, and others as well, the story or the parable plays such a prominent role. We approach the mystery and the majesty of the Holy God, if we do so at all, indirectly, by means of nuance and imagery, not directly, by observation and analysis.

I

So: the parable of the sower. A sower went out to sow. Some seed fell along the path, and the birds devoured it. Some seed fell on rocky ground, with little depth of soil, and the plants were then scorched by the sun. Other seed fell among thorns and when the plants grew, they were choked. Still other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Then at the end of the parable, the teacher, Jesus, says: those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

I want to begin interpreting this parable with an existential truism. It makes a difference where you are. I suppose no one will doubt that for a moment.

A student, a junior it so happens, was just telling me about how shocking it was for her to return home this summer. "All my friends from high school," she explained, "are married. Most of them have children, and the women are at home with the kids. They all look at me as some kind of a freak," she said. "They wonder what I possibly could be doing with my life."

Then she observed that if she hadn't come to Wellesley College, she could well imagine that she also would be married by now, a mother, settled down to that kind of existence.

So it makes a difference where you are. That's a truism of our experience. And sometimes it's a truism with radical implications. I am fortunate, am I not, as my regular schedule of meals indicates, because I was born in America into relatively affluent conditions, and not in the hunger-ridden world of Bangladesh. It makes a difference where you are.

But the parable of the sower isn't about physical geography, as it were, but spiritual geography. A sower went out to sow, and some seed fell here and some there, but only the seed that fell on the good soil flourished. Sure, it makes a difference where you are, and we should never forget that, but this parable, I think, is much more about your interiority and mine, rather than external circumstances.

So we should probably qualify our truism a little, perhaps this way: it makes a difference where your life is rooted. It makes a difference where your inmost self begins to grow. It makes a difference where the germinating center of your integrity, your promise, your wholeness as a person is rooted.

II

Some human lives, tragically, do fall by the wayside; Sometimes before they even begin, before they ever have any choice about the matter. Think, for example, of the millions of children around the earth who are malnourished, who suffer debilitating brain damage or who simply die before they have really lived.

In our time, it seems to me, if you want to talk about the Devil or the demonic, it's in this kind of context -- the death of the innocents -- that such talk might begin to make some real sense. Some human lives never really get started.

Which is surely a mandate to those of us who know a fuller life to try to do something about it all. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear. No one ought to be able to rest content at night in a world where children suffer and die.

III

Other seeds do get started, as the parable suggests;but because they're not deeply rooted, the sun burns them out. I suppose that this point on the map of spiritual geography brings us closer to home.

When did you first take College Boards? How many times did you take them? How long have you been concerned to get good grades in order to get into a good college or a good graduate school? I've even heard parents in a nearby town discussing with great concern how to get their children into the right nursery school -- so they could get them into the right grammar school, of course, the right college, the right grad school,the right job, and so on, and so on, ad infinitum: and, at the end presumably, like the Hollywood scenario, ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after.

The problem is that that sun sometimes gets to you at high noon. If you don't have deep spiritual roots, in other words, roots that give you sustenance from the wellsprings of life, then the heat of the day -- all the pressures for survival, success, and happiness -- sometimes can burn you out.

Graham Greene once wrote a novel entitled A Burnt Out Case. Well in the time I've lived and worked in these parts I've seen a number of burnt out cases.

Now there are surely things you can do when that kind of thing happens to your life. It's not a hopeless situation when you begin to feel that way. To conclude that would be to dehumanize the deeply human presuppositions of our parable. A burnt out case need not die. But the phenomenon of the burnt out case can be very real indeed. That's the point the parable wants to bring to our attention.

What becomes of your life when you get a solid "D" on your first hour exam? It doesn't happen often, but it can happen. What becomes of your life plans when you don't get into med school, as you always had planned to do, or you don't get that promotion that you were counting on?

When the noontime heat of human existence burns away at you, what happens to your life? Do you begin to fade, like a green plant that has inadequate soil for the roots?

IV.

Then there is the seed that falls among the thorns. When I was taught about these thorns in Sunday School it was in rather self-righteous, moralistic terms. The message conveyed to me was: take care about the crowd you travel with. You know; the leather jacket set, the wild kids who live on the other side of the tracks.

But that kind of interpretation rather misses the point. The point is not so much that the thorns of human experience can cramp your virtuous inclinations, but that you get yourself rooted in such a way that you don't produce the good fruits of righteous living.

This part of the parable, clearly, like every other part pertains to our spiritual geography, not first of all to external circumstances. In light of our interiority, the point is our failure to root our lives in such a way as to produce good fruits. The parable suggests that we should notice our own egocentricities, much more than external temptations, as such.

What do you care about most in life? Think about that for a moment. What concerns most occupy your attention?

How often when you answer such questions does everything seem to focus on yourself? My grades, my friends, my publications, my career, my future, my happiness, my growth, my problems, my love life, my roommate, my parents, my schedule, my telephone, my travel, my lab report. My,My, My.

This, as you know, is called narcissism. And a little bit is surely good for us. But a little bit goes a long way. In the meantime, in perspective of the Jewish and Christian traditions, and many others, your life and mine ought to be oriented on loving our neighbors as ourselves, being concerned with them and their needs; being ready to give of ourselves and our goods to them, even though it may pain our egos or diminish the level of our affluence.

The seeds that fell among the thorns were rooted in a way that never allowed them to produce the fruits of righteousness.

V

We come at last to the seeds that fell on the good soil, which grew and flourished and produced many good fruits. The immediate and irrepressible question here, of course, is: where is the good soil?

Sometimes I have the feeling that this is both the most urgent and the least discussed question at Wellesley College. Where is the good soil for our souls?

You can read this question on the faces of new students, many of whom have been uprooted from relatively secure lives at home. You can read the question between the lines of the College's much discussed Counseling Report which studied the personal and academic needs of students and found not only that most students considered others more in need of help than themselves, but also that many of the same students experienced themselves as seriously depressed much of the time. Where is the good soil? Where can I root my life deeply?

I have lately been reading a novel, as I was telling some of you the other day, that I suppose that many of you have already read. This is the bestseller, Kinflicks by Lisa Alther. The author attended Wellesley College not too long ago, as you may know. It's interesting, then, that a full chapter is devoted to her heroine's stay at a women's college outside Boston, Wortheley College.

It is a poignant, moving book, in many ways. Ginny, the main character, tries just about every lifestyle you could possibly image. And you have the sense, as you read, that she's never really rooted anywhere. She moves from one chapter of her life to another, mainly searching for a congenial context in which she might find some rudimentary fulfilment for her inmost self.

Where is the good soil? Where can I root my life deeply?

Of course students aren't the only ones asking such questions. You can hear these questions, however indirectly, in jocular discourse of faculty at cocktail parties and other private gatherings -- when you notice that some of the same people who joke so loudly are troubled about their teaching effectiveness or deeply anxious about not being reappointed.

Likewise, the conversation of some of our classified and union employees is revealing at times. They may enjoy their work but at the same time they sometimes seem to be seriously disturbed by the kind of regard - or lack of regard - which their employers have for them. Almost as if they were wondering about their own worth as persons ...

Where is the good soil?

The answer I have in mind for this question is surely no panacea. Nor will it come as any surprise. It is as old as the oldest religious traditions that most of us know.

VI.

You will find good rootage for your soul through a discipline of faith. Or, if you will, to use Brother Lawrence's language, you will find good rootage for your soul by "practicing the presence of God."

The God whom our traditions depict, after all, is invisible, intangible, and ineffable, If you and I are to root our lives in the presence of this God, we will have to practice finding that presence. God is not going to drop down out of the heavens like a meteor, and land at our feet with a bang. In order to find, we will have to seek. That's the unanimous testimony of the biblical writers.

This summer I attended a lovely concert of baroque music in a delightfullly out-of-the-way small town in rural Maine. At the intermission I was introduced to a circle of people, who, it quickly became apparent, were professional musicians. It also became apparent, very soon, as their enthusiastic conversation filled the air, that I scarcely had a word to say. As practicing musicians, they had heard and experienced and then were discussing the same music I had heard, but in a way that I could barely understand, howevermuch I felt that I had enjoyed the music.

Faith is like that, in some important respects. If our souls are to be instruments of the Divine presence we will have to practice using them. Maybe take lessons from a master, also; Isaiah or Paul, Teresa of Avila or Julian of Norwich, Isaac Luria or Israel Baal Shem, Sojourner Truth or Martin Luther King, or Mahatma Ghandi. The list obviously could go on and on. Sit at their feet and listen to them play on the instruments of their souls. Apprentice yourself to them.

Even more, before too long we'll probably want to join with other beginners, and perhaps with a few who are more experienced in practicing the presence of God. This is why our traditions set aside times for common worship, whether on Friday night or Sunday morning or any other time.

The simple human fact, as true for the spiritual life as it is for anything else important in life, is that we learn by doing. We enter into the beauty of the Divine Holiness by opening our lips with words of prayer and praise, however inexperienced or insecure we may feel about the whole thing. In matters of our interiority, in finding the deepest wellsprings of life, we learn by doing.

VII

You will note that I have shifted from an organic metaphor to a social metaphor--from the question about finding the good soil in which to root our souls, to the image of learning, studying, and playing good music, individually and in concert. But this is the way the parable points us, it seems to me.

For the parable takes for granted our freedom before God to choose where we root our lives, and it presupposes that God isn't going to superimpose God's will on us, tyrannically. Because God relates to us as free creatures, we will have to seek, if we're going to find. We'll have to practice the presence of God, by choice, if God's presence is to be a reality for us.

That's why the parable ends, I think, on this note: "those who have ears to hear, let them hear." We will have to attune our ears to the beautiful music of God's holiness, if we're going to truly hear and understand and find good soil for our souls. So the social metaphor is needed here to draw out the implications of the parable.

Our spirituality will not grow automatically, as my tomatoes seemed to do (praise the Lord)when I was away for a month this summer. To grow into a sense for the presence of God, we'll have to exercise the freedom that God has blessed us with. We'll have to enter into a discipline of faith, taking time to pray and to worship, even though at times we may find such practices awkward.

Where is the good soil, then? The good soil is to be found in our interiority, according to Biblical faith; the Kingdom of God is within us: but only insofar as our interiority is shaped and sustained by a discipline of faith, by our practicing the presence of God.

VIII

Which brings us, at the end, to the point where we began: Mr. Durant's stone up there: God is love.

Both the Jewish and the Christian traditions, among others, teach us this wonderful paradox: that practicing the presence of God is itself a gift of God's love for us, God's faithfulness to us, God's deepest desire to communicate with us.

From our perspective, we are doing the practicing. Seen with the eyes of faith, from a Divine perspective, God is giving us what we need, God is drawing near to us, through our practicing.

In a word, God creates the good soil for our souls. God creates the good music that we play. God creates the possibility of our communion with God. So obedience to the Law is looked at in the Hebrew Bible as a gift of Grace. So the discipline of Christ, the yoke of Christ, is understood to be a gift of grace, in the New Testament. This is at least part of what it means for us to say in our hearts that God is love. God gives us the discipline we need to attune our lives to God's presence.

"And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." And he said, 'Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.'" Amen.