JESUS THE HARSH MAN

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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> "And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, saying to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be a house of prayer"; but you have made it a den of robbers.'" (Luke 19:45)

The late Paul Tillich once caused some controversy when he said of a painting of Jesus by the famous artist Salvador Dali: that painting is junk. This is one of the few occasions, that I can recall, that a remark by a theologian made the first page of the New York Times.

Another remark of Tillich ought to have made the front page of the Times, too. He once referred to Picasso's painting, Guernica, as this century's greatest Protestant painting. As you know, there's very little that's openly religious about Guernica. With its several torsoless heads and broken figures of men and animals, it instills horror more than anything else.

Although it may be difficult to see at first, I think Tillich was on to something in his remarks about the Dali and Picasso paintings. And I think that this something shows up in the life of Jesus, howevermuch the Church in recent times may have ignored it.

Undoubtedly Salvador Dali with his representation of Jesus as the Nice Man is much more in stride with the mainstream of the modern Church's understanding of Jesus than Tillich was. Those of us who remember our Sunday School days know this very clearly. The Jesus with whom we were confronted was the Nice Man. Let's call him Jesus Meek and Mild. This is the Jesus who says suffer the little children to come unto me, the Jesus who talks about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

Clearly, there's something that rings true about all this. It <u>is</u> something fundamentally human to be able to take joy in children, to be able to enter into the world of children, and not to be a hyper-sophisticated adult all the time. Read the enticing children's book, The Little Prince, if you haven't done so already. Read how silly the sheerly <u>serieux</u> adult can be.

Likewise, there's something fundamentally human about the person who has the sensitivity to notice the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. No less sophisticated a community than Harvard witnessed to this fact not too long ago when the sycamores along Memorial Drive were threatened. We needn't have a St. Francis to remind us that we desperately need the common world of nature to be fully human.

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But if the Church only knows the Jesus who said suffer the little children to come unto me and consider the lilies of the field, then the Church is missing much, -- to its own impoverishment. And this is the point, I think, where we have to look at paintings like Guernica.

Picasso painted this work in a burst of deep anger. In 1937 he learned that the little Spanish town of Guernica had been destroyed. For three hours German planes flying for Franco during the Civil War had dropped bombs on that helpless town. Two thousand innocent people had been killed. Hearing this news Picasso spent ten days making hundreds of drawings of wounded horses, dying riders, and shrieking women as he worked out a compostion for a painting. In the short time of one month he produced the huge canvas, entitled Guernica.

Such a swell of profound anger is very much akin to a prominent mood evident in the Bible. This is especially clear in the prophets, for example, Jeremiah in our lesson today, where he speaks words for God against the people of Israel: "Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'we are delivered,' -- only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?"

In more than one way, Jesus stands in this prophetic tradition. Upon coming into Jerusalem, for example, Jesus enters the temple and drives out the commercial interests which had encamped there. The account of this we have in the Gospel of John even suggests that he used a whip. And our gospel lesson relates this to the Old Testament prophetic tradition: "And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, saying to them, "It is written, "My house shall be a house of prayer'; but you have made it a den of robbers.'"

This, then, is no longer the Jesus Meek and Mild, but the Jesus Angry and Severe. This is the Jesus who says in that passage which has often embarassed the Church: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Mt. 10:34) Jesus the Nice Man is here Jesus the Harsh Man. Jesus the man of peace is here Jesus the man of strife.

What are we to make of this side of the life of Jesus? The Jesus Meek and Mild we can pretty much understand. But what about the Jesus Angry and Severe?

I think we can begin to understand this if we recall the general New Testament presupposition that the life of Jesus

disclosing the life of God himself, -- that in the man Jesus God is drawing near to all men and saying something. Paul Tillich expressed this by saying that the man Jesus, called the Christ, is transparent to God, or transparent to the Ground of our Being.

Then the question is: who is this God to whom Jesus is transparent? Who is Jesus disclosing to us? We can say at least this much. This is the God who in his great love won't let man be less than human.

Here let's think of the case of a young person growing into maturity. The goal is to achieve a relative independence and a life of his own. However, as the depth psychologists have taught us, it sometimes happens that a mother or a father will, for one reason or another, attempt to inhibit the young person's growth into maturity. In extreme cases this can result in schizophrenia.

In those cases where the parent does hold back the child, it's necessary for the good of the child to encourage him to break away from his parents. And this causes consternation, not only to the parents, but also to the child. But the psychiatrist or the counsellor will willingly induce this consternation out of love for the young person. For it's only through this upheaval that the young man or woman will begin to enter into maturity.

Isn't it striking in this connection that immediately following Jesus's saying that he did not come to bring peace on earth, but a sword, we read these words: "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household"?

We see in Jesus here the self-disclosure of the God who in his love will willingly induce consternation among men in order to lead them into their full humanity.

And what we can say about the individual level(the young person and the family, for example), we can also say about the social level. The whole prophetic tradition, which Jesus is reenlivening in his cleansing of the temple, rests on the presupposition that God would rather have no temple than a temple which enshrines injustice, that God would rather have no city than a city which knows no genuine peace. Without justice and peace man is falling short of his own humanity. So Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed, according to the Old Testament. So Jerusalem is destroyed, according to the New Testament.

If we are cautious, I think we can apply this message to specific events in our own day.

Consider the case of the student who is having difficulties staying on good terms with his parents back home. Perhaps he isn't writing enough to suit them; or maybe he doesn't seem grateful enough for all