SHE PROTESTS TOO MUCH

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!"(Phil. 4:4)

You may have noticed that little Arthur, in the comic strip "Miss Peach," was this week depicted carrying a large sign which read PROTEST. I have the feeling that that's what we are supposed to be doing today on the Festival of the Reformation, carrying signs that say protest. But then we are caught in little Arthur's predicament, I suspect. The principal says to him: "Arthur, I can't understand why a smart boy like you would walk around all day with a sign saying protest." To this Arthur replies: "O, is that what it says?"

Do we carry the banner of the Reformation without really being sure about what that banner says? Lutherans, after all, are in an increasingly problematic position. To begin with, since the Second Vatican Council the Roman Catholic Church is not the Church to which we have grown accustomed. Among other things, it is now singing A Mighty Fortress is Our God. But even more than that, Christianity itself is no longer a dominant force in the world. Christianity itself is daily becoming a minority religion, which will have to struggle for its existence in a preponderantly secular world. How much sense does it make, then, to wave the banner of the Reformation when the very life of Christianity is now at stake?

I think it does make sense, as long as we remember that the Reformation was fundamentally an attempt to reaffirm the essentials of Christian faith. The Reformation was not first of all a protest.

This does not mean that protest is ruled out. What is ruled out is protest in principle. The heart of our faith is not a so-called "Protestant Principle." The heart of our faith is the Living Lord whose name we bear. We protest, when we do, not in the name of principle, but in the name of Christ.

And this is why. The New Testament has an amazing vision of the place of the man called Christ in the greater scheme of things. Teilhard de Chardin is quite biblical when he affirms that Christ is the focal point of the universe. So the author of the letter to the Colossians says of Christ: "All things were created to him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Col. 1:16f.) More specifically, the New Testament sees the whole of mankind as being one, as being united, in its relation to Christ. In the familiar words of Ephesians, "there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all."(Eph. 4:5f.) This clearly is a radical kind of conviction. It is surely not self-evident that all men everywhere are united with each other, one body, in and through their relation to Christ. But this is the point from which a biblically oriented view of protest begins.

This week at our Congregational Meeting it was suggested that this parish might consider procuring a residence for students, perhaps in Boston's South End. (Apparently this is possible given the favorable financial arrangements for non-profit organizations.) In the course of the discussion, the young woman who was presenting the proposal observed that if we bought and refurbished such a residence one of the things we would surely want to do would be to tear down the fences in the backyard. Presently each row house has its own little fenced-in yard. She said, "Think what it would mean for the community if all those fences were taken down!"

This is the kind of protest which flows from our commitment to the One who is the focal point of human life, the One in whom all men are one. We protest against anything which builds fences between men. This protest is at least as old as St. Paul's adamant refusal to accept the notion that the Church is for the Jews only and not for gentiles also.

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In the same vein we will naturally protest against divisions within the Christian Community itself. We will work adamantly to tear down the fence of denominational pride wherever we find it. And lest we forget, such protest properly begins at home. How do you think of yourself when someone asks you about your religious affiliation? As a Lutheran first? That seems to be the natural thing to do; but perhaps somewhere some denominational pride is lurking. Clearly, in any case, University Lutheran Church is not the Church of Luther first of all.

That's one side of the matter. Protest that flows from an affirmation of Christ and His focal role in world history. The other side is this: common rejoicing.

Imagine the case of a group of people lost, let us say, in a Western Wilderness Area. Their food supply runs out and they scatter in small groups. Unknown to them a rescue plane has dropped supplies in the area. One small group comes upon these supplies and quickly sends up shouts of joy. We can imagine one of the other small groups looking down at the first group from a height and wondering what has happened, wondering what all the noise is for and why a couple of people are even dancing around.

Perhaps this humble story can be taken as a parable. In a world full of many problems, there is at least one group of people, the Church, which is able to be joyful, in the conviction that it has come upon the Ultimate Food of Life. So we hear Jesus saying in the Gospel of John: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst."(Jn. 6:35) Hence we affirm the reality and meaning of Christ through common rejoicing.

But I wonder whether this is as easy for us as it sounds. We Protestants, after all, are generally a pretty inhibited lot. Generally we are preoccupied with the Protestant Ethic which dominates our society. Roughly speaking, as you know, this is the ethic which says: work hard and then work some more; postpone enjoyment as much as possible so as not to interfere with your work. We are preoccupied with this, on the one hand, and, on the other, we are often preoccupied with sheer protesting. Some people seem to be so social-action oriented, for example, that you wonder whether they get a chance to breathe. We Protestants do not readily have the inclination to rejoice together, plain and simple. That seems to be so impractical.

It is no accident that Zorba the Greek was written by a man steeped in the traditions of Eastern Orthordoxy. A Protestant could hardly find the spare time to dance the way Zorba does. A Protestant would be too busy working or protesting. In contrast, the Orthodox churches know well what liturgical celebration is. That is the center of their worship life. Somehow we Protestants have to learn from Zorba. Somehow, likewise, we have to learn what the Psalmist meant when he said: "Sing to the Lord a new song... Let the sons of Zion rejoice in their king! Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with timbrel and lyre!" (Ps. 149:1-3)

You and I, and common Christians like us everywhere, have come upon the Bread of Life. So we naturally respond with songs of joy and with dancing. And this by its very nature is an affirmation of Christ. People in the surrounding community, specifically the academic community, -- all of them looking in one way or another for the Ultimate Food of Life, -- may well ask themselves: What is it now that makes that group sing and dance so joyously? Meanwhile we continue merrily on our way.

Let's take down the sign PROTEST, then. We protest, yes, but not just for the sake of protesting; rather for the sake of Christ who is the focal point of human existence. We protest against the fences of division. At the same time we affirm, again and again, that we have come upon the Bread of Life, -- throwing off the inhibitions of earlier generations, -- singing and dancing together.

To cite some words from St. Paul: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."