A Sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
Wellesley College Chapel

April 9, 1972

THE REBIRTH OF THE INNERLIFE

My text is from the 20th chapter of John, verse 9: "Jesus answered him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.'"

Recently I was having lunch with William Sloane Coffin, and I made what for me was a reassuring discovery. Bill Coffin, as you know, is the fellow who got the freedom rides going in the sixties, who put his body on the line along with Dr. Spock and others against Vietnam a long time ago, and who has subsequently been at the front of just about every major peace demonstration I can remember.

At one point I said to him, in my best Movement language, "So Bill, what are you into these days?" He thought for a minute. "I've been reading Carl Jung," he said. Carl Jung! The great prophetic activist reading Carl Jung! "I've been trying to get in better touch with myself," he explained.

This was reassuring for me, because for sometime I've been experiencing some tugs in the same direction, not necessarily focusing on Carl Jung, but in general toward a new kind of attention to the inner life. I guess I haven't been willing to talk about it too much in public, for fear of sounding like a Movement cop-out.

But I want to talk about the rebirth of the inner life this morning, for I think the time has come. And I want to ask whether anyone else is tuned into this wavelength, and where we might go from here together.

I.

To begin with, let's dispense with this cop-out issue. A friend told me the other day that she had a long talk with one of the leading student radicals of a few years ago, and it now turns out that he's heavily into drugs, and not so much interested in politics anymore.

It seems clear that a lot of people are copping-out these days. For some it's drugs, for others it's ecology, for still others it's a return to "hitting the books" (as we used to say in the fifties). Finding excuses not to be involved in the struggle to transform our society; not to rid ourselves of genocidal war, racism, sexism and all the rest; finding excuses for copping-out is one of the easiest things in the world. It's as easy as falling into bed.

We will have none of that, all right?! As a fragile community of people who are trying to take the name of Christ for ourselves authentically, you and I will have nothing to do with cop-outs. Right? Right.

The question of the rebirth of the inner life, I think, is something else. It's a question that arises in the midst of what Bonhoeffer calls the worldly life, not apart from it. Bonhoeffer himself knew that question, although in

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my judgement he didn't articulate it as clearly as he might have.

Interestingly enough, on the day following the failure of the plot to assasinate Hitler, Bonhoeffer wrote in a letter in prison about a conversation he had thirteen years before with a young French pastor. The two men were asking themselves what they wanted to do with their lives. The French pastor remarked that he wanted to be a saint. Bonhoeffer said that he wanted to learn to have faith.

Then Bonhoeffer observes in his letter how radically different their two answers had been. For his own part Bonhoeffer proceeds to write elegantly about the nature of his own decision, words which have become the keystone of faith for a whole generation of Christians:

> "One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman(a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world---- watching with Christ in Gethsemane."

I suggest that as you and I may choose to renew our interest in the inner life, we will not want to go back on Bonhoeffer's words. We will not want to forsake the commitment to a life of radical worldliness, watching with Christ in Gethsemane.

But I also want to suggest that we must go beyond Bonhoeffer, or at least some of us must, if we are to be sustained in the kind of worldly life we want to lead. Maybe we can learn from that young French pastor, too, as well as from Bonhoeffer. Maybe we <u>should</u> be working to cultivate holiness as well as worldliness.

I mean, have you ever had the experience of working on a project, spilling your guts out for it even, and then realizing that you still had a long way to go? I'm not much of a mountain climber, but I do remember a couple of hikes which began just that way. You hike and climb for what seems like hours, you convince yourself that you must be at least halfway up the mountain, and then you come over a ridge, and there's that great big mountain standing there way up above you! When you get into a situation like that what keeps you from copping-out? What reserves can you draw on? What new sources of strength can you find?

So I say, I think the question of the rebirth of the inner life arises quite properly, even with some desperation in the lives of the worldliest of Christians.

Remember good old Moses? Here he was, saddled with the unenviable job of leading a fragmented tribe of complaining ex-slaves through the wilderness and through enemy territory. According to the story, in a certain battle Israel would prevail, when Moses held both his arms outstretched. But after awhile Moses got tired; so two assistants sat him down on a rock and held his arms up.

Sometimes in the most worldly of situations you need someone to hold your arms up. You need to find new resources to allow you to continue.

II.

In a striking way, perhaps more than he recognized, Bonhoeffer himself points us toward the rebirth of the inner life, the rebirth of a new spiritual vitality. During his stay in prison he wrote a poem "Who Am I?" The poem begins with a certain celebration of worldly strength. Bonhoeffer depicts himself as the concentration camp guards and his fellow prisoners see him:

> Who am I? They often tell me
> I step from my cell's confinement
> calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
> like a squire from his country-house.
> Who am I? They often tell me
> I talk to my warders
> freely and friendly and clearly,
> as though it were mind to command.
> Who am I? They also tell me
> I bear the days of misfortune
> equably, smilingly, proudly,
> like one accustomed to win.

Then Bonhoeffer steps back from himself, back from the man who is a tower of worldly strength. Or better, he looks deep within himself:

> Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
> Or am I only what I know of myself,
> restless, and longing, and sick, like a bird in a cage,
> struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
> yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
> thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
> tossing in expectation of great events,
> powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
> weary and empty at prayer, at thinking, at doing,
> faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?
> Who am I? This or the other?

Who are you? Do these questions from Bonhoeffer touch your inner side? They do mine. Who are you? Who am I?

III.

So where do we begin? Where do we go to start the journey within, in quest of the spiritual food for which we hunger?

I propose that we begin at the beginning. I propose that we begin our journey within at the most elementary level of spiritual life. Here I am taking my

cue from depth psychology. On occasion the counselor encounters a person who has experienced a "block", sometimes a severe one, in his or her psychic development. He or she just never learned how to express anger or how to feel tenderness toward another person. In such a case sometimes what is required is for that person to go back to the point at which the block occurred, and to begin learning, begin experiencing life from that point, all over again.

I suspect that some of you have had the experience of trying to pray, but then just giving up, because you don't know how. Well, rather than talk about prayer and meditation in any specific sense this morning, I want to go back toward the beginning, back toward the point where a spiritual block might have occurred.

IV.

A week ago, I must tell you, the Lord blessed me with Easter a day ahead of time. Around here the day before Easter was like the day before Spring. The sun warmed-forth and carressed the first crocuses to bloom. My two-year old daughter wanted to go outside. I put on her coat, and then I lingered at the window to watch her for a moment in the back yard.

She wandered slowly, contemplatively, step by step, from here to there. She had never really been so adventurous before. Every branch, every stone, every dry blowing leaf was wondrous for her. When the time was ripe, I saw her come upon the crocuses, and bend down before a deep blue cluster. She watched them for an infinite moment -- and then she gently plucked one, and carried it with her on her way.

Wonder! Wonder, wonder, wonder. I yearn, says Bonhoeffer, for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds. And I would add, I yearn for the sight of little children on the first day of creation. Somehow the inner life begins with the ability, the freedom, the ecstacy of wonder, primal, childlike wonder.

Have you and I forgotten how to wonder? Wallace Stevens tells about a man on an ordinary summer walk. In the brightness of the sun, he turns his head to see a single spruce tree, and

> suddenly,
> The tree stood dazzling in the air
>
> And blue broke on him from the sun,
> A bullioned blue, a blue abulge,
>
> Like daylight, with time's bellishings,
> And sensuous summer stood full-height.

Primal wonder. Childlike wonder. Is this not the beginning of the spiritual life?

Perhaps this is all the farther you want to go. Perhaps the thought that there dwells within you a primal wonder is enough. If so, I invite you to fix the eye of your inmost self on that first crocus, or that little child, or that single spruce tree, dazzling in the air, in bullioned blue.

V.

But then, if you will, I invite you to come along too, if you feel ready to take another fragile spiritual step.

Bonhoeffer describes himself as "powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance."

Authentic friendship. If our highly mechanized, compulsively busy, society blocks us off, at practically every point, from the experience of primal wonder, it makes it equally as difficult for us, perhaps more so, to experience authentic friendship.

We are so mobile, so preoccupied with our own plans, our own studies, our own careers, so isolated in our own families, so alone in the midst of the crowd. Have we forgotten how to make friendships? And how to cultivate them as well? I'm not sure that you and I even have the language at our disposal to talk about friendship!

Ther was a time when people wrote treatises and poems on friendship, a time when people sought to identify it as clearly as possible, in order to savor it and cultivate it. Emerson, for example, in his essay Conduct of Life writes with real wisdom: "Friendship should be surrounded with ceremonies and respects, and not crushed into corners. Friendship requires more time than poor, busy men can usually command."

Why cultivate friendship? What does that have to do with the renewal of the inner life? Everything. Everything, because as Martin Buber reminded us so forcefully long ago, our very reality, our deepest identity, is to be able to say I and Thou. The deepest level of our selfhood is the matrix of mutuality. The deepest level of our selfhood is our unity with all our brothers and sisters in the one body of humanity.

Here I suggest that we all can be instructed by Norman Brown's apperception of the unity of humanity in his book Love's Body. "Is there a way out," Brown asks; "an end to analysis; a cure; is there such a thing as health? To heal is to make whole, as in wholesome; to make one again; to unify or reunify; this is Eros in action. Eros is the instinct that makes for union, or unification, and Thanatos, the death instinct, is the instinct that makes for separation, or division."

So think anew of the vital "ceremonies and respects" of friendship. Think anew what it's like to reach out to another and touch his or her hand; to have the anguish of your heart heard and assuaged? Feel the healing presence of another. Taste the sweetness of Elysium, the blessedness of those ecstatic islands on the other side of this sea, in the depths and the delights of authentic friendship. This is Emily Dickinson's imagery:

Elysium is as far as to
The very next room,
If in that room a friend await
Felicity or doom.

VI.

Primal wonder. Healing friendship. To begin to experience them both, to know how to cultivate them both, I think, is to begin the spiritual life anew, to be abirthing within.

But there is of course more, much more indeed, to the journey within. So many things that might be said. Of them all, I want to touch one more point lightly before I conclude.

Bonhoeffer doesn't mention the community of the faithful in his poem, "Who Am I?" But in a certain sense the Church of Jesus Christ was the self-conscious presupposition of everything he thought and said and did. Not the abstract idea of the Church, but the concrete reality!

As a matter of fact, it was typical that on the First Sunday After Easter which we mark this day, 27 years ago, Bonhoeffer was asked by some fellow prisoners to lead a Service for them. He prayed with them, and he spoke about the meaning of their common imprisonment. He read from the Epistle lesson appointed for the day: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."(I Peter 2:2ff.) But it was not long before the door was flung open, and two civilians called out: "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us." The next day the Gestapo hanged him.

Bonhoeffer was <u>ready</u> -- profoundly ready. He was in the midst of the community of faith, from which he had drawn sustenance all his life. Read his book <u>Life Together</u> for a taste of his communal spirituality.

So this First Sunday After Easter, 27 years later, I cannot conclude without some testimony to the Church and to the Christ who gives us his Name. I want to say something, insofar as my fragile words will permit, about the Christ <u>who dwells within</u>, and who in this way unites us together in His body, together with all his saints.

Remember that striking story in the Gospel of John about Thomas, whom we call "doubting Thomas"? I have always liked Thomas best of all, I think. I remember being told in my confirmation class that we shouldn't doubt like Thomas, while secretly I was celebrating his sagacity.

The story, as you know, runs this way. Jesus manifests himself to the group of disciples gathered together, as the Resurrected One. But Thomas isn't there. When he arrives the others tell him about meeting the Lord; but Thomas objects. "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side," says Thomas, "I will not believe."

Then Jesus does appear, and Thomas does reach out and touch him. Thomas says, "My Lord and my God." Following this Jesus replies, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Now until the other day, when I looked at this passage again, I had always assumed that the point of the story was the obvious one, that second generation Christians -- and all of us -- that you and I have to get by with <u>sheer invisi-</u>

bility. Well, I don't think that's so anymore.

Last week, let me tell you, sad to say, some of you were not able to be with us for our Easter celebration. Yet for those of us who were here, you were here also, and we rejoiced with you in spirit. After we had feasted on bread and wine, and cried out together in crescendo "Christ is Risen, He is risen indeed!" , we embraced each other, all of us, old and young, male and female, male and and male, female and female. We touched each other joyfully and deeply.

We did not see Christ, did we? But did we not touch Him? As we ate and drank and rejoiced together, and embraced, were we not indeed His Body? I think so. I believe so. I feel so. This was the tangible invisibility of the Church of Christ.

So Thomas! You still can touch the Lord! Even though you can't see him. Reach out if you will. Reach out to your brothers and sisters in Christ.

VII.

Primal wonder. Healing friendship. The Body of Christ.

Are we together? Are we on the way to a new birth of the inner life? I dare say so.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.