1974

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JESUS SAID TO HER, "WOMAN, WHY ARE YOU WEEPING? WHOM DO YOU SEEK?" SUPPOSING HIM TO BE THE GARDENER, SHE SAID TO HIM, "SIR, IF YOU HAVE CARRIED HIM AWAY, TELL ME WHERE YOU HAVE LAID HIM, AND I WILL TAKE HIM AWAY." JESUS SAID TO HER, "MARY." SHE TURNED AND SAID TO HIM IN HEBREW, "RABBONI!"

BPS Easter 1974

Most of you are aware that the Chaplaincy sponsored a series of lectures this past week under the title "The Search for Human Values." The lectures themselves were thoughtful, insightful, and engaging, the kind of presentations that j^robe new areas and raise new questions. All this, surely, was^a good experience? but many of us had been anticipating as much from our friend, Roger Johnson, of our Religion Department, who gave the lectures - SSignificant

What was surprising, at least to me, and to some others as well,~was the response to the lectures. I don't just mean attendance, although that was unusually good ~~in itself~~. I mean the kind of personal involvement the hearers were committed to. Some said they had come knowing little or nothing about the lecturer, or the Chaplaincy for that matter; they were attracted mainly by the title, the Search for Humgn Values. Others "I'Trmly indicated by the seriousness aed their participation that they were indeed embarked, in their own lives, in a Search for human values, and beyond that what the participants came to call a "search for the Sacred."

What was going on here? Isn't it ~~clear~~ true that for most people God ~~died~~ somewhere inxKhaxikhHx toward the end of the 1960's, if not before, a requiem piously chanted by the then famous Death-of-God theologians? Isn't it ~~oSimr~~ true that most people in the circ highly sophisticated academic world have stopped taking religion seriously for some time, viewing it as a psychological projection or a sociological opiate for the masses, MXXMX a la^Freud or Marx? I, for one, hadn't seen such a sustained expression of what Tillich used to call ultimate concern,in an academic context, for two decades, really. What was going on?

This morning I want to take up that question, more or less from the perspective of the lectures and the discussions themselves. Then I want to raise a further question, What might have gone on?,— this time from the perspective of our text and the Easter message in gKKHKaix particular. Those of you who were at the lectures, see if you agree. Those of you who weren't there, try to imagine the kind of lively discussion it was, and how you might have felt about it all? how you do feel about the Search for Human $V_a$lues or, more theologically, the Search for the Sacred.

I.

What was going on?

To answer this question I think we need look no further, to hegiin with, than the daily newspaper. Many of the institutions that most of us have held sacred in the past are KxpKKXSHKKRg undergoing a xxxifcky variety of fragmentations and disintegrations: the family today is under severe straing^our religmous institutions seem more interested in their own survival at times than in the life with God and the love of neighbors; our political institutions seem to be in an advanced state of deca^z^-s®.

jit * s not too much of an exageration *here^is,* it, to speak of fihe spread of a kind of social death, a certairr rigor mortis, a state of social paralysis, affecting HHK our most cherished institutions at their roots?

I use the word death quite consciously, for the XMLHKXWrxHLx notion of a dsafekx contagion of death, a kind of spiritual and moral plague, may be the best way to understand our present cultural situation. We are a compulsively death-denying society, to be sure, but I thj.nk that many of HECK us are deeply troubled by that fact that at the same time we seem to be a compulsively death-wielding society.

This past Christmas Eve, as some of you may have read, Schenectady, New York police found the bodies of a 91 year old woman and a 93 year old man, Katherine and Frank Baker, frozen to death. They froKe because the Niagara-Mohawk Power Corporation had turned off their electricity for failure to pay their electric bill.

You and I kypw, a,t one level or another, I think, that this kind of awful event is grotesquely typical of our society: the huge, technologized, death-wielding institution wreaking havoc in the lives of the poor and the powerless, from Vietnam to Attica, from LhxL Hiroshima and Nagasaki to Wounded Knew.

So, not only are some of our most cherished institutions entering into a kind of rigor mortis, all of them together seem to be paying out the wages of death everyday, in many ways, around the globe. This is a sometimes frightening, frequently enervating, always frustrating kind of situation in which to live. Some contemporary writers have called this patchwork of social and personal anxitig^, the experience of nothingness. So it seems to be.

II.

Fo-unders tandably/ in the face of this encounter with nothingness, whatever form it may take for each one of us, not a few of us feel depressed, powerless, even totally hopeless some of the time, tfSffiesai—s- us, perhaps, much of the time. So we thirst for Life, with a capital L. So we hunger for something really REal to hold on to, some xwiii solid Ground to walk on. So, as defintelyk seemed to be the case at those lectures, many of us today, young and old, are embarked on a deep, even desparate, spiritual quest. Call it, as we did this past week, the search for the Sacred.

And this search, as we recognized, knows few bounds. It highly pluralistic, by and large, open to a wide variety of experiences. Some are seeking new tastes of Life in a variety of small groups: from encounter groups and value clarification groups to seminars on death and dying or consciousness raising groups. Some are seeking the Jiacred is a wide spectrum of communal living experiments. Others, variously, are turning mainly to solitude, toward mediatative and interior explorations. Still others are seeking a new kind of ecstacy in neo-Pentecostal movements. And so on.

So many options, it seems! So many possibilities for seeking the Sacred in a world fragmented by the experience of nohhingne ss! Our universe^ today, in a way, is a kind of vast supermarket of the RMNKM Sacred. Shelves and shelves, row and rows, of possible encounters with the Sacred seem to lie there waiting for us to pick them up and make them our own.

[ihis was as far as the lectures and the discussions tookK us, it seems to me. This was irhat was going on: a deep search for the Sacred, ~~it seemed,~~ in response to the experience of nothingness, a search and an experience, I'm sure, that xxxfx was ~~fairly~~ representative of spiritual hunger and Ms' existential despair er ~~globe today.~~ felt by many people today.

III.

(I must confess, retrospectively, that those lectures and discussions raised more questions for me, than they answered, as good intellectual evenings sometimes das can and should xaghSHferiiy do.

|My mind kept coming back to the pie thora of options ±XKijig spread before us in our search for the Jiacred. I mean, just thinkK of the current flow of gurus, preachers, teachers, meditators, shamans, poets, priests, seers, astrologers, mediums, and so on, now xpxEaxnuaxxHgx circulating throughout our society and around the world. We are in the midst of an incredibly diverse, unus^aH^^fed~~a^p^a~~?^ sp 1 ritua 1 quest.

jit's kind of a blur, isn't it?

(Do you feel, as I sometimes do, that the spiritual options open to most of us tend to difuse our spirituality, rather than KHxixxx enliven it? Has the thought crossed you mind,maybe, as it has mine, that in our highly pluralistic quest for the Sacred, in the face of nothingness, that we may be like so many spiritual Don Juam's? ■— Always questing for new kinds of experience; never quite knowing how to rest trustfully in any single spiritual experience?

jit's at this point that I want to raise my second question^about thoselectures and discussions. This time not WkxfcxwaxxgaixgxS What Was Going On, but fcliat might have gone on-8 And I mean this very ~~pagfelc.111•MSJ.'Y~~. What might have gone on if the persons who were involved in those lectures and discussions were the same persons who were joined together for worship^tnis Easter morning?

/Concretely, then,what might go on for you and for me.right now, as we are aware of the great diversity of spiritual Options our world offers us, or seems to offer us/ I want to suggest what I think is a simple spiritual strategy for a tine of time a spiritual confusion and diffusion — focusing. I mean, concentrating, centering, on that which our training and our tradition and our commonality equips us to know best.

jl fcafe think here of an event in the life of the great Greek mathematician and inventer, Archimedes, which most people have taken to be legendary. But it illustrates my point. On one occasion, when his homeland was under attrack by a Roman fleet, Ar^imedes was said to have ~~drawn on his knowledge of~~ designja collection of IKXSKS mirrors for the defending troups, who then used the mirrors together to focus the rays of the Mediterranean sun on the attacking Roman ships ~~and~~ to set them on fire. Archimedes, in a time of duress, had his soldiers focus, rather than coming up with all manner of ideas for defending^his homeland from the Roman attack,---------- ----- a little of this, a little of that, catapults, sneak attacks, etc. Legendary as the story might be, I like its spiritual import?

IV.

In any case, focusing is surely a key biblical experience, from the beginning to the end of the Bible, and particularly in the story of Mary Magdalene before us today.

I think we can understand her^situation rather empathetically. Somewhere in the middle of her life, it seems, she had encountered Jesus. She had concentrated on him and his mission, and in the process, we're told by Mark, Jesus had driven out seven demons that had possessed herg. Thereafter she continued to focus her life on Jesus and his ministry, supporting him and caring for his disciples, ~~we Liu a W y in-aminy- way*.~~ Mary rested in the one xpxxifcHaixKxpKxiKHKKxkkakxx overpowering spiritual experience that had been given her; she focused her life on Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. She trusted her relationship with Jesus. She invested her life and in her relationship with Jesus.

When, we see her in the story before us this morning, she's in a situation with which most of us contemporaries can-^npMntze. She's full of tears. Hera world is falling apart. The relationship in which she had rested and invested so much has now apparently been broken, severed, never to be restored.

9 instead of searching tne heavens for signs, exploring the wisdom of the East, seek^Jjie Hdyixe^of some medium or astrologer, or something like that, ~~she~~contEues^to focus^XWHX on that which was given her, even thought everything seemed to be collapsing around her. She stays with^ the tradition of Jesus, even though it means going to his tomb.

Then the astoudding happens. Jesus speaks to her. He calls her by name.ML And she recognizes him in his gixagy risen glory. "Mayy," he says. And she replies, "Rabboni," which meanZ Lord and God. Not only had her focusing xafcx on Jesus not been inftyvain, it was the xxxxaxKHinix channel for all manner of heightened encounters with the Life of GodytatBaH^ik which was overflowing through the figure of the risen Christ.K

V.

Ponder this for a minute. I don't want to suggest here somehow that other religions, so-called, or other experiences of the Sacred around the globe don't have validity. That's not my concern at this point, important as those questions are.

What I'm pointing to is the fact that for Mary Magdelene everything stands or falls with the focus of her life on Jesus, now encountered ever more gloriously as the risen Christ

By focusing on that which had been given her, on the figure of Jesus, even through the woes of death, Mary encounter what I think we can fittingly call a new LXX, luminosity for her life. Now£ to use Tillich's language} Jesus^/^'Vully Xxansdpax transparent to the Gr ound of Being. Now risen Christ ^07 shown with the glory of Eternity.

What was it likeforher at that moment? Maybe something like this:
Imagine a whole world^sot^wnlre which somehow managed to be, and to survive, in some perpetual twilight or darkness: a planet somewhere, perhaps, Xalwyys surrounded by clouds, never being bathed by the Light of its

parental Star. Imagine now the emergence of some visionaries in this twilight world, sometotally impractical, unrealistic(so it woudd seem) religious dreamers,/prophets and seers who proclaim the coming Bay of Light, in words like these:

> On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees....
> And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread HHXH over all nations.

Imagine, further, the emergence of one single person, like all others in every essential respect, yet somehow offering to those who became his followers a communion with an incredibly beadj$fS(l Eternal Light and Life, a person who lived and walked with an overwhelming glory, a captivating luminosity, One who said of himself:

> I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.(In. 8:12)

This is the One whom Mary Magdalene encounter® in his full glory in the Garden near the tomb, while she was irr the anguish of tzrief. This was the immediately accessible solor orb the tangible blazing light of Divine glory embracing her life, turning her grief to joy, her twilight to a burning giacK enthusiasm ofgjJLife. The Light of the risen Christ set her life on fire.

V.

But J' you're thinking/7 lucky Mary Magadelene} I'm not Mary Magadelene other biblical character, am IL I'® very much a modern man or a modern woman, immersed in the^experience%f nothingness!.'' [is that the kind of thing you're thinking now, maybe just a little bit? I mean, it can't happen to you? At least not nearly so powerfully as it happened for her?

[Not to speak of your awaress of the mythological elements in the biblical story itself, a problem which I can simply do no more than mention here. Anyway, there! are two thousand long years, it seems, between me and Mary Magdalene. It just can't happen in my life. Or can it?

A- **

Let me tell you a little story, Recently a scientist XEm®±wkKx somewhere speculated informally that Archimedes feat of focusing the rays of the sun on the Roman fleet just might have been possible. In response, a learned professor from the University of Arizona wrote a lengthy articj^in the journal Applied 88W888 Optics. He calculated carefully that even hundreds of well-aimed mi^tjp^, would barely raise a wooden ship's temperature by a few degrees per minute. He also akx stated that producing glass for hundreds of mirrors, let alone lenses, was probablyg quite beyond the Bronze age technology available to Archimedes. He concludear "We are bound therefore to dismiss this tale as mere legend."

Presumably this is what some of us are inclined, to do with the possibility of the risen! Christ's luminosity tm**^mp'in^/hpffin** our lives dismiss it, in one way or another as some kind of a legend.

Anyway, back to my story. Scarcely had the learned professor's report been published in Applied Optics than modern Greek,sailers, unburdened by sophistcated calculations and theory, turr^bronze-coated mirrors on a wooden boat in Greek waters and promptly s^t it afire ---------- This was the latest in a series of experiemLW? by Creek enginesr, 4k loannis Sakka. The mirrors he used were flat bronz shields. Held by dozens of sailers, properly aimed, they formed, in effect, a section of a large, concave focusing mirror. In ~~this particular~~ expe^'^**mtn** 7**0** sall-ers-aimed the—mirros. The target KKgKnisdxx repoetedly began to smoke within seconds and was blazing within a couple of minutes.

S o much for sophisticated, scientific modernity!

Now, likewise? for all mannjar of refined and well-calculated reasons, you may have concluded that the luminosity of the risen Christ can never really set your life on fire. But I'm just an unsophisticated Greek - sailor, I guess.

This morning I invite you to p^acevo^rseIf in the middle of - this ~~singing~~ aslebrat^^^ljristianVf^a^s it e=?e«5!effle=«Ss&- **wfaEe=®s4¥¥e*iag** the glory of Lifej^^ear them? touch them; see them all around you, focusing on you. See whether you are all that different from Mary Magdelene, as you too prasHe the name of Jesus.

VI.

All right? ~~All right.~~ Give it a try.

Sd^I*wisl***VymL^all*** manner of good Easter fire. In the name of Jesus. Amen.