THE CHURCH IN UNIVERSITY CITY

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
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". . .to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge. . . ."
(Ephesians 3:19a)

With the coming of the Kennedy Library, not far from here, this whole area may be rebuilt. Of some interest to us in this parish, at least one of the maps of one of the city planners shows an empty space where this building is presently located. Modern chapel or no, the demands of the university city could require the retirement of our building. Which ought to give us pause, even though presently there is no clear and pressing danger to our building. We might want to ask why we are here in university city in the first place. What would be lost if a church such as ours had to be put out to pasture?

I.

The first answer, and a true answer, is: very little. Once upon a time, perhaps, when theology reigned as queen of the sciences, it was different. Then the university needed the church explicitly for its own completeness. The church and its theology served as a kind of supernatural keystone which held all the natural sciences in place.

But that was just the trouble. With the church and its theology as the keystone, the natural sciences <u>were</u> held in place. They were restricted. You and I don't need to be reminded that the church which was queen refused to allow freedom to her subjects. This fact has been driven home to us this past year by the performance here of Bertholt Brecht's drama about Galileo. The queen refused to allow her subject, Galileo, get out of line. As we all know, however, Galileo and many after him did get out of line. And at times the queen looked pretty ridiculous trying to get them back. I, for one, sometimes would very much like to repress the nineteenth century story of the church's attack on the theories of Darwin. Rather than repress it, however, we can learn from it.

Should we not say, in keeping with the teaching of the New Testament, that the genuine role of the church is not that of queen, but that of servant? Should we not think of ourselves not sitting at the head of the table, but going around the table with a tray in our hands? But I am getting ahead of myself.

The point I want to make here is that in a very real sense the church in university city <u>is</u> dispensable. The various departments no longer need us to give their work coherence. That unified archway of knowledge in the university, with the church and its theology as the keystone, has long ago fallen to the ground. Each of the disciplines is now resting firmly on its own territory, however strewn and disorganized the stones may now appear. The university will surely survive if a church like this one is wiped off the map.

II.

But in what sense will it survive? That is the next question. Here I think we can be instructed by some remarks of Robert Hutchins, former

president of the University of Chicago. According to Hutchins, our universities are almost without exception multiversities, to use the familiar word. The parts scattered here and there dominate the scene. The unified community of knowledge is a thing of the past, by and large. Hutchins suggests that the heart of the multiversity is the department. And I imagine that any graduate student would agree. What really counts when the chips are down, is the department.

Then Hutchins has some unkind remarks about the department. "In the nature of the case," he says, "the multiversity department, however brilliant its short run results in training and research, cannot understand anything. It exists like every other subhuman organism, for the survival, reproduction, and expansion of itself." "Other departments are its natural enemies, because they are after the students, grants, contracts and appropriations the department wants for itself. A multiversity is, therefore, in a constant state of virtual civil war."

This may be a little too unkind. But I think most of us can see the validity of the underlying point. Call it increasing specialization, or increasing atomization, -- with each part of the university being increasingly out of touch with the others, coming more and more to care chiefly for itself and for its own survival. I would imagine that if one also looked hard enough at individual departments one might be able to find a corresponding atomization within many of them.

This is not a comforting situation, given the well-documented knowledge explosion of our time. Already two years ago a committee of the American Association for the Advancement of Science came up with a serious indictment. It charged that the tremendously powerful scientific tools now at man's disposal have been used with excessive haste and before complete understanding of their full effects were available. It pointed to thermonuclear tests in the atmosphere, the use of harmful pesticides, and the introduction of poluting detergents into our water. As the committee report said: "Science has developed powers of unprecedented intensity and world scale. The entire planet can now serve as a scientific laboratory." And, as an observer noted, "if something goes seriously wrong with a planetary experiment, all will suffer."

But as things now stand, the multiversified university city does not seem to be attuned to this universal human situation. Many a department, and individuals within the department, seem to be plunging ahead with eyes on the academic grindstone, but not so much on the world-wide human community and its needs. Unraveling the genetic code and mapping out the chemistry of the brain -- such things are astounding. But where is such research taking us, and how are we to deal with the new situation it is creating? Each part of the multiversity is most likely competent, and probably it also feels responsible at least to some degree in its own area, but who shall care for the whole? Who will tend to the overall needs of mankind?

III.

Here, I think we can say, the church has an important role to play in the university city. Surely we do <u>not</u> want to say that the church

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is going to solve the problems of the world. That would be a futile attempt to revive a queen who is long ago dead. But I think those of us who are members of the church can take it upon ourselves to leave this building, and enter into one or more of those scattered departments. We can enter into those largely atomized spheres, and, as judiciously and as forcefully as we can, say that ultimately what counts in human existence is self-giving love. We can say that such love surpasses knowledge. We will not suggest that knowledge is of little or no import. On the contrary, our commitment is to the God of truth, to the God of veritas. But we will say that knowledge without self-giving love is incomplete. We will say to our friends and acquaintances and colleagues in the department that veritas needs caritas. Truth is insufficient without charity.

I am saying, then, that a mark of the christian man or woman in the university city is his or her constant care for people, in the world at large and in the immediate vicinity. A christian man or woman knows that a life attunded to the needs of people, and not mere knowledge, is ultimately what counts. Caring about the effects of your genetic research, for example, and caring for the needs of the person next to you in the laboratory, takes precedence over your experiment. A christian in university city is one who knows, and who shows, that self-giving love surpasses knowledge.

IV.

But we christians have not come upon this stance in life by ourselves. We know a secret. We know a mystery -- a mystery hidden in the heart of eternity and poured out for us in an eternal moment of time. We can talk about it here this morning, even though we may choose not to mention it in so many words to our friends and colleagues in the department.

We know that genuine love, self-giving love, doesn't grow by itself, anymore than a plant can grow without soil and sunshine. We know that self-giving love flows from the Lord of this universe, and is mediated to all men, openly or in secret, through the abiding and faithful presence of the risen and ascended Christ. This is a mystery. Like a family on an outing coming to the foot of a precipice as it walks together through the hills, we can touch this great mystery and talk about it together and press our experience of it into our common memory. But we cannot comprehend its height and width and depth. Even so, this is our momentous family secret: we know that the love which surpasses knowledge is the self-giving love of God in Christ.

So we have built ourselves a building: to come together as a family to hear, again and again, about the man Christ, to sing about him, and to show forth his reality in our caring relationships with each other. So St. Paul in Colossians speaks of christians as having their "hearts knit together in love" and having"knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ."(Col. 2:2f.) So in our text, in a similar way, we hear about a christian community which knows "the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge."

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V.

Make your way to the top of Holyoke Center sometime, and look down at this church building situated in the midst of the university city. Maybe you will wonder what it is doing there anyway. Then, too, if it were a Sunday morning you might think that down there is a community of people singing songs of praise to Christ. You might think also that when that singing community disperses, it will infiltrate this academic building and that academic building, in order to become servants: to remind others, by word and by example, that self-giving love for people is what ultimately counts in this universe and in this university city, -- that love surpasses knowledge.

Still looking down from the top floor, you might conclude finally that although that church building might someday be torn down or crumble, you hope that that community of people will not. For it knows, -- you and I know, -- the love of God in Christ which surpasses knowledge.