LOVE AND LIBERATION

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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In recent months the media have been reporting what one magazine refers to as "a high tide of change... rolling across college campuses, sweeping away many old issues and leaving students in a fresh mood." Typical of these stories is the one about Harvard that appeared in the Boston Globe not too long ago. The Globe reports what it calls a "quiet revolution" along the Charles.

Chem 20 -- organic chemistry, which is necessary for medical studies, as yo,u know, has more than doubled its enrollment over the last three years. And it's a difficult course, too. On the other hand, Thomas Pettigrew's nationally known course on race and racism, which had 224 registrants in 1968, last year crested at 18.

What seems to be underway at Harvard is a certain pervasive withdrawal from the social and political arena and a move toward the old-fashioned Joe-college grind, aimed at financial security and domestic comfort. So the Globe concludes: "Harvard students are bored or despairing over current events, and they are becoming increasingly concerned with making a living."

All of which sets me to wondering about this College. Are Wellesley students experiencing that kind of withdrawal from the social and political dimension of life, for the sake private concerns like academic success and interpersonal achievement?

I'll leave each one of you to answer that question for yourself. I just want to make one observation.

You may not have noticed, but hoop-rolling is back. For those of you who are new to Wellesley, hoop-rolling is a traditional Spring ritual that many seniors participate in as a group before they graduate. Resplendent in caps and gowns, they roll their hoops together in a race, and the winner -- according to the tradition -- will be the first to be married! A sterling goal for every young woman, of course. A house in the suburbs and all the rest.

In recent years hoop-rolling fell from favor somewhat, particularly during the late sixties when student protest was very much alive on this campus as elsewhere. As late as two years ago, indeed, some 30 seniors used the occasion of hoop-rolling to convey their deep disgust of the Vietnam war. Wearing caps and gowns, they enacted a cemetery scene, as corpses on the ground, seeking to remind their classmates and the nation, via the press, of the killing of civilians in Southeast Asia. But those days of protest are gone, or so it seems. And hoop-rolling is gaining more and more popularity every year.

Now I'm not sure whether anyone, including most students, really knows what's going on in the hearts and minds of the student generation today. It could be, could it not, that the signs of a vast withdrawal from social and political concerns are deceiving. After all, social and political reality today is profoundly resistant to meaningful change. So it could be that many students are biding their time, waiting for an opportunity to return to the social and political arenas, preparing themselves for the new day when it comes. It could be.

I

But in the meantime, anyway, I think there's good reason to reflect about our deepest motivations, commitments, and feelings. Is hoop-rolling to function as a kind of culminating experience of your four years at Wellesley? Are you, or are you becoming, the kind of person who goes around in his or her own little circle, hardly conscious of the rest of the world? Do you live inside of some kind of a spiritual or moral hoop, and go round and round as the world goes by?

A century ago, Henry Howie Durant, the founder of this institution, directed that on the first Sunday of every academic year the preacher should speak on the theme "God is love." So, dutifully, when this Chapel was built at the turn of the century, those words were inscribed in stone in the chancel, and the theme appears today, as well, a little more brightly, before our eyes up front. But there's a problem with this love theme. There's a danger that it will become sentimental, that love will be taken to be the kind of nice attitude displayed by the nice people who never leave their nice little circles.

At this point you will, I hope, forgive me for taking the name of an alumna in vain. Consider with me for a moment the life of Ali McGraw in Love Story. And here I will hide behind the words of Harvey Cox. This is what Cox has to say in his review:

> Jennifer, played by Ali McGraw, never develops at. all, let alone into a woman. She remains a pseudo-tough but pathetically dependent post-pubescent Cliffic, right through the death-bed scene .. . ' Jenry' never loses her psychic baby fat, despite diploma, disinheritance, disease, and death.

But lest you wonder, let me tell you what Harvey Cox has to say about Oliver, played by Ryan O'Neal. Oliver, he says, is a swishy prep-school type who never once questions his sterile goal to be a smoothey corporation lawyer, surrounded by New York affluence. Of their relationship, Cox remarks:

> Oliver and Jenny never once mention politics; never speak of, let alone take, drugs;, never seem to discuss the content of any course, or any idea for that matter (just what grades they're getting); dress like ads from Mademoiselle's back-to-school number; and in general, perpetuate the camp image of college popularized in the 'Buckle Down Wynsocki' films of the 1930's.

Cox concludes: "Love Story is a sad movie all right. It is sad not just because it is about a beautiful girl who dies, but because it is about two beautiful young people who never really lived." Now I know that it's heresy to criticize Love Story and that, male or female, like thousands of others, you probably cried when you saw it. But think of what might be the deepest pathos of that film -- two beautiful young people who never really lived. Perhaps.

Anyway, I think you see my point. Sometimes love can be sentimentalized. Sometimes, indeed, it can be made super gushy, as when some of the old time missionary societies used to thrill about converting the natives in Africa, when they would never think about sitting next to a black person on the train. If God is love in that sentimental sense, if God too is a member of the club, a member of somebody's private circle, then give me the Death of God theologians! Give me Nietsche or Camus. I, for one, want life with meaning and humanity, not cake with frosting and frills. I'm sure you do, too.

It's precisely at this point .that biblical faith has its cutting edge. It all begins, and in a sense it all ends, with a group of slaves in Egypt, oppressed by the Pharaoh and the ruling classes of then ancient kingdom. How long they were there, we don't really know, but it was for some time. We can imagine them there, going around in their own little circles, "jiving" you might say. You know -- things are bad here in Egypt, but if you study hard and get into medical school, you might be able to make it high enough into Pharaoh's establishment to make your life bearable, even comfortable.

But, according to the story, God takes hold of a certain man named Moses and says -- set my people free! Go out there toward the waters of the Reed Sea, head out there toward the wilderness, toward the land of freedom and justice, and I will bless you. I will deliver you from Pharaoh's hands. This is the biblical "love story" par excellence. It's called liberation. For the Bible, from the beginning to the end, love is liberation.

II.

Now it may sound as if I'm jumping on a relevance bandwagon at this point. You know: there's black liberation, women's liberation, gay liberation, even some talk of men's liberation and children's liberation. I don't deny that. I think a lot of it is beautiful. All I'm saying is that the gospel of freedom is as old as the oldest traditions of biblical faith.

You know the story of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt. But listen, in the same vein, to the less familiar words of Mary, the mother of Jesus, whom so many sincere but misguided people have thought of as the stereotypical female, passive, meek and mild. This is Mary's song, or part of it, the Magnificat (which has been mostly hidden by Church Latin and Bach's music for 2000 years):

My soul magnifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree,
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy.

From Moses to Mary, from Deborah to Jesus, the Bible is the story of liberation, the account of God setting people free from oppression.

So, if one day my young daughter comes to me, as she sometimes does, and asks me what it means to say "God is love," I think I will tell her that God is liberation, that love is actually spelled l-i-b-e-r-a-t-i-o-n. The God whom we confess, and whose life-giving we celebrate, is the God who sets the captives free. That's what it means, I will tell her, to say that God is love.

III

But now a question arises. What stance are we to take in order to experience the love of God? How are we to find out what it means, deep inside us, to praise the God of liberation? The answer to such questions will surely vary for each one of us, according to our particular traditions and our own life histories. But let me venture an overall answer, taking my cue here again from the traditions of biblical faith. The way for you and for me to experience the love of God, the stance to take, is to step forward and claim it, for. yourself and for others. Don't just sit there stewing in your own private circle. Claim your Divine birthright.

There's an old Jewish legend concerning the people of Israel leaving Egypt and approaching the waters of the Reed Sea. As they hear the Egyptian chariots, thundering behind them, and wait by the Sea for the-promised Divine deliverance, nothing happens. The promised miracle is nowhere to be seen. You can imagine their consternation. It was only when the first person finally plunged into the waters that the people were able to pass through and escape from the Egyptians.

So, I think, you and I have to claim the liberation of God for ourselves and for others. If you just stand there doing your thing, going around in your accustomed circle, doing things naturally, business-as usual, maybe freedom will pass you by. You have to take the plunge, to risk, on the basis of God's promise of freedom.

Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to let go of your secure and predictable little private circle of habits and friends in order to lay hold of your freedom and to fight for the freedom of others?

Are you willing, for example, to lift your sights to the starving, millions in West Africa—a story crassly and inhumanely unreported in most of the media. Are you willing to plunge into the murky waters of indifference all around us, on the behalf of those peoples? Are you willing to risk being called a do-gooder or, maybe, a white liberal? Are you willing to ask your parents to tell their representatives to vote for massive relief for West Africa, as we have so easily supplied massive military aid for the oppressors in Angola and South Africa? Are you willing?

Likewise, will you engage in the trivial, sometimes nuisance practice of not eating California lettuce or drinking California wine, for the sake of thousands of impoverished agricultural workers? Will you risk the expenditure of some of your lifestyle energy and join the Massachusetts Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Bishops of New England, and the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis in active support of the consumer boycott of California grapes and lettuce not bearing the black Aztec Eagle of the United Farm Workers? Are you willing?

God is love. That's a very concrete statement in the Bible. It means that God is liberation, that God is setting the captives free. But to experience that liberation, you have to claim it yourself. You have to plunge into the uncertain currents of contemporary history. And then

maybe freedom will become a reality for you, too. That's the biblical logic. You gain yourself by giving yourself. You become a free person, as you risk yourself for the freedom of others; like the one who plunged into the waters of the Exodus. You leave the security of your own private interpersonal circle behind, and you make what Kierkegaard called the leap of faith. That's how you find your own freedom. That's the stance you assume.

IV

But how, really, can you find the motivational energy to take that stance? I frequently think about this as I sit on my front porch and look around at this country club we all belong to here. You know, sailing, golf, nature-hikes, tea parties, Love Story mixers, and all the rest (in addition to a good deal of academic work, to be sure, whose importance I don't want to deny for a minute.) But just think of it all. If Harvey Cox said what he did about Love Story, I wonder what he'd say about Wellesley College. I can hardly bring myself to think about it. But seriously, how can you possibly find the motivational energy to claim your freedom and fight for the freedom of others at a place like this? How do you find the strength to let go of your security and to plunge into the uncertain currents of contemporary history here in this particular cd-legiate circle?

Well, liberation as we see it in the Bible, is definitely a social and a political reality. It's paradigm is the oppressed people of Israel being freed at the Exodus. So, insofar as you and I are seeking to take biblical faith seriously, we will naturally want to think and act in terms of social movements: third world people and justice, black power, freedom for Soviet Jews, victory for the lettuce pickers, women's liberation, men's liberation, and so on.

But claiming the liberation of God also has an inner, personal side, as well as a social, political side. To be able to take the plunge into the currents of social history, to be able to claim your own freedom and the freedom of others, you also have to be embarked on the process of inner liberation, freeing your spirit. Otherwise, your own little circle, which, you've contrived for the sake of your own security, will undoubtedly keep you well protected from anything but the vaguest thoughts about freedom.

I'm saying that you have to realize, and I have to realize, by the Grace of God, that it can happen to us -- itsy bitsy, unknown, lower-case, middle class us. You can become a child of God's freedom. So can I.

There's a Hasidic story about a certain Rabbi Eizik, son of Rabbi Yekel of Cracow. After many years of poverty, he dreamed one night that someone was telling him to look for a treasure in Prague, under the bridge which leads to the king's palace .

"When the dream recurred a third time," as Martin Buber tells the story, "Rabbi Eizik prepared for the journey and set out for Prague. But the bridge was guarded day and night and he did not dare to start digging. Nevertheless

he went to the bridge every morning and kept walking around it until evening. Finally the captain of the guards, who had been watching him, asked in a kindly way whether he was looking for something or waiting for somebody. Rabbi Eizik told him of the dream which had brought him from a faraway country.

"The captain laughed: 'And so to please the dream, you poor fellow wore out your shoes to come here! As for having faith in dreams, if I had had it, I should have had to get going when a dream once told me to go to Cracow and dig for treasure under the stove in the room of a Jew. Eizik, son of Yekel, that was the name! I can just imagine what it would be like, how I should have to try every house over there, where one half of the Jews are name Eizik and the other Yekel!' And he laughed again. Rabbi Eizik bowed, travelled home, dug up the treasure from under his stove, and built the House of Prayer which to this day is remembered by his name.

So I want to suggest to you this morning that you have a treasure right where you are, deep inside you, the still small voice and the vitalizing power of the Spirit of God. Just listen. God is saying inside you, right now, -- Susan or David or Mary or Paul or Deborah or Stephen, calling you by name, -- I love you, I want you to know my freedom. You're free now to claim what I give you.

Which brings me finally to the question of those hoops. What shall we do, what shall you do, with hoop-rolling?

I have an idea. All things considered, the senior class should keep that hoop-rolling ritual. But in no sense should it be allowed to symbolize a community of people who go around in their own little circles. On the contrary, as a truly fresh mood of liberation rolls across this campus, the hoop will become a playtoy in an entirely different kind of culminating experience. The ritual enactment will be the stance of your life and mine as free human"beings. The ritual enactment at the end of four years will be you striding through life, knowing how to take the plunge, knowing how to let go of your own little secure circle, embraced by the love of God.

So, come the Spring of your senior year, you'll play with your hoop -- like a prisoner taking the fetters that used to hold him, and flinging them in the air, with joy, celebrating his liberation. You'll sing praises for the energizing love of God, which is there for each one of us, if only we claim it for ourselves.