CHRISTIC ACTION

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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"Do not model yourselves on the behavior of the world around you, but let your behavior change, modeled by your new mind." (Romans 12:2, New Jerusalem Bible)

This text takes us to the point where we stopped last week. In relation to the story of the wisemen and the star, we considered the need for wisdom in life as well as calculating technical knowledge. We considered the need to dream dreams as well as the need to solve practical problems. In short, we considered the need for a religious vision of this universe, in particular a religious vision which sees the infant Christ as somehow being in the center of all things.

But there's a danger to that kind of emphasis on wisdom or the religious vision of life. We meet it full-blown in the most visionary of Christian traditions, the Eastern Orthodox: this is the tendency to sit tight with your vision, once you've dreamed it. You catch a glimpse of the greater scheme of things; you begin to see that God's in charge of everything; and you sit back and do nothing. You enter into the religious vision, but you forget the moral action. Let's call this the Byzantine perversion of Christian faith. As you know, the Eastern Church did become totally identified with the social order, and did adopt a position opposed to any social change.

Let's not restrict ourselves, however, to looking askance just at Byzantine Christianity at this point. Let's look a little closer to home. And when we do, the results are not comforting. Lutheranism, as I hope you know, has been second to none in its commitment to social stagnation. It's no accident that a certain life insurance company, which caters especially to Lutherans, should say in one of its advertisements, "Family security is the Lutheran way of life. Somehow, more than most people, Lutherans take care of their own." Well, historically speaking, that's true. Lutherans have spent a great deal of time taking care of their own, and precious little time taking care of anything else.

In a certain sense Luther himself is to blame for this. And here I ask your permission to quote my favorite passage from Luther for the first time this year. This is the statement Luther made one day as he was sitting in the local tavern and one of his parishoners came up to him, as parishoners sometimes do, and asked him why he was just sitting there and wasn't out preaching the gospel to all men. He remarked, "As I drink my Wittenberg beer, the gospel runs its course." That is a beautiful theological statement. In a way it summarizes everything Luther ever wrote or preached. Likewise, in its way, it summarizes the first eleven chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans, on which Luther depended so much. Luther, and Paul before him, had a vision of the Power and Grace of God active in human history; and they knew that that God was in charge and that that God was going to save the world. That was that. So you can sit down and let the gospel run its course.

Nevertheless, that's not enough. And here's where the emphasis of Luther's writing got him into trouble. Often, he seemed to leave matters right here. And very early in the sixteenth century the ruling classes twisted Luther's good theology into a bad ideology. They said that anyone who's interested in social change is subverting the will of God, -- which will is that you should sit still. Luther had not emphasized enough the last five chapters of the Book of Romans. Here Paul shifts the emphasis, from a religious vision of the world to a call for moral action. From the theme of the new life <u>from</u> God, to the theme of the new life for God.

Our text appears just at that point where Paul shifts the emphasis. Looking back over his discussion of the Divine gift of salvation for all men through faith in Christ; of the Divine gift of the Spirit as the vital reality of the future, salvific life in this present world; and of the Divine promise of the renewal of the whole creation, not just man; Paul has just said: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ...For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory. Amen."(Ro. 11:33f.) That's the vision. Then the call to action: "Do not model yourselves on the behavior of the world around you, but let your behavior change, modeled by your new mind." Paul takes it for granted that no Christian will forever sit there drinking his Wittenberg beer.

But notice how Paul ties the first eleven chapters together with the last five. He doesn't scorn the vision when he urges the action. He doesn't turn from the wisdom when he considers the program. As I indicated last week, I am afraid that that is what we Americans are tempted to do more than we realize: tempted to plunge headlong into a mindless kind of action. Action without the vision. We can call this the American perversion of Christian faith. For example, the mass visceral commitment to "support the boys in Viet Nam." Of course, anyone with an ounce of humanity will refuse to contemplate pulling the rug out from under our troops and leaving them to the enemy. But the feeling to support the boys in Viet Nam is employed much more comprehensively than that. It's used to justify a variety of policies, some of them at odds with each other. On the other side, there seems to be a growing mass visceral commitment to protest against the war at any time in any way. The other day a student at Radcliffe wrote to the Boston Globe about the Dow protest at Harvard. She observed: "In many ways we were wrong, in some ways we were right, but mainly we were frustrated." It's clear, I think, that frustration was an important motivating force for some of the demonstrators. But that kind of mindless, visceral response to a social challenge is excluded by Paul. He calls for action modeled not by the behavior of everybody else, but by your new mind.

What is the stuff of that new mind? For Paul, the answer is clear. It's the religious vision. With the reasons of your heart, you see a universal Divine process of new life, and you see that process as somehow coming to a focus in the man Christ. That's the vision. And that vision then becomes the paradigm case for your moral action. As you dream your religious dream and see God humbling himself unto death on the Cross for the sake of all men, so you see yourself, in your own way, as one who lives for others, even to the point of death. As the writer to the Ephesians puts it: "Therefore be imitators of God...." (Eph. 5:1) God left his heavenly throne for the sake of all men; so we leave our family security for the sake of our needy neighbors. The life of the man from Nazareth, in whom we sense the coming of God, thus becomes the thought of our minds. And our moral action is shaped by that thought. It becomes christic action, action which imitates the life of God in Christ in this world. The vision and the action, the wisdom and the program, are intimately related to each other and inseparable from each other.

So we can, and we should, drink our Wittenberg beer. That's the first essential moment of the Christian life, the time of rest and celebrating God's work. But not to the exclusion of the second essential moment, the Pauline perapatetic. For, according to Paul, the Christian properly isn't one who sits around all the time; the Christian is also one who walks, -- who follows after God's work in Christ and who imitates that work in his own life.