Are We In the Picture?

-- a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire

4JJe Z[1];^ College Chapel
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.x"' I have two texts this morning, both from the thirteenth Psalm. They express very different sentiments. First: desparation, born of deep disappointment —

How long, 0 Lord? ...
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

Then: joy, born of deep trust —

But I have trusted in thy steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation.
I will sing to the Lord.

I.

A few weeks ago, some time it seems now, long before the fireworks started going off around here, I found myself engaged in an utterly conventional world. Some relatives were in town, and they inquired whether they might see some of our home movies!

Now, I have always felt ambivalent about home movies, but I was glad to be able to show them some, especially since they happened to be the very relatives who had given us the camera and the projector in the first place.

As I sat there in the darkness, watching reel after reel of children opening birthday presents, children grinning, children grimacing, mother carrying birthday cake, mother playing ring-around-the-rosie, and all the rest, my residual ambivalence began to increase to the point of downright displeasure.

I thought that was strange at the time, but later upon reflection I made a simple discovery. For most of it, I wasn't in the picture! However touching, however corny the films, I wasn't there. Of course I was, I know; somebody had to be holding the camera. But, then again, I wasn't there.

The thought came back to me this week when I was talking with a small group of new students. After we shared some of the initial niceties of getting to know each other, a number of these students began to indicate, in various ways, that they were ill-at-ease at Wellesley because they were still thinking of themselves in terms of their family or their friends back home. As they looked back at that world, ~~it seemed it was~~ it was dawning on them, it seemed, that they weren't actually in the picture anymore.

[Others in the group expressed concern about ma the grade at ~~Wellesley,~~ kqq College, getting to know their professors, getting along with their roommates -- you know, she insists on keeping her carnivorous pla nt on her bureau, and it's chomping Jjeeps you awake at night, and so on — all of which seemed to amq^it to the same kind of feeling. These students clearly felt that they had yet to become part of the Wellesley picture. And it was cause for some mild anxiety.

Then, the more I thought about the whole matter, the more I began to suspect that my own low-keyed disquiet about the home movies, and the new students' somewhat similar feelings about leaving home behind or entering a new college world, might be signs of a deeper malaise, a kind of anguish of soul, of which some of us may be only dimly aware.

Are you part of the picture? Am JE part of the picture? That's the question I want to raise ^irignwnrT^ this happy Flower Sunday morning. I'm talking about life in general, about being a human being who makes a difference. Are you part of the picture?

I don't for a moment want to be inordinately grim. I don't want to suggest at all that all those beautiful fireworks the other night all these beautiful flowers here this morning aren't for real. It's good to be here this academic year, beginning anew, stepping forth into a second one-hundred years. I don't want to deny for a moment the sense of excitement and anticipation I

But I do want to testify, as well, to a certain sense of emptiness I feel from time to time, a certain aching in my soul, that seems to emerge at odd hours -- like at night, after the fireworks are over, after the lights are out, and it's quiet. And I suspect that more than a few of you can tell of similar feelings.

When everything's said and done, am I for real? Are you for real? Are we really part of any picture that makes any difference?

II.

I take it that the external story of our time doesn't have to be belabored. Some of you may have received a third-class mailing from Jacques Cousteau this summer, as I did, pleading for funds for basic research in oceanography. The letter depicts a rather frightening scenario of approaching ecological catastrophe — unless somethings are done very quickly. In addition — and Cousteau barely touches on this horrendus fact — millions of human beings around the glob^^&fl^jf at this very hour/^at" the verge of starvation,

Closer to home, many of us are feelingSKK increasingly powerless. The problems that seem to be strangling the globe today are so huge and so far beyond our control! I mean, how are you to feel when you pick up the Boston Globe on a fresh summer morning, as I did in a vacation retreat this pafit July^bi^itfiely begin paging through, as you look^&t the beauty of the White Mountains every now and then, - how are you to feel when your eyes glance down at the bottom of page twelve, and you see a little paragraph/'with a tiny headline that tells you that AKA 50,000 people in Ethiopia and Somalia have recently died of starvation. How are you to feel? .. .Pagq -twelve, way at the bottom, scarcely Visible next to the half-pagef Filene' s*. Fifty-thousand people*. How do you feel? Powerless? Probably. Numb inside? Probably.

Matters aren't help much^-~~Mig ouyduily ..Imrfegj~~ by the increasing mechanization of our own society. In looking at my class listy this year, coming back after a year away, I nob?that you all have numbers. Isn't that right? --^1 mean, even at Wellesley! No longer can people make those unkind cuts about MIT, for all their numbers. -^Maybe that's progress. I won't debate it. But the sense of becoming more and more of a number in somebody elss's computer is a little NWgsszr scary.

Not long ago, according to a report in the N.Y. Times, a certain Geraldine Herring of Jacksonville, Florida went to renew her driver's license. The examiner fed her information into a computer. He scanned the reply, and,, then looked quite puzzled. "I'm sorry to tell you this," he isM^zher, "but you're dead." ...Geradine Herring later told a reporter: "I hope they get it cleared up. It's kind of uncomfortable being dead."

Are you part of the picture? Do you make a difference? That's my question. Am I part of the picture? Do I make a difference? Or am I drifting off into some netherland, in&the darkness, with numbness of soul, with aching of soul, into some walking world of death?

Such questions become all the more pronounced for us when we personally encounter one of life's uxxh unavoidable crises, — separation from a loved one, serious illness, or the who^e wrenching experience of death and dieing itself.

After the fireworks are over, after the flowers have faded, do you sometimes feel this way? Do you know what it means to taste the bitter fruits of numbness and loneliness and alienation? fear? Have you yourself spoken the Psalmist's lament at times, perhaps wordlessly, gjgaMMWg! .ilxgrinding your fingers into your fists?

How tong, 0 Lord?
How long must I bear pain in my soulK,
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

This is an experience, I take it, that many of us can relate to quite concretely -- desparation born of deep disappointment.

But, as I don't want to belabor the WHKHX woes of our external history, neither do I want to dwell very much on the woes of our internal history. It's sufficient, it's helpful enougMf?>"just to be aware of them, insofar as shape theyXXXXXXXXX the reality of our lives.

III.

I'm really standing here this morning to belabor something else, to dwell on Something else. I stand here this morning to say, as simply and as directly as I can, that -- in any case, in spite of it all, in the midst of it all -- there's hope.

Tgte- h, stand here this morning happy to take up that venerable directive of Henry Fowle Hurant, may he rest in peace — especially after his voice has been so often exhumed this week, after such a long time — I stand here this morning glad to remember that brother Henry was distinctly displeased with preachers who could talk only of hellfire and damnation.

For which reason, as you know, he directed that preachers in this Chapel, on the first Chapel service of the year, should in perpetuity *a&uaps* chose the text "God is love." So I have done, although slightly recast in the words of the Psalmist, jgsfey minil you, is the very same poet who has just uttered a deep groaning of lament for the poet's heart:

But I have trust& in thy steadfast love;
7mv heart shall rejoice in thyH salvation.