THE CIRCLE AND THE CROSS

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church, and
Marsh Chapel, Boston University
The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
July 17, 1966

"Even so we also should walk in newness of life."
(Romans 6:4c)

A rather proper looking young Berkeley coed was sitting at a cardtable at the South Gate of the campus. Behind her was a large sign which read, "Radicals." And then a little lower on the sign these words, "Psychedelic freedom, sexual freedom, academic freedom."

A curious tourist went over to her and brashly asked her what she meant by freedom. She said that the literature she was selling would tell him all he wanted to know. But he persisted, so she finally said: "For what it's worth, we don't want to be hemmed in by anyone."

I

That's the way a growing number of people feel today, not only the professional campus protesters. Around the outside lie the big issues, Viet Nam or de facto segregation; closer to home such realities as the grind of study or the ever-present pressure for a successful career. We often seem to be caught up in the midst of forces which appear much bigger than ourselves. And so we tend more and more to feel hemmed in.

This is one of the points, it seems to me, where the claims of biblical faith deserve a special hearing in our day. "Even so," writes St. Paul, "we should walk in newness of life." Which is to say, we should break out of the old pattern, and begin a new path. We should push our way through that which hems us in and head in a fresh direction.

G. K. Chesterton was suggesting much the same thing, I think, when at one point in his facile book, which has the title Orthodoxy, he juxtaposed two symbols for human life, the circle and the cross. The first, he maintained, is most germane for most people. The second, of course, is the less popular biblical alternative.

II

Consider the circle. It's not all that bad, at first glance at least. The circle is safe. You just keep going around in the same familiar path. You don't have to worry about any unexpected turns which might cause you injury. The circle is also comprehensible. And that's nice. It makes for peace of mind. You know where you're going. You can plan your life to perfection. And, of course, the circle's comfortable, by and large. You're not often jolted by unforeseen circumstances.

So we go to the right school or join the right group, and we make a

circle of friends. Interesting expression, isn't it? "A circle of friends." You go around together. That's your circle.

Later on we may move into a community which has a fairly well defined sphere of concerns. Inside that sphere things are probably rather green, like the well-manicured lawns at the country club. Outside things may be not so green, even dry brown, but then that's not our problem. That's the problem of the people who live there. Two-thirds of the people in the world may go to bed hungry at night, but that's no real concern of ours.

Outside of our green sphere, indeed, things may be caught up in a brush fire, or even hotter flames. But we have our own well-paid fire department; so we needn't worry. There's no reason to think that the nice life in the circle will ever be disturbed.

It almost goes without saying that our churches tend to be a part of the safe, comprehensible, comfortable circle.

We have seen some stirring developments in recent years. For example, just this past week the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Chicago told his many constituents in no uncertain terms that the sale of a home is not merely a financial transaction. "It is a moral decision as well," he said. "And there can be no justification for rejecting a prospective buyer or renter because of his race or religion." The church has been coming alive in recent years, ~~as you know~~.

But the image which still seems to be most adequate for many of our churches is the circle,-- the sewing circle. The idea is that the church should tend to its own religious knitting and let the rest of the world go by.

After noting the persistently meager church attendance in a certain English diocese, an Anglican writer commented pointedly: "The Church is remembered (in England) as having fought the trade union movement, having been 'the Tory Party at prayer,' and having Lord Bishops in Parliament who opposed such reforms as the abolition of captial punishment for the crime of spitting on London Bridge."

In America in recent times, to be sure, our church leaders have not been quite so blatant. But the sewing circle image has persisted, mainly through the device of uttering many finely honed words and taking precious little concrete action. One national church body declared this summer: "It is important that every effort be made to bring all parties to the conflict (in Viet Nam) toward a stance of openness and flexibility with a readiness to respond to whatever beginnings of solutions may emerge." Now that's about as decisive as sewing circle chatter! It doesn't even have the sting of a good piece of gossip.

All this, then, -- many of our churches included, -- is the circle. Safe. Comprehensible. Comfortable.

III

Of course, as anyone who's ever taken a ride on a merry-go-round knows, a person can sustain interest in a circular life just so long. Life can become terribly dull, very soon. This sense of dullness and boredom alternates, I guess, with the sense of being hemmed in. The two feed on each other.

So, many people today spend a good deal of their time in search of diversions or tranquilizers of one sort or another. You know the story. In some circles, people give more and more attention to the illuminated box and the likes of Dr. Kildare. In other circles, people begin to ride the cocktail circuit. In still others, especially among the so-called radicals, the cry goes up for more and more LSD and more and more sex.

But it seems to me that very few people really believe that such diversions materially alter their circular lives. As the saying goes, you go off on a tangent. And a tangent never really touches the circle in which you live. With the TV or the LSD or the compulsive cocktail or the souped-up sex, no one really alters the shape of his life. The circle is untouched. Everything basically continues in the same old pattern.

Why don't we really become radicals then? That means getting to the roots. Why don't we try a little more energetically to get at the roots of authentic human life? Why don"t we ask anew what human freedom is, and not just cry out from time to time for freedom from restriction here or freedom from restriction there. Human freedom is surely more basic than psychedelic freedom or sexual freedom or academic freedom, important as any one of those particular freedoms can possibly be.

IV

At the roots of authentic human life, from a biblical perspective, lies this one central presupposition: <u>you are not your own</u>. Your freedom is not first of all freedom <u>from</u>, but freedom <u>for</u>. You are free for God's sake and for your neighbor's sake.

From the perspective of biblical faith, in other words, authentic human life is <u>outgoing</u>: serving God by serving your neighbor in need. Not going around restricted to your own circle.

This, I think, is part of what St. Paul is suggesting when he says: "Even so we also should walk in newness of life." Paul is asking the common man of faith to move in a new direction, and that direction is undoubtedly toward the person in need.

There's a rub here, however. This newness of life is neither safe, nor easily comprehensible, nor necessarily comfortable. That's why the proper symbol for the Christian life is not the circle, but the <u>cross</u>. Here, with the cross, two lines <u>cut</u> across each other. Here two lines open up the wounds of suffering.

-4-

In our day we readily criticize the saints of the church. Today we desire secular Christians, not saints. But most of the saints whom the church remembers were the most worldly Christians of all. What they knew, and what we sometimes forget, is that the common life of faith involves suffering, and the more involved in the world it is the more suffering.

It <u>does</u> entail risk and sometimes serious discomfort to break out of your own circle and to go out to your brother in need. Whatever the mixed motives and the ambiguous successes of our brethren in the freedom rides and freedom marches, -- and who by the way does not have mixed motives and ambiguous successes?, -- whatever their motives and successes, they have at least demonstrated that going-out to one's brother involves risk and discomfort, sometimes suffering and death.

Sometimes, like Samson among the Philistines, the only way to change an unholy establishment is to bring the ceiling crashing down on your own head. ...Recall that right after Christ had cleansed the temple, he was put to death.

Accordingly, St. Paul wants the common man of faith to see his life in terms of the Cross of Christ. "Know ye not," Paul asks, "that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?"

From a biblical perspective, then, the way to break out of the dull restricting circular life is to open oneself to the possibility, then perhaps the reality, of suffering. Mind you, though, it's <u>not</u> suffering for suffering's sake. That's the ascetic perversion of biblical faith. It's suffering for the neighbor's sake + Xt's sake

Not long ago I was talking to some non-Christian friends all of whom had traveled to Mexico at one time or another. They recounted to me with considerable horror the suffering of some of the people there, suffering made even more intolerable by the custom of religious pilgrimages. As I told my friends, and as is obvious to just about anyone with eyes to see, what those Mexicans need is a good hospital, not mortification of the flesh or hope in a sudden supernatural resolution of their pains.

And it's precisely the common man of faith who ought to be struggling, even dying, for a good hospital for those people.

I should add that we shouldn't be exclusively dedicated to the spectacular projects, important and decisive as they can be. We must have freedom marches and we must have people to fight for hospitals for the poor in Latin America. But that's not all. The arms of the Cross extend over the whole journey of human existence, over the common and the mundane, no less than the spectacular and the sensational.

Indeed we might venture to say that the spectacular and the sensational achievements in behalf of the poor only <u>finally</u> make

sense in the context of a life which is constantly being extended, which is constantly going out to the neighbor. It finally doesn't make sense, in other words, to be a champion of civil rights and then to be curt and cold to the local girl who checks out your groceries in the supermarket. Nor does it finally make sense to parade in behalf of peace in Viet Nam and then turn around and manipulate your fellow student as a stepping stone to some private success.

The arms of the Cross cast their shadow over the whole of life, over the ordinary as well as the extra-ordinary.

V.

The wonder of all this, -- and this is the delight of biblical faith, abiding into the present, -- is that the cross is the way of newness of life. This is a paradox, not easily comprehensible, but this is the biblical claim: With an outgoing life comes newness of life. With a life oriented on the brother in need comes authentic human freedom.

As Chesterton wrote, "The circle returns upon itself and is bound. The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travelers."

But we, of course, are not the first travelers to choose this way, if indeed we do choose the way of suffering for our neighbor. The path of newness of life through suffering and death for others was walked first, and finally, by the man Jesus, called the Christ.

This is why it is fitting that his Cross should be carried at the head of processions by common men of faith. This liturgical habit tells a truth. He is the Divinely given model and the Divinely given power for our own lesser lives. He has forged the way and he continues to instill in us who are not deserving the strength of his vibrant life.

This is clearly the presuppostion of our text, brought out well by the King James Version: "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

Not only the Cross, then, but also the Resurrection gives shape to our lives, -- or it can. Through suffering and death comes new life. That's the wonder and the delight of the Christian life.

So if on occasion your life seems like it's locked on a merry-go-round, -- if from time to time you feel like you're hemmed in in a circle, -- consider again the biblical alternative. That's to go out straightway to your poor brother, after the example and in the power of Christ. That's the truly radical pathway open to us all.

"Even so we also should walk in newness of life."