

FINDING THE LOST GOD, IV
IN WHAT HAPPENS BETWEEN PEOPLE

October 10, 1971

Last June a very sneaky business went on here in Duluth. I snuk into town and delivered a sermon in another church. Certain people from Pilgrim Church snuk over there to listen. But most of you did not hear that sermon. So I am at liberty now to sneak in a story that I used on that occasion.

A five-year-old boy came to Sunday church school for the first time at a church where I was the minister. When his class was over, his mother asked him how he got along. He answered:

"I looked all over but I couldn't find God anywhere."

That is a very disconcerting statement about the church. You can take it as a devastating indictment of the spiritual poverty of the church today. But you can also take it as a pointer to what the church should be doing these days. Despite his disappointment that little boy came to church for the right reason.

So bearing him in mind, I have been inviting you on recent Sundays to share in the same quest. I have been speaking of how we might look for the lost God. First, I said some strange things about tree worship, which I called THE ART OF HALLOWING. Then I spoke of how a higher sense of what is right sometimes breaks through the bounds of custom and conscience. Last week I spoke of the presence of the divine Spirit in the depths of each person. Now in this sermon I want to try and locate God at that point where he seems to appear most characteristically in our time.

What I have in mind was summed up very concisely by something I heard a young Catholic priest say a few months ago. He was one of a group of clergymen who had come together to create an ongoing fellowship, and this group was discussing what the agenda of their future meetings should be. The priest said that he felt that they should think about ways of working together in the community because as he put it:

"People today find God in human relationships."

That remark was not very original. But it struck me as summing up the new point of view one is likely to discover in such a young priest right now. It is the kind of statement that helps us get a handle on so much that is going on in all sorts of churches today. It helps explain, for example, why Catholic churches are moving their altars out from the wall and having the priest face the congregation. It helps explain the growing use of the dialogue Mass. As one leading Catholic writer, Gregory Baum, tells us, the various changes in the Catholic liturgy are all aimed at conveying the thought that GOD IS PRESENT IN THE PEOPLE. I would refine that statement just a little bit to say, GOD IS PRESENT IN WHAT HAPPENS BETWEEN PEOPLE.

Now that is my theme. I should like to hold up four kinds of happenings that seem especially significant for contemporary Christians. They are caring, needing, crusading, and celebrating.

First, caring.

Most of us have been rather well educated, I would think, in the idea that divine love and human love go together. The man who wrote the first Epistle of John taught us that a long time ago when he said that God is love and that without love we cannot know God. A few years ago I came across an interesting book by a psychiatrist named Margareta Bowers, who specialized in working over broken down ministers. She said that this experience confirmed her thesis THAT HUMAN EXPERIENCING OF LOVE IS PRELIMINARY TO AND PREREQUISITE OF THE EXPERIENCING OF GOD'S LOVE,

But as I have said before, love is a much overworked word these days. It is through the kind of love that cares for others, the love of sacrificial concern, that God comes through to people most powerfully. That has always been true, of course. What made St. Francis so effective an evangelist was the caring he showed for people and things that were generally overlooked in that hard-bitten medieval world. When he gave his cloak to the wandering beggar, or bathed the leper, or preached to the birds, people were astonished. They found themselves in the presence of a great mystery. Some of them called that mystery madness, but others saw the glory of God in it. So it has always been. When people confront a person who cares deeply they sense that here is a life grounded in a power that reaches beyond their own humanity.

In our own day this seems to be for many people the primary path to the presence of God. As Bishop Robinson reminded us, modern man is most likely to find God in the gracious neighbor.

Next, I suggested that people find God in needing. Here too we come upon one of the characteristic insights of our time. God is not only there in the gracious neighbor, that Good Samaritan who gives us first aid and reserves a room for us in the next motel. God is also there in that victim whom we find lying in the ditch. God reaches out to us not only through our caring for others, but also through the needing of others.

A few years ago a litany was used at one of our denominational gathers that went like this:

"O God, who is cold in the slums of winter,
whose playmates are rats, four-legged ones who live with you
and two-legged ones who imprison you,
Help us to touch you.

.....
O God, who is three and whose belly aches in hunger
Help us to touch you,

O God, whose toys are broken bottles, tin cans,
whose play-yard is garbage and debris,
and whose playhouse is the floors of the condemned buildings,
Help us to touch you.

O God, who sleeps in bed with his four brothers and sisters,
and who cries and no one hears him,
Help us to touch you.

Some people were so offended by that litany that they walked out of the meeting. Even the liberal journal, THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY, called it blasphemous because it identified God and man. As one who has devoted his life since his teenage years to opposing every humanistic reduction of Christian faith, I too would like to tinker with the language there.

But, allowing for some liturgical license, there is gospel truth in that litany. It is the truth of the great doctrine of the Incarna-

The fourth happening I mentioned was celebrating. It is people taking delight together in the goodness in the human situation.

The term celebration has become a synonym for worship in our time, especially for a style of worship where there is emphasis on something happening between- or among- people. In a passage quoted in one of our confirmation books, Ross Snyder says:

"Celebration is a million candles lit with reverence and joy."

He goes on to remind us that celebration is not something you can do as a spectator. "Celebration," he says, "is communal. It is an act of a people."

Many people have difficulty warming up to some of the experiments in celebration worship today. I must confess that I myself am not quite ready to change all our worship services into rock festivals and sensitivity groups. But what the celebration people are trying to accomplish is not really new at all. They are trying to get back to the idea that our Congregational forefathers had of worship when they described their worship by means of another term, the term meeting.

It is too bad that word has lost its deeper meaning. Now it conjures up for us the image of committees hassling over whether to serve string beans or brussel sprouts at the annual aunts and nephews dinner. But in former days the word meeting carried a spiritual depth. It described a situation where people came together to share their deepest joys, their deepest beliefs, their deepest sorrows. It described a situation where people said "yes" to what mattered most, and where they levelled with one another concerning what was wrong. Meeting was worship, worship in the sense of a happening among people in their mutual meeting with God.

But something rather terrible happened to our churches over the years - between the seventeenth century when our forefathers went to meeting and the 19th century when they went to hear the preacher and the choir. The meeting house changed into the auditorium.

Now there is a place for listening to sermons - I don't deny that. If I did, I might be out of business. But it is important that we recognize today that true worship is meant to be a meeting of persons on the deepest level, or a mutual celebration. Said Jesus:

"Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Christ is present in the midst of two or three, or two or three hundred in a way he cannot be for one all alone. That is why his followers have always gathered in upper rooms, in meeting houses, in house churches, in great cathedrals. He is present in worship that happens between people. Unless we recognize this, we might as well stay home and listen to the Mormon Tabernacle over the radio.

So then, to sum it all up: We live in a time when many people seem to find God most significantly in human relationships. And there are certain kinds of relationships, or happenings between people which in our day have brought a renewed awareness of God's presence in the world: they are the happenings of caring, of needing, of crusading and of celebrating. And if the church can become the place where these sorts of happenings occur - then perhaps those five-year-old boys will locate God in church after all.

tion - the doctrine that God identifies himself with the human situation. The God who comes to us in an Albert Schweitzer is also the God who comes to us in the staggering derelict.

No book has influenced the church in our time so profoundly as that collection of letters and jottings that the German martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote in his prison cell during World War II. It is there that we meet the statement that to be a Christian today means to stand with God in his suffering. And there too we confront the paradox of this poem:

"Men go to God when they are sore bestead,
Pray to him for succour, for his peace, for bread,
For mercy for them, sick, sinning, or dead;
All men do so, Christian and unbelieving.

Men go to God when he is sore bestead,
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead;
Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.

God goeth to every man when sore bestead
Feedeth body and spirit with his bread;
For Christians, pagans alike he hangeth dead,
And both alike forgiving.

God comes not only in the neighbor who cares, but in the neighbor who needs. He is present in the mutual dynamic of caring and needing that happens between people. He is there in the gracious giving that astonishes us with the glory of a boundless love. But he is also there laying claim to us in the cry of misery.

The third happening between people where I said God could be found today was crusading. People often make fun of that word, especially when it is applied to politics. But it is a good word to stand for the sort of caring that is shared and which is militant.

Here is the last paragraph of the last address by Martin Luther King - a speech delivered at the Masonic Temple in Memphis the night before his assassination:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead, but it really doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he has allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. O I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

And I think that if you were to ask many people today when God came alive for them, they would answer, "when we were out there together in pursuit of a great cause - when we were thrown in jail for eating at the wrong lunch counter, when we prayed in the rain at the capitol steps." It is in crusading that so many in our day have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.