DEATH AND LIFE

Meditation to go with Tillich reading
Good Friday service at St. Paul's Episcopal Church
April 8, 1977

The passage that I have just read is taken from a sermon that bore the title Born in a Grave. It was preached by the late Paul Tillich to students shortly after World War II. The horror of that war and the attempted genocide of the Jewish people was much closer to people then than it is today. To Tillich, who was himself a refugee from Nazi persecution, it must have seemed that Europe itself was about to be reborn out of a grave.

In his sermon Tillich stresses the "tension" as he calls it, - we might even say, the opposition, - between life and death. That opposition is brought out even more strongly in a passage which the editors of our service today omitted. In that passage Tillich stresses that Jesus really did die, that the whole person died. His death was a real ending.

And yet out of the grave came a new beginning. Out of death, life. Had not Jesus actually shared in death, Tillich tells us, he could not have brought us a victory over death. Without the grave there would be no Easter.

New life born out of the grave. Sometimes that happens in the midst of life itself. It seems that we have to pass through some devastating defeat, some acute suffering, before new possibilities appear in our living. The expression "hit bottom" is familiar to people in A.A. It would be a mistake, I think, to insist in some dogmatic way, that nobody can overcome a problem with alcohol until he or she hits bottom. But so often that is in fact the case.

So often it seems that it is only when we come to the end of the rope that there is a chance for new beginnings. Our ecumenical study groups this past Lent read some selections from Thomas Kelly's A Testament of Devotion. The little essays and talks in this collection were all composed during the last three years of Kelly's life. They radiate a quality of spiritual health and joy. They testify to a person who in modern times achieved that capacity which was found in Brother Lawrence and in St. Teresa, the capacity of living in constant communion with God in the midst of very busy activity. People who knew Thomas Kelly personally did not doubt that he knew by experience the things he wrote about.

Yet prior to composing those little gems of spiritual literature, Kelly went through a grave personal crisis. He suffered a jolt to his ego and to his long held ambitions that came near to destroying him. Spiritually speaking he entered the grave. Out of that grave A Testament of Devotion was born.

Life out of death. The Greeks taught that wisdom comes from suffering. And more than wisdom, I think. Humility and compassion usually come out of suffering too. And creativity. I doubt if there ever has been a great artist whose work was not forged at least in part by agony.

If you wish to know the secret of all human efforts to bring beauty to the world, you will find the answer in a little poem by William Carlos Williams that is called To a Dog Injured in the Street.

It is myself,
not the poor beast lying there
yelping with pain
That brings me to myself with a start -
as at the explosion
of a bomb, a bomb that has laid
All the world waste.
I can do nothing
but sing about it
And so I am assuaged
from my pain.

What do we make of this? We may be tempted to ask a question similar to one that was put to Paul. The apostle taught that our sin is forgiven by God's grace. Some people apparently asked him, perhaps facetiously, perhaps in earnest, why not sin more then so that grace may abound? Perhaps we ought to seek suffering and death in order that life may abound and with it wisdom and compassion and creativity.

I think that would be misguided. Death and suffering should never be sought for their own sake. Even Jesus' death on the cross should not be seen as something he chose, or that God chose, as a good in itself. It was not good. It was evil. But it was an evil that Jesus had to face because he was faithful to his mission.

The fact that life sometimes arises from a grave does not mean that we should leap into graves in order that life may abound. Always it is life that we should seek. But when that quest fails, when endings do come despite our best efforts, then we may take heart in the glad tidings that there is a power at work that brings new beginnings out of the most dismal endings.