

CHRISTIANITY AT A DISCOUNT
JAMES 2:14-26 MATTHEW 5:38-42

APRIL 20, 1986

A friend told me recently about a sign that appeared just after the Christmas holidays. It said: "Christmas, 50% off." It was meant to advertise some sort of sale, of course. Still, that sign on some merchandise has more to say than we may want to admit about our attitude toward the Christian faith itself. This Sunday, not long after Easter, perhaps we need to reflect on the ways in which we "discount" our faith during most of the year.

Christmas and Easter are glorious times of affirmation. Look at the Scripture we read and the hymns and the anthems we sing on those days and all during Advent and Lent leading up to them -- in fact, all year long. They are truly remarkable statements of faith.

First of all, we have the audacity to affirm that God reached out to us and sent Jesus to be a unique link between the divine and the human. He sent him furthermore, in the person of an infant -- a helpless baby, born in the humblest of circumstances. We go on to affirm that this baby grew up into a person who challenged the entire power structure of his day. All the more remarkable, he performed miracles -- amazing acts that cannot be explained on purely human terms. Then, he was apparently defeated, put to death by ambitious and fearful religious and civil authorities who could not stand his challenge to their authority and to their view of how the world works. He was brutally humiliated and then crucified, presumed dead, and buried. And then, we declare, he triumphed over death and, as one of our historic creeds states, "Sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

However we debate about the precise definition of the Resurrection, it is at heart the affirmation that death is not final -- that death is a door, not a dead end. And so we sing joyfully, "Christ the Lord is risen today. Alleluia!"

That, however, was on Easter Sunday. What, now, do we affirm and do when the Easter hymns are fading, the lilies are drying up, and even the secular trappings of bunnies and eggs and new clothes are past tense? I fear that the sign which I mentioned might be put over the door of almost any Christian church, if we are really honest with ourselves: "Christmas and Easter -- 50% off." As a matter of fact, I wonder if that estimate isn't generous. Sometimes we appear to be affirming considerably less than half of what Christianity is presumably all about.

Our discounting of Christianity occurs in a variety of dimensions, I believe. We certainly cannot deal with all of those dimensions in one sermon. However, two which are absolutely crucial are faith and social action. Those two elements are like the two legs on which the Christian life moves forward. Take away either, and we are in serious trouble. Yet, we discount both -- and stumble along when we ought to be running.

I. FAITH

Fundamental to the faith we profess is Jesus the Christ. If that relationship is not central, we are going to have problems from the outset in affirming a faith that is truly Christian. We may affirm noble causes and commendable ideas without relationship to Jesus. Many people do. But without that relationship our faith cannot be called Christian, good though it may be. I recall the words of Theodore Parker Ferris in this context, spoken from the pulpit of Trinity Episcopal Church in Boston: "The only question to put to the church today is, 'Is it relevant to the life, death, resurrection and return of Jesus Christ?'"

Starting with that foundation, what we affirm in our faith is a series of quite extravagant claims, as I have noted already. We go far beyond what is objectively provable -- or at least we say we do. Do we really mean what we say? As a matter of fact, I think most of us put affirmations of faith into some sort of special area where we can say them over and over without thinking about them. Perhaps we are really afraid that if we think about them, we will really have to believe them -- and if we really believe them, we will have to do something about them.

Look, for instance, at all we say and sing about love. Go through the New Testament some day and look at the passages about love. Then leaf through our United Methodist Hymnal and see the words there about love. We make audacious claims about its power. We affirm that for Christians love literally conquers all. We repeat the words attributed to Jesus, that if someone does us harm, we should turn the other cheek -- that if he or she takes one garment, we should add another voluntarily? Do the parents here teach their children to do that? Do we ask our President and Congress and State Department to practice that sort of cheek-turning with the Russians and others we assume are hostile to us? No, not often -- if at all. Instead we wall off that sort of affirmation into a safely remote place where it lives only on the pages of scripture, as though those pages were some sort of insulation protecting their words from having any real effect on us or others. We can sing loudly about the power of love over hate and then turn right around and threaten others with the full force of retaliation if they oppose us personally or nationally. In all honesty, we really are not at all sure about the power of love. Our response, usually, is that whatever the ideals of Christianity, we have to live in an imperfect world; adjustments have to be made. Reinhold Neibuhr, who was one of the most perceptive students of Christian ethics in the modern age, wrote a very important book entitled Moral Man and Immoral Society. He argued in that book that we can do better in approaching ideal standards on a one-to-one basis than in groups. The more we get involved in the fabric of social interaction, the more we have to compromise with absolute principles. Therefore, Neibuhr suggested, one can try to turn the other cheek in an argument with a member of one's immediate family -- but not with a hostile nation.

That is always an appealing argument, when we fall short of the ideals of Christian love. I suspect it is a very popular argument among Christian people in America now, when our nation has turned to bombing instead of negotiating in a situation of international crisis. Accepting such compromise, however, is dangerous -- dangerous not only to those whom we attempt to compel into submission, but to ourselves as Christian people. For when we believe that what we profess in principle will not work in practice, we are in danger of ending up with very little of the power of the Gospel. Our Lord was quite clear about this, over and over. We need to recall his warning that "They who live by the

sword shall perish by the sword." I believe those words are intended not just for Libya, but for the United States of America, as well.

I don't believe that much of value has happened in the history of the Church because of people who doubted the full power of what they affirmed. The real miracles have happened when the saints among us -- famous and unknown -- have refused to discount their faith and have insisted, against all odds, that we are a people who believe that love does triumph over hate and that life does prevail over death. Thank God that among us have been -- and are -- great souls who do not put a discount tag on the great affirmations of our faith.

II. SOCIAL ACTION

The Scripture chosen for this morning was from the Gospel of James, that gem of a book following the letters of Paul in the New Testament. In turning to the area of social action, the second of the two "legs" on which Christianity is called to run, I want to read some of those words again. "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Well, few here this morning would argue with that statement. The rub comes, however, when we move from personal acts of charity to efforts to work together for the betterment of society to social action.

I am reminded of George Webber's story of the Good Samaritan, recast a bit for the modern world. He writes: "I am a good Samaritan. I am a commuter between Jerusalem and Jericho. On Monday morning I start off for Jericho and on the way I find a man beaten up by a gang of thugs. Now I have got to stop and take him to the hospital, and I'll be late to work. I must convince my boss of the legitimacy of my tardiness. The next morning I come along the Jericho road again and there in about the same place I find another man beaten up by the same gang of thugs. I take him to the hospital and again have to make excuses to my boss. By the time this has happened four days straight, I decide there is something wrong with the system. I am going to begin to worry about the matter of police protection on the Jericho road. This I cannot handle by myself, as an act of charity.

Yes, sooner or later we come up against one system or another -- and we confront the issue of social action as Christian people -- one of the most actively debated areas of our faith. There used to be a basic conflict between so-called Conservatives and Liberals about whether or not Christian persons should talk about social issues. One group said that faith was entirely a personal matter and should not be expressed in programs for social action. The other said emphatically that effective social witness was the whole point of being a Christian. One group focused on personal devotion to the virtual exclusion of social action, and the other put so much emphasis on action that it often left little time for personal devotion.

Now, however, both Liberals and Conservatives are insisting that religious conviction be translated into action. Some Christian clergy insist that a program like the President's proposed "Star Wars" is immoral. Others, like

Jerry Falwell, affirm that program as an appropriate expression of Christian righteousness. Both, however, insist that programs of social action are necessary outcomes of Christian faith.

There are, of course, some who continue to argue that Christian faith is not something that ought to upset us and create controversy. Not long ago Robert Schuller, minister of the Crystal Cathedral in Orange County, was asked what could be done about declining church growth. He said that in his opinion the clergy should stay away from controversial subjects and just concentrate on personal faith. He does that -- and the Crystal Cathedral is thriving as a multi-million dollar operation. Many are touched deeply by that ministry. But if avoidance of controversy is at the heart of the Gospel, I think we are discounting one of the most vitally important elements of the Christian faith. It is not my intention this morning to advocate a particular program of action. What I do urge, however, is that all of us try to face up to the full demands of the Gospel on what we do. If we are too confused or weak to act effectively in the name of Jesus Christ, let us at least be honest about our failure -- and not spend time and energy inventing excuses why Christian faith cannot possibly work in this imperfect world, anyway. Let us at least recognize, in all humility and contrition, that the failure is not of the faith we profess -- but of our imperfect selves.

We need to reflect on the miracles that have been caused by persons who, in faith, have not started with the assumption that they would have to "trim their sails" according to the winds that happen to be blowing. Let us reflect on the miracle of the American civil rights movement, for instance -- and the nonviolent Christian witness of Martin Luther King, Jr. Much still needs to be done in that area. However, we are far ahead of where we would have been if, at that crucial point in our history, the movement had been led by someone filled with hate and a hunger for vengeance. Instead, a deeply committed Christian led the marches -- and preached about his dream for true brotherhood, not of murder and retaliation. In my opinion, not only those who belong to ethnic minorities are in that man's debt. Every person in this country with a white skin ought to thank God for Martin Luther King, Jr. We owe as much to him as the Southern Blacks with whom he actually marched.

We have paid a great deal of attention lately to events in the Philippines and what has been, thus far, a largely nonviolent revolution. I was interested in reading recently that prior to that change, members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, devoted to nonviolent action, were active in that area, helping train persons to bring about change peacefully. It was deeply heartening to me to see masses of people, including priests and nuns and religious leaders, fill the streets to the points where tanks could not move -- literally putting themselves between the two opposing forces that could so easily have begun shooting at one another.

When faith is strong, we are open to become effective channels of the power of God -- open to putting our lives on the line in ways that will build new foundations and not simply duplicate the mistakes of the past.

In closing, I want to share one of the great hymns of Easter affirmation which was a favorite of Bishop James Chamberlain Baker, one of the most influential Christian witnesses in my life. Bishop Baker loved these words, by the poet John Masefield, because they were such a joyous affirmation of faith and hope beyond all doubt and despair. They are not the words of a discounted

Christianity, reduced in value by human limitations, but of a boundless confidence in the grace of God who has come most near us in Jesus Christ. Share with me, please, through the ears and eyes of faith, "An Easter Hymn," by John Masefield.

Sing, men and angels, sing,
For Christ our Life and King
Has given us light and spring
And morning breaking.
Now may men's soul arise
As kinsman to the skies,
And God unseals his eyes
To an awakening.

Sing, creatures, sing, the dust
That lives by lure and dust
Is kindled by the thrust
Of life undying.
This hope our Master bare
Has made all fortunes fair;
And man can on and dare,
His death defying.

After the winter snows
A wind of healing blows,
And thorns put forth a rose
And lilies cheer us;
Life's everlasting spring
Hath robbed death of his sting;
Henceforth a cry can bring
Our Master near us.

Let us pray: Oh God, save us from the despair and doubt that tempt us to discount our faith, our personal devotion, our action. Inspire us, rather, to accept your grace so fully offered. Let us know, again and again, that "henceforth a cry can bring our Master near us." In the name of Jesus the Christ, whose disciples we are called to be. Amen.

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION
by Glenn S. Fuller

Dear Loving Parent, Creator, Judge and Redeemer,

We come before You after another week of personal living with all of its triumphs and frustrations, its joys and its sorrow, its love and its fear.

Grant to us Light for the pathway, courage for the responsibility, sensitivity to family and neighbor; vision to understand and interpret, trust to lean upon You, and love to infuse all relationships.

Bless this Your congregation. We ask your blessing upon B.B. Angell in the death of her father Walter Rice. For our sick - Robert Youngberg and Beth Kennedy, for others in hospital or in convalescent home, for those wrestling with anxiety and frustration, those battling with resentment, hurt, loved ones

with mental illness, those experiencing bereavement, temptation - depression - or overloaded schedules - grant healing - wisdom - shalom - courage - renewal.

We pray for our nation at this hour of heavy responsibility. Forgive us our trespasses, military and economic, against other nations. Teach both our leadership and our people the wisdom, discipline and patience of true diplomacy. Give us the insight to get to the root of problems, whether terrorism or deficits, or poverty, or ecological crisis, or cold war. Give to us as a nation the honesty to face these problems; the creative courage to address them; and the vision and discipline to prepare this world not only for ourselves but for our children and our children's children. We remember how our fore-parents beginning with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel passed this world on to us. Through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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