

You remember the story about Bob Fulgrum<sup>h</sup> who was working at a resort and was complaining about the sauerkraut and the wieners until he confronted the Jew from Auschwitz, Siegmund, who said, "Boy, you don't know you are born yet; you are confusing an inconvenience with a problem; you only have an inconvenience. You don't really have a problem." And you remember, Bob Fulgrum<sup>h</sup> said, "It was as though my butt had been kicked and a window opened in my mind to see the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. Well, this is a story that usually brings the house down and I told it in Finland and then I found out later that some of the people had already read it in GOOD NEWS UNLIMITED magazine. Then the other shock about how near they are to us. One day Dr. Searing (?) came up to me and said, "Look, there is a request that you speak on the faces around the cross." And, of course, this is a very old cassette, a Good News Unlimited cassette, that goes back a long way. So come with me while I cross a bridge to a little island and there is water flaying all around it and here's a company of Gospel people, men and women, boys and girls who sang like angels, beautiful singers. I will never forget the music there. I talked to them about the faces around the cross.

Let me remind you of that story. You know the negro spiritual that says, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" And, of course, we were. The nails may have been forged in hell but we drove them. The thorns may have come from the Jewish hillside but we plaited them and placed them on his brow. It was our sins that took him to the cross. He was there because Paul says, "He loved me and gave himself for me." It was a world in miniature

There were Jews and Gentiles, there were black and white; Cyrus of Cyrenia, which is north Africa and he was probably black; there were male and female. We are specifically told the names of certain of the women that stood around the cross including Mary, the mother of Jesus; there were young and old; there were learned and unlearned. There was the religious and the irreligious. It was a miniature world. It was a preview of the last day when, again, Christ will be lifted up, judging the whole world. There on the cross we have a micro-judgment scene as he separates the lost from the saved; the man on his right is saved, the man on his left is lost. The uplifted Christ always divides the world. He is a savor of life unto life or death unto death. The same sun that can soften wax hardens clay. So there at Calvary we see the last great judgment scene with Jesus lifted up dividing the world.

There were three groups there, three attitudes: There were those with sympathy, there were those with antipathy, and there were those with apathy. Some of the disciples were there and Mary, the mother of Jesus was there--sympathy; other women there--sympathy. Antipathy--it says the chief priests were there! Caiaphas may have been there. He was at least there in the presence of his minions. And then, apathy--the soldiers didn't care, couldn't care less. But changes took place that day around the cross. A Roman soldier, a centurion, witnesses this strange Galilean who prays for his crucifiers and when the dark sad scene is over he exclaims, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" And, of course, the most amazing change of all is the thief on the cross on his right who in his last moment of existence begs to be remembered. So changes took place. Yes, we were all

there and one day we will all be there again because judgment day will be the cross lifted up and the question asked, "What did you do about it? What did you do about my Son?" One of the most outstanding figures there, of course, is Mary. It says in John 19, "That standing by the cross of Jesus was Mary." We are told that others stood afar off but we are told that Mary stood by the cross. Her name means 'bitterness.' She had been told at the birth of her son, "A sword shall pierce your heart." Not only would her son be pierced on Golgotha but a sword would pierce Mary's heart so she stands there unable to help the son of her love but by her mute sympathy strengthening him in his suffering. She is reminiscent of Rizpah, you remember the Old Testament story of that mother whose boys were hung on trees and she spread a sack cloth over on the nearby rocks and stayed there through the months from harvest down to the winter rains warding off the beasts of prey and the vultures. So Mary stands by the cross of Jesus and she is warding off the specters of doubt, fear, bewilderment and loss. But like her son, she does not curse the people involved. She does not call for God's vengeance on his crucifiers. And, thus, she seems to expiate the sin of the first woman who stood by a tree and who cursed the whole human race! Eve, who plucked from another tree of knowledge. The cross is a tree of knowledge of good and evil. It tells of the evil of our hearts, the goodness of God's heart. The cross is another tree of life. To receive Him is to receive life; without Him we are dead.

So, Mary, by her refusal to curse, in a sense, expiates the crime of the first woman by the first tree who brought cursing on all of us. Then I think of the gamblers at the cross. The soldiers gambled for his robe. It was too good to divide, the seamless robe, representing his perfect character without spot or blemish or seam.

But, you see, we are all gamblers. It is impossible not to gamble in life. Being born was a gamble--the most dangerous thing that ever happened to any of us. Getting married is a gamble. You have no guarantee that your partner is not going to be stricken in one way or another. Having children is a gamble. The biggest gamble of all is when you hazard what is very valuable to you for something that seems of surpassing worth. That is when you become a Christian. When you become a Christian you have to be prepared to give up everything. It costs nothing to become a Christian; it may cost everything to remain one. So there is a sense in which we are all gamblers. Maybe God was a gambler. When God permitted the multitude to make a choice, Barabbas or Christ? Wasn't God gambling? When God gave his Son on the cross, was he gambling? Start at \_\_\_\_\_ Kennedy, the padre in World War I--the padre poet, this is what he wrote on that subject: "And sitting down, they watched him there, the soldiers did, there while they played with dice, he made his sacrifice and died upon the cross to rid God's world of sin. He was a gambler, too, my Christ. He took his life and threw it for a world redeemed. And ere his agony was done before the westering sun went down crowning that day with its crimson crown, he knew that he had won." Yes, we are gamblers, not just the soldiers gambling. We are all gamblers but do we gamble wisely? Are we prepared to hazard apparently everything for the sake of the one on the central cross? That's the test of our gambling.

We talked about Mary but, you know, the Scripture names several other women and they seem to personify women through the ages who often are unable to intervene, who see their fathers, their brothers,

their husbands going through hell and seem just unable to do anything. Not one woman in the Gospels ever speaks against Christ. Isn't it amazing. Plenty of men speak against him--not one woman ever speaks against Christ, even the heathen governor's wife speaks for Christ: "Have nothing to do with that just man," says Pilate's wife. Think of the wonder of it. It is as though the New Testament was predicting that down through the ages the gentler sex would respond more spontaneously to the gentlest person who ever lived.

I think of Caiaphas; the most dramatic interview of all time is that recorded in Matthew chapter 26 where Caiaphas who represents august tradition and tremendous power is confronted by a non-conformist and the traditional hierarchy has to choose between tradition and truth. All institutions have a tendency to be self-perpetuating and to be idolatrous. Many, many institutions end up crucifying what they originally set out to worship. The leaders, represented by Caiaphas, had an option that day to hand Christ over to be crucified or to kneel at his feet and say, "My Lord, and my God." But in every generation the test comes--shall we crucify Christ that the institution may live? Will it be Christ or Caiaphas? Will <sup>we</sup> be governed just by tradition or will we be governed by Him who is the way, the truth and the life?

When William Booth set out in the Methodist to win souls to Christ, the Methodist leaders said, "Please, please, we don't like your unorthodox methods." So they crowded him out and that is why the Salvation Army started. When Spurgeon rebuked the Baptist leaders of England for their compromises with Biblical truth, they voted Spurgeon out of the British Baptists. But his name will live

forever. And no one remember the leaders who voted him out. And then there was William Carey, that shoemaker become a missionary who went to India. He couldn't stand England's sun and got a skin disease in England's sun. That is why he became a cobbler and God sent him to India where the sun shines more fiercely than any place on earth. There he went through all sorts of trauma. His wife went mad, his fellow missionary went mad. They were both confined at the time of Carey's first baptism after six years in the ministry. Carey translated Scripture into over 40 languages. He said, "My only ability is the ability to plod." But he translated the Scriptures into forty languages. Great men joined him. But, finally, when a new generation of missionary leaders came to the Baptist missionary government of England, they found Carey and his friends out of line because these men on the scene, who saw what was happening and made decisions accordingly, wouldn't fit in with the traditionalists back home who were not on the scene and they tried to legislate about everything they could not see. So, finally, Carey and his friends are excluded from the missionary organization they founded.

So, there is a continuous battle in the religious world between tradition, officialdom and the movements of the Spirit. The Spirit is often unpredictable and often radical but always in harmony with what Jesus was and is. That's how we test truth--is it like Jesus? Does it fit in with what he taught? If so, let the traditions go.

I am putting a fair bit of time these days in preparing for our next congress called <sup>the</sup> / JOYOUS TRUTH ABOUT HELL and I can remember back in 1945 when I was in the church that taught everlasting

punishment but which, interestingly enough, last year said they no longer believe it. I am talking about the Episcopalian church. But in 1945 that was the teaching in my church and as I was contemplating some decisions to be made with reference to Christ in the Scripture, I thought I cannot study all these differing, conflicting, controversial issues but I will study this one: Is hell a reality? And tradition comes down on the side of hell. There is an old saying: "If it is old, it may not be pure gold; if it's new, it may not be true." You have to keep both in mind. So we cannot go just by the votes, we cannot go by the calendar. We must always say, "To the law and the testimony, if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no truth in them." When the congress comes, Lord willing, we will talk to you about millions who become atheists because of the traditions about God, the supreme torturer. About a God who brought people into the world without their asking for it and decreed from eternity that most would burn forever and even when they wanted to die, couldn't....a horrible, blasphemous teaching and, happily, has no support in Holy Writ. We will talk about that. Very few people know that the English word 'hell' comes from a word that means 'hidden' and back in the days of Shakespeare, if they were playing a game would say, "Where's Bill?" "Oh," they would say, "he's in hell, he is hiding." The new international version doesn't use that word 'Sheol' but always translates it 'grave.' That's a great advance. Today, all around the religious world the people are throwing out that old tradition about the malicious, vindictive monster who could persecute forever creatures that did not ask to be born. So, if it is old it may not be pure gold and if it is new it may not be true. We are never relieved from inquiring

what is the truth? What does God say? And there will be times when we must make a decision between Christ and Caiaphas.

There is another face there at the cross, the penitent thief. Who could have invented that story? Think how marvelously he reverses the judgment of all the other courts. From his high court on the cross, he reverses the judgment of all other legal bodies--Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas, Sanhedrin, the mob that said, "Not this man, but Barabbas." This penitent thief elevated on the cross, dying, reverses all those judgments. And what faith, faith to believe that the man on the center cross owned the kingdom, what faith to believe that the man on the center cross would one day come back again and implement that kingdom. What faith to believe that the man on the center cross would allot positions in the kingdom! There is so much implied when he says, "Lord, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom." What faith! It wasn't faith without works, though we often draw the analogy that he couldn't do anything because his hands were tied, couldn't run any messages because his feet were nailed but there were works, he confessed the sinlessness of Jesus, "This man has done nothing amiss," he said. The rest of the world was crucifying Jesus. He was a non-conformist too. "We, ourselves, are justly in this trouble," he says to the other thief. He confesses his own sinfulness. He prays a model prayer and he manifests tremendous faith.

There is another person, however, that we should look at and his name is, son of the father. That is what Barabbas means...son of the father. One Son of the Father went to the cross, another son of the father should have but went free. Paul Lagaquist (?), a



Scandinavian novelist, years ago won the Nobel prize for literature by telling what he felt was a true story about Barabbas: When Barabbas was released as in a daze, he wanders around Jerusalem and then he begin to inquire, "But who is this man that has taken my place?" "Oh," they say, "that's Jesus of Nazareth; he's a pretender." "What happened to him?" asked Barabbas. "Oh, he's out there on Calvary; he is being crucified." And so, Paul Lagaquist (?) in his story has Barabbas go and observe the man that took his place and he hears the man pray for his crucifiers, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He hears the muttered murmur of the thief, "Lord remember me when thou comest in the kingdom." He hears Christ allocate his mother to John and John to Mary and, last of all, he hears the cry, "Father, into thy hands I commit my life, IT IS FINISHED." And he sees the sun darkened for three hours and he is in the midst of the earthquake that shakes Calvary, he sees the faces of people strongly etched into hatred or love and the Spirit of God convicts him that this man on the center cross who has taken his place, is the long promised Messiah. And, of course, when we are looking at Barabbas we are looking at ourselves. Barabbas deserved to die. There is a death sentence out against him and that is true of all of us, the wages of sin is death. We all have a debt. None of us let God be God, we've been God; we have done our own thing. So Barabbas represents me. I deserve to die and then Jesus comes and takes my place. There are so many layers of meaning in the Barabbas story. When the mob had to choose between Christ and Barabbas it is trying to remind me that every day I either crucify Christ or I enthrone a murderer by every decision I make. Every conscious

decision of thought, word or deed, I repeat the scene where the mob had to choose between the purest of all souls and a murderer--every conscious decision, I either crucify Christ afresh and enthrone a murderer or I let Jesus be Lord--every decision. And I have often thought, on what must have happened when the news came to Barabbas in his cell, "Barabbas, you can go!" "What do you mean, I can go?" "Another man is taking your place." "Don't laugh at me, don't tell me sad jokes; how could that ever be that a man could take a murderer's place?" "Barabbas, it's true, get out." Suppose Barabbas said, I don't believe such rubbish, I am staying here? Suppose Barabbas had said, when I am a better man I'll go...when I am reformed I will leave this prison. You laugh and say that is impossible. Oh no, it is happening with millions of people all the time. Millions of people hear the Gospel and they think it is a joke. Other millions hear it and say, well, it can't be that easy. I had better be good first and then I will go to church. It's happening all the time.

Two other faces not around the cross but on the cross. But we can't see it because it is dark. The darkness of the earth reflects the darkness of the man on the center cross. He's been made a curse for us. He has been made sin for us. All the curses of the covenant are falling on him; the curse of the covenant included hunger, thirst, poverty, scorn of the people, separation--the heavens becoming brass--no help. All the curses of the covenant detailed in Deuteronomy 28, 29 and 30 are now falling on the messenger of the covenant and so the physical darkness represents his heart. There is not a ray of hope because God cannot smile on the prisoner at the bar. He represents all the evil of all the ages. He suffers

internal torment in the sense of qualitatively. And that is the only eternal torment it will ever be.

Now, look at another face, the face of the sun. Why is the sun darkened? Well, it hides the anguish of the Son of God; it reflects the heart of the Son of God where there is no light but it is telling us something else. It is telling us that sin darkens the face of God because the sun which is the life giver, which is the light bringer is, of course, the great symbol of the creator. The sun is the symbol of God and when the sun is clouded over by great darkness it is telling us that when you and I find it difficult to see the face of God it is because we live in a sinful world. Because our own hearts are often inclined toward evil. The real problems for the GOOD people that day of the cross was not the facts, it was the fears. Here is Mary experiencing the sword going through her own heart. If she could only believe that Jesus said, "The third day I will rise again." Here are many of the believers standing afar off. If they could only remember the words of Jesus, "I am going to rise and go before you into Galilee, I'll see you again." So the real problem for the GOOD people at the cross was not the facts, it was the fears. Because of sin the face of God is clouded. You and I often find life hard because the face of God seems clouded over. The sun was still there. It would shine again. Nightmares never last. Night always gives way to morning. Storms cannot always cover the face of the sun. All these human experiences typify the hard trials through which we must all pass when the face of God seems covered as the results of the sins of men and, too often, our own sins. It may be that you and I could negotiate life's storms better if in thinking about the faces around the cross we thought of the face of

the sun clouded by doubt, fear and sin. If we could have faith instead of doubt, joy instead of fear, righteousness instead of sin, the face of God would always shine on us. This is the great battle of life; we walk by faith and not by sight.

Can I remind you that the same day the moon is at the full. Now, the moon has no light of its own. The moon in the Bible is the symbol of the church. It gets all its righteousness, all its glory from Jesus. We are a group of sinners but as the moon reflects the sun it has light, it has glory. But there are times with the moon seems almost nothing. There you have the symbol of resurrection. So many things about the moon in the Bible, are prophetic. When the moon turns to blood, it is to remind us that there will be great tribulation for the church before the end of time. When you see just the crescent streak and you say, "Aha, it is going to grow and grow, and grow until it is full. It is telling us about resurrection. May I recommend to you that we should often stand at the cross and see ourselves there. We are either one thief or the other; we are either with the priests that are there or the disciples that are there. And if we could only contemplate the depth of the symbolism, the seamless robe, given to crucifiers, you know, that's the Gospel. We receive the seamless robe though we have crucified Him. If we could contemplate that darkened sun and say, "Well, when I can't see the face of God, remember, he is still there! We often cannot see the sun. Every night we cannot see it. In storms we cannot see it--but it is still there! So when our lives seem overwhelmed with grief, sorrow, perplexity, and difficulty--and our own failures--that's designed to say, hey, the sun is still shining. My heavenly Father still loves me and he will never let me go.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the cross and the faces around the cross. May we see ourselves there and above all, we look to that center cross and see a face that reflects the love of God for sinners. Grant us this experience for Christ's sake. Amen.