

WHAT IS MAN?"  
February 11, 1990

TEXT: Matthew 12:13 "How much then is a man better than a sheep?"

In a way, this morning's sermon picks up where last Sunday's left off. Last week I urged us to honor God and country; to seek the common good, the general welfare, and the truths eternal. And deeply ingrained within the American spirit are these words which Thomas Jefferson wrote into our Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

So today, on Brotherhood Sunday, I would challenge us again. This time to consider the question, "What is man?" Not merely as some kind of academic exercise, but in the most practical of ways. For how we act toward others depends, in large measure, on our answers to that question. In 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote, "The political, social, and economic structure of society is largely determined by its answer to this vital question. Is a man a person or a pawn? Is he a cog in the wheel of state or a free, creative being capable of accepting responsibility? This question is as old as ancient man and as new as the morning's newspaper."

As we think about those words, let us turn again to this morning's scripture reading. In it we find, two occasions where Jesus and the disciples were condemned for the way they kept the Sabbath. First, the disciples were challenged for picking grain as they walked through a field. The Pharisees saw that a violation of the commandment, "The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord, thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work."

In the second, Jesus was taken to task for healing the man with the withered arm. On the Sabbath the Pharisees accepted only medical attention which was necessary to save a life. What was at stake here, however, was not the man's life, but his dignity. The "Gospel According to the Hebrews", now lost but quoted by St. Jerome, says that the man was a stonecutter. His livelihood, his dignity, his humanity, itself, depended on his hands. He had begged Jesus to help him, saying, "I pray you, give me back my health so that I shall not need to beg food in shame." But that did not seem to matter to the Pharisees. They had their own agenda, and this poor man's needs were not on it. They did not seem to notice his anguish. All they saw

was a way to condemn Jesus. To them, he was not a man. He was just a thing to be used. But they are not alone.

Centuries later, there were others who saw blacks and Indians as things. Things to be bought and sold like cattle or else exterminated like insects. Still others saw factory workers only as units of production, not worth even the care they spent on their machines. Today, of course, things are different. We are more sophisticated, but have we really changed?

In recent years, I have heard aid to starving millions favored --and opposed-- on the basis of what it might do to domestic grain prices. I have seen welfare programs suggested --and criticized-- not based on needs, but on the money cost and the votes to be gained. I have heard bussing urged --and opposed-- for just about every reason under the sun except what was good for the children involved. In short, I have seen both Liberals and Conservatives who dealt with people and issues pretty much as those Pharisees did.

Or consider, for instance, this scenario which happened all too frequently not so many years ago. A man is badly injured. He is rushed to the nearest hospital only to be sent to another several miles, and precious minutes, away. The man, you see, was black, and the hospital was for whites only. Fortunately, that no longer happens. But stupidity can still dehumanize.

I remember a former parishoner who fell and sprained her ankle. She was taken to the hospital where she stayed for several days. Then someone came and told her that she had to leave. She had used up all the time allotted for her specific problem. She even offered to pay for the extra days out of her own pocket, but was told she could not. It would not be fair to those who could not afford to do likewise. So she went home, fell again, and, this time, broke her hip. As I said, stupidity can still dehumanize.

In a somewhat lighter vein, I also recall a story about a young lieutenant who got some papers that were not for his department. Following procedure, he initialled them and sent them on their way. The next day they were back on his desk with this notation: "These papers were not for you. Erase your initials. Then initial the erasure and return them to me." Is it any wonder that people sometimes feel dehumanized? And many a withered hand, and many a withered life, remain blighted because of it. Rules are important, as I said last Sunday. But so is Cicero's classic statement, "The welfare of the people is the highest law." Or as Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

However, it is one thing to say that in theory, and quite another to live it in practice. It is one thing to celebrate brotherhood in the safety of a Sunday morning service; it is something else to live it in every day life.

Some years ago, an unknown terrorist tossed a bomb into a black church in Birmingham, Alabama. The building was destroyed, and three little black girls were killed. A few days later, a young white lawyer named Charles Morgan wrote these words to the local newspaper: "We are all guilty of this murder. Our racial pride has begotten us this racial hatred, and the racial hatred, when it was full, became murder." That letter cost him his law practice and forced him to leave Birmingham because of threats against his family. Later he confessed, "I was so distressed that I said to myself, 'If you had measured the ultimate consequences . . . would you have written that letter?'"

As I was working on this sermon, I asked myself the same question. Would I have written that letter? I like to think so, but I wonder. Even this sermon gave me a little pause. It was far easier writing last Sunday's sermon on God and country than writing this one which deals, however obliquely, with economic and social issues. Some of you may not like that. But, like it or not, we are all a part of one mankind. Whatever we do --or fail to do-- if it diminishes the dignity of even one human being, it diminishes us.

Jesus treated people with love and respect because of how he saw mankind. Not as things to be used, but as the Psalmist saw them ". . . Thou hast made him little less than God and dost crown him with dignity and honor." When Jesus looked upon a child, he did not see someone too young to matter. When he saw a woman, he did not see someone too weak to matter. When he saw a Samaritan, he did not see someone too different to matter. In everyone, of whatever age, or sex, or race, Jesus saw the image of God.

So he loved them and gave his life for them --for us. And the world has never been the same since. Every now and then, there were those who began to act as if they really were as Jesus saw them. Not everyone. And not all the time. But often enough to give a sense of dignity and worth which otherwise we might never have known.

On this Brotherhood Sunday, therefore, I challenge us to see others as Christ sees them, to free them from all that blights and withers. There is in the world today a great rebirth, not just of freedom, but of human dignity. Let it not be said that Christ's church lagged behind. In their concert years ago, the great Fred Waring Chorus always made one little change in Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic." I commend that version to us now, not just for Brotherhood Week, but for a lifetime:

"In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born  
across the sea, with a glory in his bosom  
that transfigures you and me. As he died  
to make men holy, let us live to make men  
free, while God is marching on." AMEN.