

THE CHURCH THAT MAKES GOD SICK

Text - Rev. 3:11-16 - "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ...I know your works, you are neither cold nor hot. ...So, because you are lukewarm ... I will spew you out of my mouth."

God is not dead. But He must get sick many times -- sick at heart over the sins of men and, as today's letter suggests, sick in the stomach as a result of men's nauseating lukewarmness about Him -- their indifference to Him making it seem in the eyes of the world as though He were absent, or dead, instead of the living, suffering, redeeming Presence in their midst which He shows Himself to be in Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to be "hot" about Jesus Christ? -- not cold, or lukewarm, but hot? Would you say it means something within a person: some intense degree of commitment and devotion, of awe-struck adoration and gratitude at the thought of His gracious love? Would you say it means some fervent and enthusiastic agreement with Him, some passionate support for His teachings about the inseparable love of God and of one's fellowman? Would you say it means a burning sense of responsibility to try conscientiously and sacrificially to put those teachings into practice, to be obedient to the will of Christ? Is that a way of stating what it means to be hot about Him?

And would you agree that these three aspects all flow together as if in one container -- inner devotion, agreement with His teachings, and outward obedience -- so that one cannot be hot toward Him in one respect and cold in another without making the total effect of a person's discipleship lukewarm? Heart and mind and will must be in zealous accord or else there comes that dilution which is sickening to God -- as, for example, when one says by his life, "I love You Lord; but I can't stomach the idea of your equal regard for people of other races; and in fact I renounce them as brothers; and I reject the claims they make upon me and my privileged status in the name of justice or human rights."

The agonizing events within our nation during the past few days cause us all to search our souls and examine our consciences and ask before God: "Have I been lukewarm toward Jesus Christ and what He wants for His people and His world?" Yesterday morning's group preparation for this sermon began with prayer, a reading of this passage from Revelation and of the Palm Sunday Gospel, then a quiet reading of the list of

names edged in black which is enclosed with today's bulletin. There was a solemn interval of silence, and then someone said: "These people on this list were hot. They were willing to stand up for what they believed. And we're going to have to face some decision about being either hot or cold."

That person's remark reminded me of a comment made in a panel discussion on television Thursday night to this effect: "The racial crisis in which we find ourselves is caused not so much by outspoken racists, either black or white, but by people of good will who sit around and do absolutely nothing about their good will." That, it seems to me, was a justified accusation against the lukewarm, the uncommitted, the indifferent and uninvolved -- those Christians in all parts of the country who keep silent and do nothing, who willingly let things drift ^{or you might say avalanche} on unchanged, and whose apathy makes God sick at the same time that it contributes to the sickness of our society. P

Presumably the church is made up of a lot of people of good will, but what has the church been doing to demonstrate its good will about this grievous problem of racism in our land? One person in our group recalled that at the time of the disturbances in Little Rock, Arkansas, it was pointed out that that is a city of many strong churches and that it was ironic that what happened there should ever have occurred. Well, Lynchburg is known for its many strong churches, and right here you and I might ask ourselves what we have been doing personally to apply the love of Christ to this problem -- what we have been doing as a congregation to bring His will to bear on the local situation.

The question was raised: "Do you think there is racism in Lynchburg, and if so, what do you thing promotes it?" The dictionary was brought in, and this definition read: "Racism: Assumption of inherent racial superiority or the purity and superiority of certain races, and consequent discrimination against other races; any doctrine or program of racial domination and discrimination based on such an assumption." Very quickly the consensus was expressed that our local newspapers are the strongest influence in the community for promoting racism. The notorious prac-

tice of printing Negro obituaries in the classified ad section was cited. Bigoted editorials were deplored. One person said that while the Roanoke newspaper showed respect for Dr. Martin Luther King, the effect of local news coverage was to disparage him. Another individual said: "An encyclopedia is a pretty unbiased book, and an article about Martin Luther King which I read in the World Book Encyclopedia says nothing derogatory about him -- nothing of the sort we get a lot of in our newspapers."

In reply to the insinuations that Dr. King was a Communist, it might be well to hear these words from one of his sermons: "Let me state clearly the basic premise of this sermon: Communism and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible. A true Christian cannot be a true Communist, for the two philosophies are antithetical. ...We are challenged to dedicate our lives to the cause of Christ even as the Communists dedicate theirs to Communism. We who cannot accept the creed of the Communists recognize their zeal and commitment to a cause which they believe will create a better world. They have a sense of purpose and destiny, and they work passionately and assiduously to win others to Communism. How many Christians are as concerned to win others to Christ? Often we have neither zeal for Christ nor zest for his kingdom. For so many Christians, Christianity is a Sunday activity having no relevancy for Monday and the church is little more than a secular social club having a thin veneer of religiosity. ...Would that the Christian fire were burning in the hearts of all Christians with the same intensity as the Communist fire is burning in the hearts of Communists! Is Communism alive in the world today because we have not been Christian enough?"

Martin Luther King was unquestionably Christian, not lukewarm about his faith, but hot for Jesus Christ and the ways of His Kingdom. That's what got Him into trouble. At the outset of our preparation for this sermon, we took note of the fact that Dr. King's assassination is a matter of internal concern to us because he was a fellow-Christian, a member with us in the Body of Christ which is His Church; and as one member has suffered, all of us suffer. In him the Body of the Church has been

attacked and grievously hurt and depleted by a terrible loss -- the loss of one who sought to heal the divisions among us and to achieve the human dignity and fulfillment of all men by peaceable, non-violent, and loving means. We in America had reason to be deeply thankful for him. The world needs more such leaders -- more such followers of whatever color to step forward in the wake of this immeasurable loss. The rioting, looting, killing, and destroying of property which have broken out in our land are an affront to his memory and an assault upon the Kingdom of Christ. And any leaders who point in that direction ^{in league with the} are ~~at~~ demonic forces in our land.

Our Lord Himself was an advocate of non-violence, and of human rights, and of reverence for the truth of God's Word which makes men free. On that first Palm Sunday, His entrance into Jerusalem in the company of followers who laid their garments and palm branches on the road and who shouted their "Hosannas" was a public demonstration -- a demonstration of the kind of King he was and the sort of Kingdom He had introduced. As the cover of today's bulletin shows, He did not come mounted on a war horse or in a chariot, brandishing weapons of destruction; but he came humbly and meekly on the back of a donkey, wielding no power and having no defense save the invincible power and defense of love.

When He arrived in the city, He went to the temple and overthrew the tables of those who financially exploited the poor and who were part of a system that excluded foreigners those/thought to be unclean, saying: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people, but you have made it a den of thieves." But Jesus was considered by His enemies to be too radical and so, later that week, He was crucified. An earthquake followed His crucifixion. And in the course of time Jerusalem was destroyed.

He had hoped all the desolation and bloodshed might be avoided. He was grieved at the thought that it could have been prevented. Earlier He had said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! ...Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes." Does there seem to be a striking parallel between what happened in Jerusalem in those days and what happened in Memphis in recent days -- a prophet of God, coming

in non-violence, thought to be too radical, sensing the danger round about him, but moving on in obedience to a commitment, and then put to death -- with desolation and bloodshed following?

Is it that the cities of our land do not know the things that make for peace? Or is Jesus right that they have had messengers enough, but that they have hid their eyes and fail to see? Can we see what things make for the peace of our beloved city here in Lynchburg? Jesus' message of unselfishness and of love for others is not really that hard to understand. Maybe there are times when we don't want to see Him as He suffers in our city. Maybe we don't want to see who our neighbor really is and how he lives and what his needs are. There are some sights we avoid. And we can become blind even to what is in our own best interests.

Someone in our sermon group told of a child in a local Sunday School class who, when the teacher asked "What do you wish for most" replied: "I wish all the colored people would disappear from the face of the earth." Do we see that such an attitude is an affront not just to one race, but that it is destructive to our common humanity? Another person told of a mother who, when her child received a birthday party invitation from a Negro schoolmate, tore up the invitation, even though the child, crying, said, "But mother, she's my friend." Do we see that such things are harmful ~~not~~ to ~~not~~ merely one race, but to all? Someone asked, "How long are we going to be able to accept such wounds as Dr. King's assassination and absorb them without their affecting very much the way we live or what we do?" Do we see that to take lightly and absorb easily the crisis which this death symbolizes, as if it were just a thing in passing, is to be indifferent not just to the demands of one race but to the highest interests of us all? The problem we confront is only superficially a racial one. Far more deeply it is a problem of our humanity, the problem of knowing what it means to be the children of God.

This is no/ time for us to be self-righteously accusing each other, and that certainly was not the spirit of anyone in the group that helped to prepare this sermon. Rather it is a time for each one of us, alone before God, to undergo a soul-

searching examination of inner attitudes. It is a time for our consciences to be stirred more than our fears. It is a time for confession. It is a time for repentance: for letting the Holy Spirit within us make those changes of heart and mind and will that need to be made. It is a time for action: for taking those actions ourselves which we can or calling upon others in positions of influence, power, and authority to take those actions, which make for our peace.

In the developments which followed that first Palm Sunday, there were those who continued to hail Jesus with glad Hosannas and crown Him Lord of all. And there were those who, either by their coldness or lukewarmness, turned Him over to the gathering forces of evil for a dreadful crucifixion. As we move out into the world with our palm branches, may we be found faithful to Him! Amen!

1. April 7, 1968 - Holy Trinity, Lynchburg - The Service.

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Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King - April 4, 1968

Founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, advocate of non-violence, assassinated in the pursuit of human rights. Memphis, Tennessee.

Wharlest Jackson - February 27, 1967

NAACP leader killed by explosion of bomb planted in his car. Natchez, Mississippi.

Vernon Dahmer - January 10, 1966

NAACP leader burned to death in the fire-bombing of his home. Hattiesburg, Miss.

Jonathon M. Daniels - August 20, 1965

Episcopal seminarian slain after release from jail for civil rights demonstration. Haynesville, Alabama.

Mrs. Viola Gregg Liuzzo - March 25, 1965

Detroit housewife serving as volunteer in civil rights march shot on highway between Selma and Montgomery, Alabama.

Rev. James Reeb - March 12, 1965

White civil rights sympathizer bludgeoned to death by whites. Selma, Alabama.

James E. Chaney - Andrew Goodman - Michael Schwerner

Civil rights workers slain after their release from jail. Philadelphia, Miss.

Louis Allen - February 1, 1964

Civil rights worker slain after testifying against a white man charged with killing another Negro. Liberty, Mississippi.

Medgar Evers - June 11, 1963

NAACP leader shot while putting the key into the front door of his home. Jackson, Mississippi.

William L. Moore - April 23, 1963

Mailman from Baltimore, Maryland, slain by bullet while on one-man protest march across Alabama. Atalia, Alabama.

Herbert Lee - September 25, 1961

Civil rights worker shot by a white state legislator. Liberty, Mississippi.

Dr. Thomas H. Brewer - February 18, 1956

NAACP leader shot by a white man. Columbus, Georgia.

Lamar Smith - August 17, 1955

Shot down on the lawn of the county court house after encouraging Negroes to vote by absentee ballot. Brookhaven, Mississippi.

Rev. George E. Lee - May 7, 1955

NAACP leader killed by a shotgun blast from a car carrying several whites. Belzoni, Mississippi.

JESUS CHRIST

Son of God, Son of Man, crucified several days after entering the city in a demonstration of the way of meekness, humility, and love. Jerusalem.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."