

- And strangely harmless. It is, I believe, one of the most radical and revolutionary insights which Jesus ever ushered. The light of the body is in the eye. If therefore, thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is the darkness? It may indeed seem strange to introduce a sermon on the miracles by using a text which raises a question about the way men see. Epistemology is not the usual introduction, either to Christology or to eschatology, but just as the hearing of the word requires an extraordinary dimension of listening to which we are not accustomed, so the act of God, any act of God, and I presume this is what we mean by miracle, is not visible to ordinary seeing, but only to a kind of vision that has been raised to the Nth power. All through the ministry of Jesus, it is assumed implicitly, and it is often stated explicitly, that some of our seeing does not see much. And some of our hearing does not hear much. They are so near to blindness and deafness that many of the healing miracles may well have referred, not so much to physical deficiencies as to the profounder spiritual inadequacy of those who had eyes, but saw only what the eye could see, or had ears, but heard only what the ear could hear. Certainly our human blindness is proverbial. We see a little here and there, but though we have eyes, we miss a great deal in between. We look over a scene, we conclude it is ugly and not worth a further glance, yet an artist will see a beauty we have missed, and we'll sit for days eliciting the full nature of that glory, and put it upon his canvas so that we, returning to the place, will see it for the first time. A preoccupied student will see the mold on a culture disk in the laboratory and throw it away without a second thought. But Sir Alexander Fleming will see it, will see it so deeply that he pays attention to it and at last, brings it back as penicillin to the assistance of the creative and curative procedures in disease for the whole world. To have lived when Jesus did does not mean that one would have seen the miracles he did. There were as many blind people, people blind to the acts of God then as now, and God is no less a part of the world's action today than he was then. The fault is rather in us. The acts of God are as real now as when Christ was born to Mary, or when he fed the 5,000, or died in shame upon the cross. It is not that we were absent then, it is rather that we are absent now. It is the blindness in us, not the death of God, which constitutes our fundamental embarrassment. We must be honest and confess that we live in an age that has long since repudiated miracles. We have said to one another, they may have crept into the record at a very primitive and superstitious time, but having been conditioned by science and a rigorous respect for the reign of law, we simply do not countenance them any longer as a practical way of understanding our world. They may have made some kind of sense in an age when the world was split into several levels and God could lean down from the battlements of heaven and stick his finger in between the natural events and create a margin of mystery and wonder. But that day has vanished and we who live now see nothing that does not fit naturally into an orderly routine. Certainly if religion wants to commend itself to our kind of world, the last thing we should do as ministers is drag in miracles. And to suggest that miracles are the essential function of religion in any age, I suppose must raise a thousand questions. And for many of our colleagues and comrades in the modern world, put faith back into the Dark Ages. But now let me be honest. I think it is possible to get rid of the miracles without realizing what has been discarded. I'm not sure what happened in any single miracle, but I am thoroughly convinced that this world is no different than that world, and that in this world, it is still possible to see the acts of God

and to accord them the reverence and hospitality of mind and heart which once was accorded them in an earlier and simpler age. Perhaps something was hidden behind their strange appearance, something significant and extremely meaningful for the whole life of man. In one of the asides of that most creative and peculiar man of our age, Pablo Picasso, he has said that art is a lie that tells you more about reality than the truth. You will forgive me if I suggest that the miracle is a lie that tells you more about reality than science. Perhaps something happened in history which could only be reported truthfully and adequately, although not precisely, by distorting the skin of the event, by twisting and exaggerating its empirical shape so that its inexhaustible and eternal content might be known to man. Perhaps a miracle is simply an event in which the ground of its happening in the ultimate mystery and power of God has been elicited. Perhaps one might dare to say that the meaning of any event, if we could reach it, if we could pay attention to it long enough, if we had the reflectiveness adequate for it, if we were sufficiently alive to its total dimension and not merely its outer appearance, perhaps then one might say that the meaning of any event would ultimately be a miracle. So that when I say that the first business of religion is to deal in miracles, I am not talking of magic or pushing faith back into the Middle Ages, or insisting that religion must concoct some kind of supernatural events. I am asking a much more modest, but I think a more radical question, can religion maintain enough vitality in the modern world to transform existence? Or in the scriptural story of the transfiguration, can religion regain that level of power and a vision in which the consciousness of man is transformed? Or again, in terms of the first miracle of Cana in Galilee, can religion, as a minimal function in a technological culture, transform the ordinary water of life, the regular day by day routine, so often monotonous and commonplace, into the wine of God's realm, where excitement and satisfaction, where joy and peace are derived from the deeper levels of meaning in this world? One is appalled at the way in which religion goes flat and tasteless. One is astonished at those words of Jesus when he says, ye are the salt of the earth. We repeat this often enough, but we seldom sense the terrible judgment, the rising eruption that comes from the very depth of his soul when he says, "But if the salt hath lost its savor, "it is no longer fit for anything "but to be cast out and trodden under the foot of man." Yet I know of nothing which disgusts modern man so much as the flatness, the boredom, the sterility, the fastidious emptiness of religion. Perhaps no one has expressed it any better than Graham Greene in a novel which he calls the "Burnt-Out Case" in which he tells the story of an architect, who having accomplished his life success, having achieved a fame that spread around the, having built a cathedral the like of which man had never seen before, he suddenly leaves his office, casts off his family, rejects all ties with Europe, and winds his way up one of the lonely rivers of Africa to settle in a camp of leper victims. And there in the camp, he sees the men who have been victims of this strange disease that drops off their fingers, their toes, their hands, and even their feet to leave them nothing but stumps to feel with, walk with, live with. All the sensitivity and subtlety of fingers and toes, all the poise and swiftness of walking has disappeared. And then the architect suddenly discerns the fact that he, too, is like them. He is a burnt out case through which the disease has run its course, left him with no pain, no pain of desire, no wish or hope, no yearning, no longing, but simply a dry, sterile dust. He, too, is a burnt out case. How often in our modern world men are burnt out. God pity us, but how often in the ministry men go on year after year down through the long Sahara of their calling burnt out with no feeling left, no reverberant thunder of God's judgment, no clear spring of refreshment. There's a story in *Wozzeck*, that opera, that surrealist opera in which a grandmother tells a story to her grandchild, for the little girl has a dream and she wants to go to the sun. And the grandmother tells her that if she goes to the sun, she will not find her dream rewarded. Well, the sun is nothing but a dried sunflower from last year's garden. And then the child wants to

go to the moon, but the moon is only an upturned flower pot. And then the child wants to see the stars, and they're nothing but glints of light on a spiderweb hung across the darkness of despair in the world. Many a man has drifted from job to job the way this little girl drifted from the dried out sunflower to the upturned flower pot, and then to nothing but a spiderweb against the sky. How shall we find the miracle? Where shall we turn and recover this vitality of faith? Must it be as Kierkegaard always reminded us, that we have made a greater miracle than Jesus did. When he turned water into wine, we have turned the wine into water. Our job as ministers is to see miracles and to report them. Our task is to find out how miracles are developed and flourish and come to their fruition in the hearts and minds of men and women. I have but three suggestions to make briefly. The vitality of religion, the possibility of miracle can only occur when religion is deeply rooted, not in itself, but in the world. The function of religion is not to relate itself to its own activities. That is a short circuit. Worse, it is incestuous. The primary function of religion is to elicit from the non-religious material of human circumstance the presence of almighty God. Paul Valerie once said that there is no pure poetry. There is only the unpoetic world which is grasped and shaped by the mind and imagination of the poet until, at last, there is evoked from its ugliness, its tragedy, and its commonness, the single drop of its fragrance. Not until the wild fig is grafted on the domestic tree will it bear its proper fruit. The arts could have told us this over and over again. Sargent painting a clothes line in the backyard. Van Gogh taking a pair of miner's shoes. Cezanne looking at a group of apples and peaches upon the kitchen table. All these men know that beauty in its inexhaustibility, beauty in its eternal significance comes only out of the ordinary world. It would be a strange thing if we, with the doctrine of the incarnation at our back, should turn out to be blind to the fact that religion also comes out of the world and is rooted in it. The materials with which we work, if they are ever to be miracles, must come to us as the raw stuff of human existence, not the finished product of ecclesiastical activity. Martin Buber once said, "He who truly goes out to meet the world, "goes out to meet God." "And he goes not to commune with God, "but to confirm the meaning of the world." The scandal of Christianity is that the source of miracles is in the non-miraculous, common places of life. But the second fact is a bit more difficult to accept. The second fact is simply that the miracle can never be revealed except by the total gift of the man. Only as we give ourself completely and utterly and without reservation will this event in the world that seems so commonplace open in all its dimensions of glory and grandeur. This is not easy, for like all men, we would preserve those instances in our own memory to which we cling, for the past has become our comfortable environment. And we drag it with us in a thousand different ways into each new event. We are paralyzed by our sacred cliches. We are contained in our traditional stereotypes, and our blindness is a cataract of those occasions which once brought us sight of the eternal, but now only a memory of it. In short, what this means is that if a man is to attend the acts of God, he must be born and reborn and born again, which, again, means that if he is to attend to the acts of God, he must be willing to pour himself out and be done with those particularly precious mementos of the past in order to be able to enter in at the narrow gate without any baggage, to see the passage of the Lord in the new age. When Gertrude Stein wrote about Picasso, she made one sentence of him that I've never forgotten. She said he was the most extraordinary individual because he was the one man I ever knew who could empty himself completely in order to make room for a new revelation. Something like that in the New Testament of one who became of no reputation, who emptied himself, that the fullness of God might be manifested, shatteringly uneasy, disturbingly risky. But this is the meaning of eternal life that we must not hang onto it in the sense that we may possess it and keep it, but rather that he who loses his life continuously with whatever risk this may mean. We may see that glory we have never seen

before, that meaning that we have hoped to see, but which smaller vision, pettier hopes have never dared to grasp. We are by our nature, homo viator, we are pilgrims on the road. There is no settled place for us if we are searching for the eternal grail. There is that great story in Luke of the young, rich ruler who came seeking eternal life only to be rebuffed by Jesus. And who justified himself by saying, "I have done all the things that I have been commanded. "I have kept the law from my youth up. "I have conformed to my parents' expectations. "I am a good citizen. "My reputation is without blemish and I'm rich. "God has blessed me. "What more could you ask of any man?" But with this fulsome self-description, Jesus, with rapier-like decisiveness says, "Yet one thing thou lackest." This man who had been so faithful to the past, this man who had conformed to everything good, what could this man lack? "Go and sell what thou hast and give it to the poor." Let us not get hung up on economics at this point. Seems to me what Jesus was saying was, the one thing you lack is insecurity. You simply have too much security. You are well-conformed to the past, but you have no relationship whatsoever to this turbulent transition into the kingdom of God, these vast movements that move through the world, these acts of God that are changing the life of mankind. No man has a right to security as a gift of the past if the present is being invaded by the judgment of God. Finally, it seems to me we need again to reorient ourselves in regard to the worship of the church. If it is true that God still acts though the miracle is hidden in the plain event, if it is true that men can still give themselves completely to penetrate the surface and the appearance of life, to risk everything they have already known in the hope of finding something they do not yet know, if this be true, then it seems to me, there ought to be a place in this worship when men coming out to the world, out of a world which is still flowing with rivers of glory, out of a world which is still burgeoning with all the miracles that rise from the heart of man, if coming out of that world, he can carry in his own existence the ablation of having seen God work in a human heart, in the tangled mess of our time, in the wonder and misery of society, if he can bring something out of the world that he has identified, confirmed, and in which he has been glorified and fulfilled, then worship becomes a celebration of a God who still lives and shares with men the strange destiny of a kingdom that is endless, and of a joy that is inexhaustible. When Rodin sought to make that magnificent image of the hand of God, Rilke, his secretary, said that he went out into the garden and began to sketch the hands of a brick layer. And after it'd been done, he came back indoors where his wife was having a tea party, and he sketched the hands of some of the ladies there. And then later, he went to the morgue and sketched the still, quiet hands of death lying upon the cold slabs. And then he went to the hospitals and sketched the hands of little chubby fingers of babies just born. He talked with surgeons and doctors about the bones and the tendons, and the marvel of this hand of man. Months went by, thousands of sketches were gathered, and then one morning he entered the studio and began shaping and cutting the hand of God. It's a moving thing, that great hand that created the world, entailed the throbbing, aching heart of man within it. But the magnificent thing about Rodin's Hand of God is that he got it from bricklayers, ladies, infants, from the dead and the living. The vision of God does not come from on high. It comes from looking at bricklayers and ladies, children, from the dead and the living. And when we have seen it, we shall not die, for this is eternal, too. Let us pray. Almighty and everlasting Father whose mysterious word created all things, and who hide us even to this day in mountain and sea, fluttering leaf, shaking hand, guide us until at last we sharpen our sight, until the eye that is in us will be generous and full of light and we may be able to enter that kingdom where all things are full of joy and peace. Amen. (uplifting organ music)