

(organ music playing softly) (crowd chatting indistinctly)

Preacher: Unfathomable complexity of God's wisdom and God's knowledge. How could man ever understand his reasons for action or explain his methods of working? For who hath known the mind of the Lord, or who hath been his counselor, or who hath first given to him and it shall be recompensed to him again? For of him and through him and unto him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. What ought we to believe about God? Nothing. Ought not we to believe the creed? No. The Bible? No. The church? No. Nor ought we to believe the preacher, including this one. Before you conclude that I have been engaged in reading too many term papers or engaging in preparing diabolical examinations, I no longer know who I am or where, let me go on and explain in what sense I have been so dogmatically, anti-dogmatic. Believing because we ought to is not really believing what we profess to believe. If I ascent to doctrines under parental pressure and continue to knuckle under intellectually to this in the past, or for group membership in the church or other organism, or to secure or keep approval of those I want to belong to, or to escape thinking further or hide my doubts, or to be right. This is not authentic belief, certainly not Christian faith. What I really may believe in such cases is simply that I am under pressure to conform, to ascent to something that doesn't make sense and doesn't ring true. And what I say I believe may have little or no connection with how I live. Indeed, because I've accepted it when it didn't seem real to me, but only because I've been told I ought to believe, I may inwardly or outwardly rebel and renounce it in my action, may even cut myself off from the truth that may be represented in such doctrine. Coerced belief, then, or belief for what it gets me, may be rank unbelief. What I may need then, uncertain creature that I am, ignorant, as you are, what I may need if I am to be open to what is real, rather than hiding behind spurious words, is some freedom to discover what I really do believe. What has authenticated itself to me? What experience has warranted for me, and indeed why I may be seeking or evading the truth. I need an accepting fellowship I can trust to let me be honest. The church might be this. Only we don't perceive it so, and sometimes it isn't. It might forgive my uncertainties, my wild notions or rebellious atheism as it forgives my other unfaithfulness to God. Surely God and the church of God can be as patient with the honest seeker or even the continuing evader as that old tale, which Benjamin Franklin once called the 51st chapter of Genesis. You may recall that Abraham, according to the story, received a stranger with traditional Oriental hospitality and offered him water to wash and a bed to sleep in and food to eat only to discover, when the time came to eat together, that he blessed not God as Abraham did, whereupon Abraham became wrathful and asked him why he did not bless God. And the stranger replied that he did not believe in the God of Abraham. So Abraham wrathful more, drove him out into the wilderness, only to hear the Lord say, Abraham, where is the stranger? I drove him out into the wilderness, Lord, because he worshiped not thee. Ah, says the Lord, all these 70 and nine years, I have suffered him. And you cannot put up with him one night. In the spirit of one great theological spokesman of our day, perhaps we could suppose that while an atheist doesn't take God seriously, God may not need to take atheism very seriously either. Knowing something of the dynamics that lie behind, suppose the belief or unbelief or with another of our theologians, perhaps we could recognize a sort of justification by doubt dovetailing into justification by

faith. That is, a recognition that honest probings and integrity about truth are after all the beginnings of a basic faith. We might even exhume from Victorian limbo, a Tennyson struggling with death and nature, red in tooth and claw, irrespective of human beings like Tennyson's friend and say, there lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds, not too far from existentialist realism about death and nature, after all. But if we of the church are insecure about our faith, we may be intolerant of others' views, their doubts, their uncertainties, and we may share in putting them under pressure. They ought to believe for if they don't, our own beliefs are threatened. If we really have a faith to share, a reality to witness to, we shall welcome inquiry and colloquy, not insist that others ought to believe as we do to bolster us in our anxiety over being right or keeping going. It is salutary then that we have come into a new okay mood of theological honesty. That little book, *Honest to God*, by Bishop John A. T. Robinson put into popular form and circulation, the recent decades' reopening of fundamental questions. Never fear, we aren't reviewing *Honest to God* here in the pulpit today. despite the sermon title. After all, it would be like chit chat about the book of the month, two years late, or even confessing that one is conformist enough to read the book of the month because he ought. But Robinson's book did render the meritorious service of prompting widespread popular recognition and discussion of the nature and limitations of our religious thought and language and showed us how little they may mean to the secular world. The world that doesn't have much truck with such archaic myths and stuff. The newer okay books of course are about the secular city or the secular meaning of the gospel and how God is dead. One of niche's heroes may have been buried in the Berlin bunker, but another dictum has come into its time. So this is a time for theological honesty or modesty or humility, perhaps even humiliation. We may not want it, either in pulpit or in pew. After all, if the trumpeter is uncertain, how can we know when to gird for battle? We've easily taken that trumpeters role, particularly in pulpit and theological study. I have. And some hearing have felt they ought to believe, even the luxury of overplus of traditional language encasing fundamental beliefs. I've told before here, but repeat the story of a little boy and my first pastorate, whose teacher not really knowing what she was doing, asked her class one day, these seventh graders about egg production and one little boy, just 12, but already coming into something of that stentorian tone one has intermittently at that age said with an authority that carried even the teacher with him, a good hen could lay 12 eggs a day. All it takes is a ringing tone of authority for some. Thus, many of us in pulpit and study had a "12 eggs a day" kind of dogmatism. We were thrilled with the powerful new reinterpretations of biblical theology, which seemed especially relevant to us in our wartime predicament and after. We may have proclaimed these words. Proclaim is one of our favorite terms, with an authoritarian ring, like 12 eggs a day, and put others under pressure to ascent. And we may have exerted that "ought" with a sort of borrowed divine authority. It was the word of God and who would be presumptuous enough to question or resist. We might even personally express some of the supposed divine asperity over such unbelief. We could trumpet surely of man's inhumanity to man and our anxiety and inner bondage. These are pretty existential after all, whatever terms we use. And then we went on to proclaim the mighty acts of God for our salvation. Only sometimes we might hide from ourselves, even in the intellectual community, our uncertainty over how the ancient biblical story made sense in our modern world. Now that we are aspiring to be more honest to God, however, the same stridency and stentorian tone not to believe he's heard from the new crop, throw one bunch of theological rascals out, and you've got another. After all the pulpit is only human. Some of this problem of our thinking about the faith is represented in theologian Langdon Gilkey's article recently in the *Christian century* on disillusion and reconstruction in theology. I still have in my files, a poignant journal excerpt from the time when Langdon Gilkey as a young theologian was

confined in a concentration camp under the Japanese in China. And as with whimsical, but theological acumen, he analyzed the reactions of the fellow members of this concentration camp. We could see the relevance of the Christian doctrine of man in his predicament of self-centeredness and need of salvation. And Langdon Gilkey confesses that he was one who found in the time after that a new authority in the great surging, strong biblical theology of recent times. Only now as he thinks with others about the secular world and its inattention to such traditional language and the analysts of language themselves, with their questions about what these really mean, and the tests of many things we have claimed, tests in action. Only now he begins to feel the disillusion and the need for reconstruction of such theology. He does not despair. He finds at the depths of man's experience, a recognition of an ultimate claim upon him. He discovers in the figure of Jesus Christ, an answer to man's predicament. But with a great deal more modesty than before, he begins the task of theological reconstruction. This is no new theological predicament. It's quite redolent of those words of Paul read this morning. And I read them again with the feeling that they belong to our time. This is a ministry which God in his mercy has given us and nothing can daunt us. We use no Hocus Pocus, no clever tricks, no dishonest manipulation of the word of God. We speak the plain truth. And so commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. If our gospel is veiled, the veil must be in the minds of those who are spiritually dying. The spirit of this world has blinded the minds of those who do not believe and prevents the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, the image of God, from shining on them, for it is Christ Jesus as Lord whom we preach, not ourselves. We are your servants for Jesus' sake. God who first ordered light to shine in darkness has flooded our hearts with his light. We now can enlighten men only because we give them knowledge of the glory of God as we see it in the face of Jesus Christ. This priceless treasure, we hold, so to speak, in a common earthenware jar to show that the splendid power of it belongs to God and not to us. After all we have said about this matter, let us go on to say in another way that we ought to believe. We ought to be open to, responsive to, faithful to what shows itself ultimately real. It has a claim upon us, not for pressured belief, but for honesty to God in a positive sense. So there is another sense, a positive one, of being honest to God, one of integrity, of responsibility, of concern for what is real with eyes wide open to the mercies of God. Then I beg you to consider three things. First, the Christian community in which we find ourselves more or less belonging is a bearer of much more than we individually have been able to test. As in a university working in one department, we're aware that other departments can be trusted to carry on their work, even though we know too little about it. So we can recognize in the continuing Christian community, the possibility of mutual witness and reinforcement in respect to a reality some others have experienced more than we yet may have recognized. This is not to say a priori that it's all true, but it's also to raise the question as to why we may not even be open to examining its truth. It is always possible that our descent is not brilliance, but evasion. We may not want to meet the claim, such a gospel embodies. But if we are to hear it and hear it with an acceptance, which isn't an "ought to believe," someone of this community will need to open the way for dialogue and discussion, perhaps like that kind of coffee house ministry that has risen in campus after campus throughout the country. Wully's magazine a couple of months ago had an article about this kind of evangelism and with typical lack of restraint, the assertion that this was the only way to reach the modern mind, but discounting that, one can recognize two important features of this new ministry. One, the opening of opportunity for frank and candid exploration of what we do think, not what we ought to think. With the coffee house, Christian evangelists, listening to, going along with, accepting persons who might be, to quote the article, slobs. But only in that kind of acceptance and belonging might these resistant and deviant characters begin to open up to what is true,

not something maintained with dogmatic power by the witness, but explore. And secondly, there was a possibility in these coffee house outreaches to look into some of the literature or the music, the art of our day with a kind of detachment yet openness to engagement through which reality might raise questions and offer answers yet. Secondly, the Christian community has as a part of its story, part of its story that shapes its real essential self. What President Knight called the other day, an inside story. We were here honoring Bishop Kilgul at the time of the dedication of a new portal. And these words were spoken about him. Called of God, preacher of the word, wise counselor of youth, champion of the liberal mind, defender of academic freedom, teacher of social enlightenment, opponent of sectionalism, full of the provincial spirit in church and society, committed to conscience above policy, upholder of Christian truth, servant and Bishop of the church. It meant something to us to hear a Bishop of our church today standing in this pulpit celebrate the resistance of this great former president of Trinity college, to some of the encroachments of what might have been called, if they had had the term for it then, the radical right, and maintaining academic freedom and integrity and excellence. And we had a feeling that this was part of our story and we could appropriate it as one of the elements that shapes the character of our school today. There's much else we can recall from the past that we would not want to shape our present character. And so you see we are selecting. But is there something moving within us that awakens us time and time again, to discern what is rightly grasping us out of the inner history of our community? If you looked the other night at that television representation of the dedication of the Kennedy Memorial in England, this simple memorial on a place where there was no other memorial to an even greater event of the past, the Magna Carta, perhaps you were reminded of one of the great central traditions in our own inner history as a Western community that helped to shape the persons we are even when we are ignorant of it, unresponsive to it, the Magna Carta has engaged us. So does the age-long biblical witness in language of another day, perhaps, concepts foreign to our secular world, tell the story of one through whom God has shaped the historic community and begun to shape our lives. And so we come to a third and final point. If our eyes are wide open to the mercies of God, we may be grasped today by such inner meanings. They center into, in what the Honest to God theology has called the man for others. They involve his followers in similar ministry of love and service in our day. They strip away many of the traditional accoutrements of belief and cultus, even as Jesus in his day often shunted aside what did not belong to authentic love and service. And somehow this part of our story of our inner history becomes normative for all the rest. And we feel ourselves grasped. Ought we to believe anything about God then, or the creed or the scriptures or the church or the preachers? Still no, not ought. But we may. We may be given accepting support, enough to begin to be free, to discover what really claims us in this world and assess its worth and hear other witnesses and probe beneath their ways of saying to what really engages them and allow that man for others to become the one for us, showing us what real man who it is and exposing our evasions of such heights, forgiving our defections from such efforts, enabling our loyalty and response. This is what we mean after all by faith. We may enter into the real meanings of the creeds and scriptures and church and preaching of the ages until with the historic church, we can join in that great Te Deum, which we now make our prayer. Let us pray. We praise thee, oh God. We acknowledge thee, to be the Lord. All the earth doth worship thee, the father everlasting. To thee, all angels cry aloud, the heavens and all the powers therein. Holy, holy, holy Lord. God of Sabaoth. Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of thy glory. The glorious company of the apostles, praise thee. The goodly fellowship of the prophets, praise thee. The noble army of martyrs, praise thee. The holy church throughout all the world doth acknowledge thee, the father of an infinite majesty. Thine adorable, true, and only son. Also the

Holy Ghost, the comforter. Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, The love of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.