

- And by thy Holy Spirit, enable us to worship Thee in the beauty.

- On a small green hill in the city of San Francisco, there was once a cross. Whether it's still there or not, I'm unsure. And upon one of the arms of this cross was a plaque, bearing a quotation from the Old Testament book of Lamentations, which read: Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? These words, which were originally written by one who mourned the destruction of Jerusalem, as he plaintively inquired of passersby whether they recognize the significance of this fallen city. These words have been transferred to the cross, so that now as one passed the cross, he was confronted with the question of its significance also, a question which is well for us to ask ourselves, Even as we sit in this place of worship before the cross, is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? We talk a great deal about the cross in the worship, in the ethical service, and in the theology of our Christian faith. But just what does the cross mean? What is its significance? How does it impinge upon our lives? I want today to speak about the atonement. In a profound sense, I'm sure that you wonder whether or not this topic can be spoken upon meaningfully. It seems so couched in ancient theological garments, so traditionalistic, and we are ambiguous about tradition, aren't we? And perhaps, for many, it seems quite irrelevant. But what is relevant? A Durham minister last year spoke on the topic "The Irrelevance of Being Relevant." After the service, a Duke student coming out turned and said to someone, "Now that was really relevant, wasn't it?" What is obvious that what is relevant on one level is not relevant on another. What is a basic question for decision at one level of our lives seems to be irrelevant at another. And what strange creatures we are. We so often cover over and confuse the dimensions of our existence, and thereby forget those issues and those questions which are most important for us. I raise this specter of relevance because it immediately confronts anyone who dares speak about the atonement. Atonement for what? Atonement by whom? Atonement for what end? Perhaps we raise such questions because, at least on one level of our existence, we seem to be people of such easy conscience, serene in our condition, neither questioning nor exploring meaning beyond the present moment, beyond the things most immediately at hand, content to shrug our shoulders about past actions, and rather wistfully optimistic about what we shall be able to do. Some months ago, I was speaking to a group of law students on campus. And I was suggesting that perhaps an analogy could be made between our lives and the experience that one has aboard a ship. We were living comfortably and well, prospering, eating good food, with plenty of task to consume our energies. But I suggested that occasionally there were people who wandered out to the bow of the ship, people who gazed across the expanse of water, and asked such questions as, I wonder where we are heading. What port is our destination? What does this trip mean? One of the students who was present replied with some heat that this sort of question simply did not interest him. He was well satisfied and fully engaged with the present moment and with the activity which was given to him. And as for the type of interrogation I was suggesting that they might put to themselves, well, to put it frankly, he just didn't give a damn. A lot of people balk at such questions. It's not that we mind the implication that we are lost or estranged, for these two words happen to be among the okay words of the present academic generation. Students who've grown up on Camus and J.D. Salinger and T.S. Eliot, Jean-Paul Sartre, students who've grown up on even Tennessee Williams or Joseph Conrad speak this sort of language. Very sophisticated

people do not mind being told that they're estranged or lost, especially if it's done in French or German. But to be called a sinner and to be spoken of about atonement, well, this is simply too bourgeois, too churchy, or Mickey Mouse. To be reminded of inauthentic existence or the brokenness of human relationships, of man's isolation, or every individual's identity crisis, all of this is all right, so long as it reminds us of our desperate situation, our despair, and the travesty of our existence. And sometimes, in a certain sense, we rather enjoy our despair. There is, as Robert Fitch has reminded us, a kind of ecstasy which can be derived from anguish. We are proud of having to have faced the abyss of meaninglessness and having called life and its significance into question. A friend of mine who teaches at Yale told this summer of being rudely awakened one night by terrible screams outside his window. He jumped up, ran to the window and looked out, and standing in the middle of the quad was a student with his arms flung up to heaven, shouting at the top of his voice, "I hate this place! I hate this place!" It does also happen at other schools, you know. (audience laughs) And I was reminded of a student who said with defiant pride, "I'm really suffering. My life is terrible." But what was obvious was that he was proud of the fact that his life was more difficult than anyone else's he knew. Now don't misunderstand me, I'm not making fun of this condition where it expresses authentic struggle with life and with the meaning of life. And there are some among us today who knows the genuine and thoroughgoing sense of lostness. But the point I wanna make is that in spite of our acknowledgement of a strained, and even estranged, life, there's still a deep sense in which we do not acknowledge any need for atonement. Our thoughts may be jumbled, our lives may be distraught, our relationships may be shallow. But we muster our strength to face the onslaught of life. And rather than ask to be justified, we demand that the situation in which we find ourselves justify itself. And therefore that when the question is put, does the atonement meet your need, you probably wonder what's being asked. What need? Atonement for what? Atonement to what? Perhaps the problem has been that we've always tried to start with our need. It may thereby be that we get off on the wrong road from the beginning. At least to start with the fact of man's need has two basic dangers. First, God so easily becomes simply a projection of that need. He satisfies those needs which we are conscious of. Feuerbach and Freud have both claimed that this is all religion is, a projection of our need upon a screen, which we then see reflected back as an answer. And who is to deny that when man begins solely with the question of his need, they are not often right. And secondly, when we begin with our need, we must recognize that what we think is our need at one level may not be our need at another level. What is relevant at one level is irrelevant at another. Let us begin therefore by going the other way around. Let us start by seeing what the Christian tradition says about the atonement, and only after that raise the question of whether it meets our need. Perhaps we shall find in the end that rather than establishing answers to needs we are now conscious of, we shall actually find our own needs reinterpreted in the light of the cross, and even fulfilled in unexpected ways. The justification for this approach is that sometimes we do not recognize sickness until we know health. Sometimes we do not know loneliness until we experience true friendship. And it's possible that we do not really understand lostness or guilt until we come to see redemption and forgiveness. To put it in traditional language, we only know the real meaning of sin and of ourselves as sinners when we see the cross. There's an old hymn which says: But none of the ransomed ever knew how deep were the waters crossed, nor how dark was the night our Lord passed through, ere He found the sheep that was lost. This is, of course, profoundly true. No one, not even those who are most sensitive to the meaning of the cross, understand fully its cost or its import. But there's another side to this, too, which should also be said, and we can put it by simply changing one or two words of this hymn, so that now it reads: None but the ransomed ever knew how deep were the waters crossed,

nor how dark was the night our Lord passed through, ere He found the sheep that was lost. For while no one of us can hope to comprehend fully what the crucifixion of Jesus meant, the only ones who come close to appreciating its full weight are those who have knelt before it and have felt the impact of its power as it impinged upon their lives. Only the ransomed know. And they do not know completely, but they know. And by that knowledge, they live. Socrates is reported to have said that philosophy begins with wonder. Whether or not this is always true of philosophy, and I'm certain it isn't, I'm also sure that the sense of the significance of our relation to God often does depend precisely upon wonder. Wonder as we look upon the originator of our Christian faith, wonder at the fact of grace, wonder at the power of love, wonder of the Christ. Let us look at it. In the New Testament, Jesus spoke, and the people were amazed. He acted, and they were startled. He died, and they questioned. He arose, and Mark says they were afraid. The wonder of it all, all of the wonder of it. In this man in whom perfect humanity is revealed, we see our own imperfection and possibility. In this man in whom perfect goodness was manifest, we recognize our own lack of goodness and our possibility for goodness. In this man, who was perfectly penitent, we recognize our own pride, yet the need for penance. In this man, in whom the perfect relation of God to man is manifest, we recognize our own inadequate relation and the promise of full relationship. Look again at the cross. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? When we see what life can be, life with God and with our fellows, we also recognize what our lives are. We are filled with wonder, then perplexity, with awe, then grief, with amazement, then perhaps with aspiration. What a strange man this Jesus was. Perhaps we've heard the story so often that it no longer surprises us. But He went to the outcast, He ate with the unacceptable, He cared for the dispossessed. His words of peace and condemnation pierce deeply. And He went to the cross. O Son of God incarnate, O Son of Man divine, in whom God's glory dwelleth, in whom man's virtue shine, God's light to earth Thou bringest to drive sin's dark night away, and through Thy life so radiant, earth's darkness turns to day. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Irenaeus, the second century theologian, put the meaning of Jesus Christ cryptically when he wrote: He became what we are in order that we might become what He is. This coming involved suffering, a suffering love. Heine, the German poet, is reported to have one time remarked with a shrug of the shoulders, "God will forgive you. That's His business." But the one who's seen the cross knows that forgiveness is not God's business. It is His grace. God will forgive you, but that's His suffering. The suffering of God is somewhat analogous to that of a parent-child relation when the child has been disobedient. The more radical the disobedience and the more tragic its consequences, the more the parent, as well as the child, suffers. If the parent is a person of integrity, he's not able to shrug off the disobedience and say that it simply doesn't matter. It does matter. It matters enough that if there's to be an honest relationship established, the parent and the child must each do something to bring it about. The parent often demands of the child some act of restitution, by which the disobedience is overcome. But more demanding than the restitution by the child is the inner struggle of the parent who must hold to his integrity, admit the radicalness of the disobedience, and yet accept the child in love and community. The parent suffers. He or she suffers inwardly. Their integrity and love meet and struggle, and love can be expressed only if it acknowledges the reality of the integrity and acts upon the basis of this integrity by suffering acceptance. And the child also suffers, for disobedience breaks the community which existed and requires both penance and readiness to restore that which was lost. There is a suffering of a separation and the struggle for renewal on both sides. The uniqueness of Jesus is found in the fact that in His cross, He expresses at once the suffering and the struggle from both sides. The event makes a difference to the forgiver and to the forgiven. And here in one man, both are present. There's a saying which must be spoken

softly and with understanding, God will overlook nothing, but He will forgive anything. It is precisely in the this tension that the cross is rooted. God notices everything. He overlooks nothing. For genuine love is not deceived either by the other or by itself. Nevertheless, God will forgive anything. But remember, there's no cheap grace. There's a cross. He who is so unlike us has come to our side, that we may be like Him. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? The offering of Jesus was not a propitiation of an angry God. Too often we've spoken as though Christ's death was a way of appeasing a wrathful, legalistic, unrelenting God, as if God must be induced to forgive us. No, it's God who was the initiator. It's God in Christ who seeks us out and who takes the struggle of alienation to His own heart. There was a cross in the heart of God, F.W. Dillistone reminds us, long before there was one on Calvary. But the cross which was present in God's heart comes to concretion on Golgotha. At this place in human history, in our history, and our renewed relationship to God also comes to concretion at this same point. We look at Calvary, at the cross which extends from God heart to ours, and then ask, is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? As we see the care of God, we also see our indifference. As we see the life of Jesus, we also see our lives. As we see Jesus' penance and suffering, we also see our pride and self-care. So now we've come full round. We're back at the question of ourselves, of our need. But now our need is seen in a new light, in the light of God's grace as this is revealed in Jesus Christ. The divine charity has stooped to our necessity. And in so doing, has indicated to us what our necessity is by indicating to us what divine charity is. And so the wonder, the self-donation of God is the most incomprehensible, and yet the most illuminating fact in history. All of the marvels are pushed aside by this one. This is the miracle which stands at the center of reality, our personal center. The center where we lift our eyes and see the cross are explained by the cross and are ourselves made cruciform. Charles Wesley said it: O Love divine, what hast Thou done? The incarnate God has died for me. The Father's co-eternal Son bore all my sins upon the tree. The Son of God for me hath died, my Lord, my love, is crucified. Behold Him, all ye that pass by, the bleeding Prince of life and peace. Come sinners, see your Savior die, and say, "Was ever grief like His?" Come, feel with me His blood applied. My Lord, my love, was crucified. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Stand. O God, fill us with the holy disquietude and the disquieting holiness which confrontation with Thy cross brings. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And now may God's grace preserve, bless, and keep you, now and forevermore.