

(reverent organ music) (reverent organ music)

(congregation hymning)

- Grace and peace to you from God, our Father, and from the Lord, Jesus Christ. When we gather to praise God, we remember that we are His people. We have preferred our wills to His, accepting His power to become new persons in Christ. Let us confess our sin before God and before one another. Be seated please. Let us pray together. Eternal Father, we confess that often we have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will. We have broken your law. We have rebelled against your law. We have not loved our neighbors. We have not heard the cry of the needy. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience through Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen. May we continue in a spirit of confessional prayer. Hear and respond to these individual prayers of confession of our hearts' need, we pray, oh God. Hear this good news. Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That is God's own proof of His love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Glory to God , amen.

(reverent organ music) (mild organ music)

(choir hymning) (mild organ music)

(choir hymning)

- The New Testament lesson today comes from the gospel according to Mark, the ninth chapter, the 33rd through the 41st verses. Hear these words. "And they came into Capernaum, and when He was in the house, "He asked them, 'What were you discussing on the way,' "but they were silent, for on the way, "they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. "And He sat down and called the 12, and He said to them, "'If anyone would be first, "'he must be last of all and servant of all.' "And He took a child and put him in the midst of them, "and taking him in His arms, He said to them, "'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, "'and whoever receives me receives not me, "'but Him who sent me.' "John said to Him, 'Teacher, we saw a man "'casting out demons in your name, "'and we forbad him because he was not following us,' "but Jesus said, 'Do not forbid him, "'for no one who does a mighty work in my name "'will be able soon after to speak evil of me, "'for he that is not against us is for us. "'For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water "'to drink because you bear the name of Christ "'will by no means lose his reward.'" May God speak to us in the reading of these words, amen. (reverent organ music) (reverent organ music)

(congregation hymning)

- The Lord be with you.

(congregation speaking) Let us pray. Let us offer unto God our prayers of thanksgiving, intercession, and petition. Oh God of life, invisible and eternal, you of 1,000 names, but ever the same in mercy and in love, we offer unto you our prayers of thanksgiving. Most Gracious Father, we give you thanks for this green time and for the sustaining sun, for ripening food, and for refreshing showers, for small children splashing in the surf and grandparents walking slowly in the twilight cool. Our five and urgent senses praise you, oh God, for large summer sights, for sweet airs, for sounds within sounds and gifts within gifts. We thank you for the

suffering transformed. We thank you for sorrow comforted and for joy extravagantly given. Oh God, we praise you for the small places of peace in our lives, the child at play, hands honestly at work, love in the eyes of a friend, forgiveness in the words of an enemy, a person who listens when we speak. We glorify you, our Father, that undergirding all Earth's teeming life, all chaos and calm, all clamor and silence, there is your peace, awesome, amazing, and eternal. Oh God, we call on your spirit, and we ask your presence and your power for the needs of our fellow brothers and sisters throughout the world. We remember before you, oh God, those who are old, whose silver threads shine now with honor and whose golden anniversaries sing with joy, those whose children remember to write them and visit them, those who have enough help and money, who had found wisdom and learned patience and journeyed in faith. May your love be in their lives and bless their condition. God of All Ages, let us not forget the old whose health fails, whose children fails, and whose courage fails. Those who must worry to their dying day about bills, those who feel unwanted and unneeded and who have not found faith, may your love break through their condition and quench their hunger and bring peace. God of the Strong, we remember those who are in the prime of life, those whose work prospers, whose families are happy, who eat the fruits of competence and achievement, who are glad to be who they are, who look back with satisfaction and ahead with anticipation. May your power bless their condition and sustain them in hope and in joy. We would not forget before you those whose work is frustrating, those who discover in themselves a wound which will never heal, whose marriage hurts or breaks, those whose friends move away or fade away, those who wish they were somebody else. May your love break through their condition, quench their pain, and bring peace. God, we remember before you the children, those who slurp their milk and crawl on the cool grass, who stagger with their first hilarious steps, the eager children who play ball and climb trees, and ride bikes and get in fights and play games, the laughing, crying children whose hugs and kisses and tears are food and drink to so many of us. But let us not forget the children who have no milk to drink, who run from the whine of jet engines and scream at the whistle of laser-guided bombs, those who crawl on hot streets where there are no trees. May your love break through their condition and quench their hunger and bring peace. Oh God, whose justice demands truth in our inward parts and whose anger is upon the uncaring, forgive our own complacency with killing, we ask. Rebuke our shrugs at poverty and war as though we could do nothing about them. Confront us who feed and protect our own children, that we rest not all parents can feed and protect their children. Save us from the fever of lusting after victory and the destruction of our enemies. Grant us, we ask, oh God, to care more about saving lives than saving face. Let us love our country not less, but mankind more in the knowledge that a nation is great in your eyes when it feeds the hungry, when it welcomes strangers, when it rehabilitates those who are in prison, when it heals those who are sick and treats the least of these as though they were the most. Forgive that heady humanity which allows us to care about people suffering across the city or the ocean, but leaves us cold to the need of those across the table or the desk or the room. Oh God, melt our cynicism with the hope of Jesus and take us by surprise with a near forgotten intuition of the meaning of grace that stirs deep within us. Break down our defenses, lower our guard for these brief minutes of worship, that we may be as defenseless before your forgiving love, as vulnerable as our children, as ready for miracles, as eager for surprises till enemies become friends and there comes peace in our souls and goodwill among men. Oh God, we live before the yearnings of our own hearts. There are yearnings within us, oh God, hidden in our sighs, too deep for our words. There is much to feel that we feel but don't understand or even perceive. Feelings, hopes, intuitions, fears, longings, seeking thy presence. There is a yearning in us, Lord, to believe that the universe is held together at the center, that there is somewhere in

the whirling galaxies to hang our hats and pin our hopes, a yearning in our restlessness that will not rest, a yearning in the meaninglessness rat race to be and to stand, a yearning to reach through all the walls of death and hate and to shake hands with life and love, a yearning, oh God, to belong, to create, to participate and feel valued from the very core of creation, a yearning to sing, in tragedy and through death, the praise of life. There's a yearning in us, Lord, longing to let our sighs lengthen into songs cascading through creation, echoing in human hearts and resounding in our hearts with a joyous and heaven-filled amen. Help us to recognize your presence in our yearnings, to reach out for your life and to drink deeply of the waters of your grace. Oh Father, let your love heal and hallow all our loves, quiet the drumbeat of irresponsible desire within us, sever the soft chains of self-indulgence, pacify our unruly passions and realign our deflected priorities, for we want to taste your tranquility and drink your health and live your life. Be with us now as we are bold to pray the words of the prayer which our Lord taught us to pray together as Christians, saying our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen.

- Let us quote again and tuck away in the background of our consciousness for later reference these words from the scriptures of the morning. "If anyone would be first, "he must be last of all and servant of all. "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, "and whoever receives me receives not me, "but Him who sent me. "He that is not against us is for us," and let us add a somewhat contrary word from another gospel. "He who is not with me is against me, "and he who does not gather with me scatters." Tuck away also in the back of your mind part of the sermon title, "Who are the people of God?" For a while, let us think only of two of those words, the people. Suppose we were now to begin a word-association game asking each one of you to record your thoughts, your first thoughts, when we read certain words. Grassroots. Of the people. Of, by, for. Liberation. Participatory democracy. The forgotten what, American, minority, worker, majority, poor, senior citizens? A safe guess is that most of you would be thinking of a certain political convention, primaries, candidates. Not to do so would be about as hard as that old chestnut about the child stood in the corner and told not to think about a white rabbit for 30 minutes, but our concern today is far more basic than party politics or conventions or candidates. Rather, a change of consciousness, of ethos, of spirit, of which political expressions may be indicative and derivative. For the moment, let us rephrase our sermon title in more secular terms, "Who really matters and to Whom?" One way of beginning to answer such questions is to join in a sort of celebration of our common life now going on, a celebration of people, not just people in general, but particular people, who they are are and what they think and feel and do, a people sometimes obscured in this rushing world of things and techniques and problems. May I share with you for a few moments this seemingly secular gospel, this good news of people and their meanings and values, these people who matter. To begin with, if you want to know about hog dressing, log cabin building, mountain crafts and foods, planting by the signs, snake lore, hunting tales, faith healing, moonshining, and other affairs of plain living, you will be fascinated by the "Foxfire Book" whose subtitle I have just now quoted. You will want to experience with Elliot Wigginton this discovery, this discovery to him, this revelation of the grace and truth in the common life of Appalachian mountain folk. It is these people, not just their lore, that matter, and elicit his dedication, quoting, "To the people of these mountains in the hope "that some portion of their are wisdom, ingenuity, "and individuality will remain

long after them "to touch us all," unquote. That's not how it started though. It started with this bright young teacher's effort to make these people fit into his world of ideas. Fresh from Cornell with an AB in English and an MA in teaching, he set out to teach 9th and 10th grade English and assorted other things in the Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School in the North Georgia mountains. In a few weeks, his lectern was scorched during class, a knife was broken off in the floorboard, graffiti adorned every desk, the globe theater chart was down, nine confiscated water pistols were re-confiscated under his very eyes, paper airplanes- Well, he got the message, and so did you. What to do? Assert authority through failing grades, paddling, the principal's office, suspension? Fortunately, he recalled his own high school days of boredom, punishments, regulations, put-downs, but also recalled three blessed teachers who let him make things and helped him, who praised results, awakened self-esteem, achievement, worth. So, he walked into class the next day and said, "How would you like to throw away the text "and start a magazine?" They would and did, and the experiment grew into a widely-circulated periodical. Mountain kids were awakened to curiosity about their own people and history and ways and lore. They talked with parents and grandparents, they took pictures, made tape recordings, wrote articles and stories and poems, solicited others, raised money, sought advertising, sold, publicized, typed, planned layout, makeup, edited, learned. They learned how. They learned English in process. They learned about themselves and their own rich unwritten story of their people and culture. The "Foxfire Book" grew out of their magazine, "Foxfire," which they named for a tiny organism in the mountain coves that sometimes glows in the dark. Their whole enterprise and their teacher's interpretation of this revealing discovery of mountain folk glows too with the intrinsic meaning and value and wisdom of people, particular people, people who matter, who matter to those who care to know them rather than to ignore or use or impose upon them. Are there not people all around us who matter if we care? Are they not the gift of God to us all, our neighbors, whom we need and who need us and one another? Isn't this good news gospel worth celebrating, enjoying, responding? May we call another witness, another seemingly secular word about people who matter? This is a discovery of, or discovery revelation to, psychiatrist Robert Coles, subject of a "Time" cover story a few months ago. This psychiatrist has gone out for years to live with forgotten citizens and their children, with sharecroppers, migrants, mountaineers, poor blacks, and working-class whites concluding that most are astonishingly healthy in mind and remarkably courageous in spirit, possessing unrecognized strengths that, if properly understood, bode well for the future of the nation. So, Robert Coles has become a passionate destroyer of usual stereotypes. As "Time" quotes sociologist David Reisman about Coles, "What he is saying is people are more complicated, "more varied, more interesting, have more resiliency "and survivability than you might think. "I listen to them. You listen to them. "Please listen again and again." Continues "Time," "By rising above the set prejudices "of both liberals and conservatives, "Coles helps depolarize a divided society. "He has performed one of the most difficult "and yet important feats of all, "to criticize America, and yet, to love it, "to lament the nation's weaknesses, "it's greedy, monopolistic, avaricious, and sordid sides "while continuing to cherish its strengths." So said "Time." Thus, Robert Coles breaks away the person-destroying stereotypes that hide and hurt the humanity of people, whether ghetto dwellers, migrants, ethnics, police, mountaineers, culturally-disadvantaged, white racist, or Middle Americans. Sensitive, insightful, compassionate, concerned, he has identified in extraordinary ways with those he studies. For example, he rode a school bus every school day for an academic year with black children going to school outside their ghetto. He visited certain families daily for years in home, school, street. He accompanied some black and some white families moving from South to North, observing them on the way and getting settled. He visited

regularly 10 white families and 10 black families in an eastern metropolis. Some of you've seen his books perhaps on children of crisis, desegregation. "The South Goes North," "Migrants, Sharecroppers, and Mountaineers," "The Middle Americans." I'm not selling books this morning. Some of these I've not even seen, but I am hearing again the good news, the gospel about people who matter and someone to whom they matter. That someone may be Robert Coles, or is it you or me, and is it God, the father of us all, and who was it who said, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all," and "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives not me, but Him who sent me." Good news, good news perhaps of fellow students, colleagues, family, helpers, bosses, administrators, employees who matter. Away with these stereotypes, too. We could go on to cite other witnesses in our day and before, witnesses to the intrinsic significance and worth and rich humanity of people, of individual people, of groups of people, of all kinds of people. We could cite a Charles Kuralt "On the Road" or a predecessor, John Steinbeck, decades ago wandering the West and identifying with ordinary folk and poor, a Carl Sandberg with his celebration of Chicago and the people, yes, and his Lincoln studies and his settling in a North Carolina mountain home and farm with guitar and folk songs and friends in high places and low all around. Indeed, a host of folk singers from John Jacob Niles to Pete Seger to Bob Dylan and back to a James Agee and his "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," or today's Peter Shrag, a "Forgotten American" revisited. Not to speak of, try not for 30 minutes, various assorted political candidates of populist sensitivity, critical of systems that depersonalize, riding the shoulders of the people to prominence and power, and others in government, church, education, and the media introducing us afresh to the people of the world in their health and wellbeing or their suffering and dire need, the untold millions of China, of India and Bangladesh, of suffering Vietnam and all of Indochina and troubled Africa, of teeming Latin America. One sort of answer then to the sermon question, who are the people of God, is all people. All are made in His image, meant for His way of full life together. For those who can care and listen and know, there is discovered in them, through them, for them a common grace, an endowment of all by their Father-creator with humanity and value and meaning. This is good news, gospel, and linked to it is another kind of answer meant to support rather than negate this universal gift from God. The people of God are Israel of old called into community and obedient witnessing service to all men, a light to lighten the Gentiles. The people of God are the renewed Israel of the church, the body of Christ, the organic union of the graciously restored with their rightful Lord and fellow members in His service to all men. The people of God are the continuing, graciously-illuminated and empowered community of the Spirit bringing new life to those within and without the fellowship. The people of God are especially called to celebrate, to realize, to live in and for the true humanity of all God's people. Well, this sounds pretty unrealistic and romantic, doesn't it? Whether we are talking about all of God's people, often at one another's throats, riven by conflicts, separated by differences, in the pull and tug of desperate everyday life, or whether we are talking about this special servant community of the people of God for their good. As for the first, we are not glossing over differences, conflicts, failures, weaknesses, but just acknowledging our common humanity. The real danger of romantic unrealism does apply to us and others, and the way we respond to this vision, this good news, about all God's other people. If we do not accept the gift of God of the others, even when seemingly secular spokesmen and events reveal their dignity, worth, humanity, then His gift comes to us as as bad news, as a claim upon us, a demand for our change, a judgment when we refuse or resist. God comes in the neighbor, the people. Receiving them, we are receiving Him. Receiving not, we turn Him away as well, but not very successfully. That's the bad news, but underneath it is a sort of good news of grace even in judgment. Thus,

when we and others in unconcern, blindness, prejudice do not acknowledge and serve the humanity of all, we may have to be awakened and jarred into responsibility by demonstrations, protests, caucuses, consciousness-raising events of various kinds, even revolution. It has taken more than appeals to our resistant consciences, more than legal recourses and governmental power to begin the securing of rights for blacks, for students, for workers, for Chicanos and Indians, for third-world masses, for Vietnamese people, for women, for gray panthers, the senior citizens, indeed for Middle Americans. God's many people, through such prophetic protests and power plays, are beginning our change of consciousness, beginning for us the painful, but ultimately joyful, discovery discovered, revealed who God's people really are, who matters. It is here that another word from Jesus becomes painfully pertinent. "He who is not with me is against me," and he who does not gather with me scatters." The question is whether the special people of God, the church called to serve Him and all, is with or against men and God, gathering or scattering? Some of the prophetic protest of which we spoke was inspired and led by churchmen, but not much, and not by most. We don't have to resort to overly critical and one-sided Marxist rejection of faith and church for identification with oppression. The story comes to us currently in myriad ways. Item, one of our distinguished scholar profit-historians, Professor Emeritus H. Shelton Smith, has just brought to completion a powerful and revealing study of the function of religion in white racism and black slavery and segregation. The title and volume are eloquent for our meditation this morning, "In His image, But," subtitle, "Racism in Southern Religion, 1780 to 1910." Indeed, the typical sociologist view of religion as a sanction on the ways and values of society, a conservative undergirding of those in power, is not adequately offset by attention to the prophetic, critical, remaking ministry of the special people of God. A few years ago, Milton Rokeach, a professor of psychology at Michigan State University, gathered in a small article entitled "Paradoxes of Religious Belief" his own findings and those of others before him about the way our creeds and behaviors square up, and it became evident that while all our great major Western faiths teach love of humanity under God, justice and peace, joy and inner peace, tolerance and appreciation of others, in actuality, when the people of the churches are studied, on the average, they are more intolerant and prejudiced and anxious than nonreligious people, a disturbing revelation if this is true. All these great faiths have a universal message, and all seem to have a particularistic term, and many people choose the latter. There's further word from this study to which we'll return in a moment. This isn't the whole story, but it is a disturbing and disturbingly-revealing part of the story of our life. It is not, however, just the Archie Bunkers of the churches and nation who manifest such rejections and anxious defensiveness. Those of us in the ecclesiastical establishment, the clergy, and even more the seminary, of which I'm one poor spokesman, are perceived by many laymen as holding church and laity in disdain, as engaged in a put-down of their life and values, as preoccupied with our own irrelevant theologizing fads on the one hand, and intruding on and using the church and laity on the other. Indeed, one student not long back contemplating the gap between his envisioned ministry and laymen's expectations, actually was led to admit by implication that he was perceiving layman as the enemy. What a gospel. There's better news about his change of heart, but recently, a conservative denominational publication chided the teaching establishment of its own major denomination for its vaunted new pluralism with regard to other faiths and secular movements, but its failure to include its own evangelical wing. We are tempted to use, again, Jesus' text, "He who is not with me is against me," and he who does not gather with me scatters" as a word against such complainers, but the more I honest use would be for our own self-examination. Well, is this all there is to say on the matter? Is there only bad news and no good news? I thank God, no, for the very fact that we can have our consciences disturbed, perhaps changed, that we can yield to

pressures for justice and rights, that we are spoken to by that charming "Foxfire Book" or Robert Cole's sympathetic studies of humanity around us, that we can confess our bewilderment and failure and sin when we fail to celebrate our common humanity, that we can keep asking for light and love and our fellows in life and keep hearing our Lord's words. All this is a sign of hope. We spoke a moment ago of another side to that study of religion and social behavior. So there is. It was evident that the great faiths and churches also had inner cores of devoted faithful who did experience and express the love, joy, peace, and justice of their teachings, and a new Lutheran study just out shows that many seemingly orthodox Lutherans may be prejudiced, authoritarian, resistant to change, but that on the whole, these are those who misunderstand the gospel as a sort of law and who see God as a punishing sovereign, whereas those who have caught the essential gospel of a loving God who provides for man through the saving grace of Jesus Christ do live in greater compassion toward fellow man. You know that, and I know that, and this is good news. People, the people of God, all the people of the world, the person next to us, all do matter, and you do care. God has touched your life and relationship, and you, in these days to come, will be seeking ways in which, in the claims and counterclaims of political struggles, in the dissensions and disturbances within the churches, in the ferment in the academic field, in the pulls and struggles of a changing community, you will be seeking ways to love and serve people. Let us pray. Oh God, who has taught us that we are members one of another, remove, we beseech thee, from among us all distrust and bitterness and grant that seeking what is just and equal and caring for the needs of others, we may live and work together in unity and love through Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen. (reverent organ music) (reverent organ music)

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