

[ms-0399, 002.005.037]

Matt. 5:46-48

SETS UP ITS IDOLS OF NORMALITY--PERFECT HEALTH, BRAINS, <sup>GOOD</sup> MARRIAGE, CHILDREN, WEALTH, PERPETUAL OPTIMISM, I HEAR HIM SAYING: "COME OFF IT! IT'S ALL RIGHT TO BE CRIPPLED, OR BLIND, OR DULL-WITTED, OR CHILDLESS, OR DEPRIVED, OR OCCASIONALLY DEPRESSED. SURE, I WISH THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE LIFE AND LIFE MORE ABUNDANT, AND TO FIGHT AGAINST ALL THAT STANDS IN THE WAY. BUT FOR GOD'S SAKE, DON'T THINK OF YOURSELF AS LESS THAN HUMAN BECAUSE YOU DON'T MEASURE UP TO THE POPULAR NORMS OF YOUR DAY. JUST AS YOU ARE YOU ARE ALL VALUABLE TO ME."

May 17, '87

TEXT: "IF YOU LOVE ONLY THOSE WHO LOVE YOU, WHAT REWARD CAN YOU EXPECT? SURELY THE TAX-GATHERERS DO AS MUCH AS THAT. AND IF YOU GREET ONLY YOUR BROTHERS, WHAT IS THERE EXTRAORDINARY ABOUT THAT? EVEN THE HEATHEN DO AS MUCH. THERE MUST BE NO LIMIT TO YOUR GOODNESS, AS YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER'S GOODNESS KNOWS NO BOUNDS." Matt. 46-48

TOLSTOY WROTE IN HIS DIARY AS A BOY: "I AM DIFFERENT," AND WORE HIMSELF OUT RESISTING ALL PRESSURES TO CONFORM. "I AM DIFFERENT"-- THAT'S THE POINT. DO WE REALLY BELIEVE THAT GOD WANTS US EACH TO BE DIFFERENT AND LOVES US JUST AS WE ARE? THERE ARE, OF COURSE, SOME THINGS THAT MAKE US DIFFERENT WHICH WE NEED TO GET RID OF, THINGS OF WHICH WE ARE, ASHAMED. IF WHAT MAKES US DIFFERENT IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS IS AN OVERWHELMING PRIDE AND SELFISHNESS WE MUST THROW OURSELVES ON THE MERCY AND GRACE OF GOD. BUT FOR ALL ELSE I BELIEVE THE WORD OF GOD TO BE: "VIVE LA DIFFERENCE!" WHAT WE DO NOT NEED IS THE CALL TO BE NORMAL, TO CONFORM OURSELVES TO THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE. I HAVE A FEELING THAT WHEN MY LIFE COMES UNDER THE SCRUTINY OF THE HEAVENLY JUDGE, IT'S NOT MY ECCENTRICITIES OR PECULIARITIES THAT WILL BE CONDEMNED BUT MY BLAND ACCEPTANCE OF THE POPULAR NORM OF OUR SECULAR SOCIETY, MY FAILURE TO HEAR AND OBEY WHEN CHRIST SAYS "WHAT DO YOU MORE THAN THESE?"

WHAT JESUS IS SAYING HERE, AND THROUGHOUT THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, IS THAT SOMETHING UNUSUAL, SOMETHING EXTRA, SOMETHING WE MAY THINK IMPOSSIBLE IS EXPECTED OF HIS DISCIPLES IN THEIR DAILY BEHAVIOR. THERE'S THIS QUESTION OF LOVING OTHER PEOPLE. HE POINTS OUT THAT IT IS PERFECTLY NORMAL TO LOVE THOSE WHO LOVE US. MOST PEOPLE, EVEN TAX-GATHERERS, HE ADDS, HUMOROUSLY REFERRING TO THE MOST UNPOPULAR CHARACTERS OF HIS DAY, MANAGE TO DO THAT. CHRISTIANS HAVE TO DO MORE, PRACTICING LOVE INDISCRIMINATELY EVEN TOWARDS THEIR ENEMIES. GREETING YOUR FRIENDS--AT THE COFFEE HOUR AFTER CHURCH FOR INSTANCE?-- IS PERFECTLY NORMAL, EVEN THE MOST IRRELIGIOUS DO THAT. CHRISTIANS HAVE TO DO MORE AND BE READY TO GREET THE STRANGER. ALL DECENT PEOPLE LIVE UP TO A CERTAIN LEVEL OF GOODNESS IN THEIR DAILY LIFE. JESUS' DISCIPLES ARE ASKED TO GO OVERBOARD. "THERE MUST BE NO LIMIT TO YOUR GOODNESS, AS YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER'S GOODNESS KNOWS NO BOUNDS."

IT IS SO EASY TO MAKE AN IDOL OF FASHIONABLE NORMALITIES. EVERY PARENT KNOWS THE REFRAIN "EVERYBODY'S DOING IT," AND HAS A LITTLE LECTURE ABOUT "TAKING A STAND." BUT DO WE ADULTS NOT CONTINUALLY SUCCUMB TO THE PRESSURE TO BE NORMAL IN OUR OWN CIRCLE OF FRIENDS OR FELLOW-WORKERS? HAVE WE LEARNED THE DIFFICULT ART OF BEING DIFFERENT WITHOUT BEING PRIGGISH, ACTING ON CHRISTIAN CONVICTIONS WITHOUT SEEMING "HOLIER THAN THOU"? IT IS SO EASY TO WORSHIP GOD ON A SUNDAY MORNING AND SINCERELY LISTEN TO THE CALL OF CHRIST, AND THEN GO ABOUT OUR BUSINESS FOR THE REST OF THE WEEK WORSHIPPING THE IDOL OF NORMALITY, FORGETTING THE WORD OF JESUS: "WHEN A LAMP IS LIT, IT IS NOT PUT UNDER A MEAL-TUB, BUT ON THE LAMPSTAND, WHERE IT GIVES LIGHT TO EVERYONE IN THE HOUSE."

WHATEVER WE MAKE OF THIS TEACHING OF JESUS--AND CHRISTIANS HAVE BEEN STRUGGLING AND AGONIZING OVER IT FOR CENTURIES-- WE CAN'T ESCAPE THE CONCLUSION THAT HE MEANT HIS DISCIPLES TO GO WELL BEYOND THE CONVENTIONAL ETHICS OF HIS DAY AND OURS. THE ONE THING WE ARE NOT EXPECTED TO BE IS NORMAL. ADNORMAL SOMETIMES, SUPRA-NORMAL ALWAYS--THAT IS WHAT HE DECLARED, AND PAUL ECHOED THIS TEACHING WHEN HE WROTE TO THE CHRISTIANS AT ROME: "ADAPT YOURSELVES NO LONGER TO THE PATTERN OF THIS PRESENT WORLD, BUT LET YOUR MINDS BE REMADE, AND YOUR WHOLE NATURE THUS TRANSFORMED." THE FIRST CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES KNEW THAT THEY WERE CALLED NOT TO BE CONFORMED BUT TO BE TRANSFORMED. DO WE LIVE BY THAT CONVICTION TODAY?

WHAT I HAVE BEEN TRYING TO SAY IS BEAUTIFULLY SUMMED UP IN A FAMILIAR BLESSING IN A NEW TRANSLATION WITH WHICH I CLOSE: "MAY THE GOD OF PEACE, WHO BROUGHT UP FROM THE DEAD OUR LORD JESUS, THE GREAT SHEPHERD OF THE SHEEP, BY THE BLOOD OF THE ETERNAL COVENANT, MAKE YOU PERFECT IN ALL GOODNESS SO THAT

AFTER CENTURIES OF WHAT USED TO BE CALLED "CHRISTENDOM," WITH ITS ADAPTATIONS AND COMPROMISES, WE ARE BECOMING AWARE AGAIN THAT THERE IS SOMETHING ADNORMAL ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN ETHIC. AND IT IS JUST AT THIS POINT THAT WE FIND OURSELVES CONFRONTED BY WHAT I AM CALLING THE "CULT OF THE NORMAL" IN THIS COUNTRY. IT'S ALL AROUND US. IN THE TEMPLES OF CONFORMITY THE WORSHIPPERS YEARN FOR THE VISION OF THE NORMAL WITHOUT

YOU MAY DO HIS WILL; AND MAY HE MAKE OF US WHAT HE WOULD HAVE US BE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, TO WHOM BE GLORY FOR EVER AND EVER!" AMEN.

EVER BEING SURE JUST WHAT IT IS. WHEN YOU COME TO THINK OF IT, A TOTALLY NORMAL HUMAN BEING IS AS ELUSIVE A CONCEPT AS THE HOLY TRINITY --AND MUCH LESS INSPIRING. MILLIONS SEEK TO ORDER THEIR LIVES BY A PASSIONATE SEARCH FOR THE NORMAL. INSTEAD OF THE OLD CHRISTIAN IDEAL "TO ME TO LIVE IS TO BE NORMAL:" AT THE SLIGHTEST SUSPICION OF BEING IN SOME WAY ABNORMAL, THEY MAKE FOR THE PSYCHIATRIST. ADVERTISEMENTS SURROUND US IN MAGAZINES, ON TV, AND ON THE HIGHWAYS SUBTLY SINGING THE PRAISES OF BEING OF NORMAL WEIGHT, HAVING A NORMAL FAMILY AND NORMAL FRIENDS, EATING NORMAL FOODS AND DRINKING NORMAL DRINKS, WEARING NORMAL CLOTHES, AND HOLDING NORMAL OPINIONS. IF WE ARE IN ANY DOUBT ABOUT WHAT IS NORMAL WE HAVE THE SACRED SCRIPTURE OF THE OPINION POLLS TO GUIDE US. PARENTS ANXIOUSLY SCRUTINIZE THEIR CHILDREN TO DETECT THE SLIGHTEST SIGN OF ABNORMALITY THAT MIGHT MAKE THEM UNACCEPTABLE TO A SCHOOL OR COLLEGE OF THEIR CHOICE. VOTERS IN ELECTIONS ARE NOW QUICK TO REJECT ANY CANDIDATE WHO SHOWS SIGNS OF DEVIATING FROM THE NORM THAT IS SUGGESTED BY SUCH ADJECTIVES AS "RIGHT-THINKING," "RED-BLOODED," "COMPETENT" OR WHATEVER THE MOOD OF THE ELECTORATE REQUIRES. IT OCCURS TO ME THAT ONE OF THE LEAST INSPIRING PERIODS OF OUR HISTORY WAS THE PRESIDENCY OF WARREN HARDING--AND HE GAVE IT THE HORRID NAME OF "NORMALCY."

SINCE THE CULT OF THE NORMAL IS SO PERVASIVE TODAY, AND WE ARE ALL AFFECTED BY IT IT WOULD BE GOOD TO LOOK AT IT AGAIN IN THE LIGHT OF THE BIBLE AND THE HISTORIC TEACHING OF THE CHURCH.

FIRST COMES THE QUESTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "NORMAL?" IN THE SCRAMBLE TO BE NORMAL VERY FEW SEEM TO ASK THAT QUESTION, YET IT'S ENORMOUSLY IMPORTANT. SOME OF YOU WILL KNOW THAT WHAT YOUR TEENAGE CHILDREN CONSIDER NORMAL BEHAVIOR, OR NORMAL MUSIC, OR NORMAL LANGUAGE, YOU PROBABLY CONSIDER ODD OR EVEN OUTRAGEOUS. AND HOW MANY OF THOSE WHO SEEK PSYCHIATRIC HELP BOTHER TO FIND OUT WHAT KIND OF NORMALITY A PARTICULAR PSYCHIATRIST INTENDS TO BRING THEM TO? IF I WERE SEEKING SUCH HELP--AND WHICH OF US MIGHT NOT NEED IT FROM TIME TO TIME?--I DON'T THINK I WOULD GO TO THE DOCTOR WHOSE IDEA OF THE NORMAL WAS THAT OF SIGMUND FREUD. THE FACT IS THAT NO ONE HAS ANY CLEAR CONCEPTION OF WHAT CONSTITUTES A PERFECTLY NORMAL HUMAN BEING--EXCEPT, POSSIBLY, THAT OF A PERSON AS LIKE OURSELVES AS POSSIBLE!

A CHRISTIAN MIGHT SAY THAT THE NORMAL PERSON IS REPRESENTED BY CHRIST HIMSELF. WE THINK OF HIM AS THE IDEAL HUMAN BEING, PERFECTLY LOVING BOTH GOD AND EVERY MEMBER OF THE HUMAN

FAMILY. THE BIBLE CALLS HIM THE SECOND ADAM--THE ADAM WHO DID NOT FALL. BUT WAS HE REGARDED AS NORMAL BY HIS CONTEMPORARIES? WHEN HE BEGAN TO SPEAK TO HUGE CROWDS IN GALILEE WHAT DO WE READ? "WHEN HIS FAMILY HEARD OF THIS, THEY SET OUT TO TAKE CHARGE OF HIM: FOR THE PEOPLE WERE SAYING THAT HE WAS OUT OF HIS MIND." THE JESUS OF THE GOSPELS IS NOT ONE WHO IS ACCLAIMED AS THE IDEAL HUMAN BEING LIKE THE HANDSOME, SUSPICIOUSLY NORDIC, YOUNG MAN PORTRAYED IN SOME SUNDAY SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS. HE IS ONE WHO IS HOUNDED TO DEATH BY PEOPLE WHO THOUGHT HIM DERANGED OR DANGEROUSLY DELUDED. THE KINGDOM OF GOD WHICH HE PROCLAIMED IS A REALM WHERE THE BELIEFS OF NORMAL PEOPLE ARE TURNED UPSIDE DOWN, AS YOU WILL SEE FROM A STUDY OF THE BEATTITUDES. AND THOSE WHO, LIKE PAUL, ACCEPTED HIM AS THE TRUE NORM WERE SCORNEED BY THE LEADERS OF OPINION. WHEN PAUL MADE DEFENSE BEFORE THE COURT IN CAESAREA WE READ THAT THE GOVERNOR, FESTUS, "SHOUTED AT THE TOP OF HIS VOICE, 'PAUL, YOU ARE RAVING: TOO MUCH STUDY IS DRIVING YOU MAD'."

THE FACT IS THAT THE BIBLE IS TO A GREAT EXTENT A RECORD OF HOW THE HUMAN FAMILY LIVES NORMALLY IN A STATE OF FEAR, PRIDE AND SELFISHNESS, AND DESPAIR. OUR CHRISTIAN ANCESTORS WERE NOT ALL WRONG IN THEIR BELIEF THAT THE NORMAL HUMAN STATE IS THAT OF WHAT THEY CALLED ORIGINAL SIN. THE ULTIMATE MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE IS ONE OF HOPE, OF GRACE, OF REDEMPTION, BUT IT MAKES CLEAR THAT, LEFT TO THEMSELVES THE NORMAL HUMAN BEING IS A SINNER. THIS HAS NOT BEEN EASY FOR THIS GENERATION TO ACCEPT, BUT WHAT PHILOSOPHERS MAY DENY, ORDINARY PEOPLE UNDERSTAND.

THE NEXT SHAFT OF LIGHT I FIND IN THE BIBLE ON THIS TOPIC IS MUCH MORE ENCOURAGING. NOWHERE DOES IT SUGGEST THAT THERE IS SOME MOULD BY WHICH ALL MEN AND WOMEN ARE JUDGED. THERE IS NO TRACE IN IT OF THE MODERN NOTION THAT THERE IS A RACE OF THOROUGHLY NORMAL PEOPLE BEYOND WHOSE FRONTIERS LIVE THE HANDICAPPED, THE DEPRIVED, THE DEPRESSED, THE DISABLED, THE QUIRKY AND THE DIFFICULT. WHAT SOME THINK OF AS A DEPRESSING DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN IS ACTUALLY A LIBERATING LIGHT. "ALL HAVE SINNED" - YES, AND IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER ALL OF US ARE DISABLED, FALLING SHORT SOMEWHERE OF TOTAL HEALTH OF BODY, MIND, OR SPIRIT.

IN THE CULT OF THE NORMAL GREAT NUMBERS OF PEOPLE ARE EXCLUDED. BECAUSE OF THEIR DISABILITY THEY ARE TREATED OFTEN AS NON-PERSONS. JESUS LONGED TO RESTORE EVERYONE TO THEIR FULL STATUS AS SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF GOD, BUT HE NEVER CONSIDERED ANYONE AS SOMETHING LESS THAN HUMAN. WHEN THIS MODERN CULT