Sunday, October 8, 1972
HELLO, HUMAN BEING!
Luke 19:1-10

The following obituary appeared some time ago in the New York Times:

Morris Domitosky, known to many in Times Square as a kind of walking department store, died Friday in his one room apartment at 357 W. 29th Street. He was 65. To the police and the store owners, he was Morris the peddler, a man who brought with him an assortment of toothpaste, razor blades, cand1; socks, and other small items which he sold in luncheonettes and other shops. All year he wore the dark cap and green vest that came to be identified with him. As he moved about the streets, he handed out royal titles to those he met. There was King Jack, Queen Sadie, and Count Mike. And if there were no title, his greeting was a simple, "Hello, human being!"

Hello, Human Being! Much of the meaning of the Christian faith is contained in those three words. When a believer in God says them, they mean, "Hello, son or daughter of God!" Hello, my brother! Hello, my sister! God loves you! I love you! You're worth loving! You're o.k.! Hello, human being!

Morris the peddler reminds me of Jesus Christ. He, too, walked the city streets giving out royal titles to ordinary people, making beggars, children, failures, parents, poor people, yes, and even rich people feel like kings and queens.

Zacchaeus a rich man. He'd gotten rich exploiting the poor people of his own country. He had defrauded them in the service of the Roman occupying government, extracting taxes, feathering his own nest, and he was hated by his fellow citizens as a corrupt traitor.

So, the crowd in Jericho, was angry when Jesus chose to be nice to an obviously unworthy man. But Zacchaeus was amazed, overwhelmed. Jesus said that he, too, was a Son of God, a human being. Hello, human being!

Now it's often difficult for you and me as it was for the people in that crowd to see and acknowledge the human being in other people. So quickly and finally we size 2. a person up, mark him down, label him, dismiss him with a word. He's a grouch! He's a reactionary! She's a radical. She's uptight! He's a bore! With one little word we squeeze the humanity out of the other person and turn off our own humanity at the same time. Young and old, black and white, we dehumanize each other in so many ways.

Take even a little thing like long hair, for example. Long hair brings to the minds of many people accompanying images — dirty, rebellious, psychedelic, drugs, sex, dis-respect, lack of patriotism. Now that can be embarrassing to somebody who has long hair. Yet most men and women are wearing their hair longer today than it used to be.

Even my sideburns are a little longer than they used to be and occasionally I've noticed people looking at me and perhaps thinking, "You can't trust ministers over forty with sideburns." So, I sympathize with the young person who wore the button which said. "Jesus wore long hair." And so, he did and so also a great many other intelligent people.

It's just a tiny example of what we do to each other every day and in so many ways and often unaware. We react to something external in a person that prevents us from seeing and greeting the human being in him or her.

We say, "Hello beard!" Hello, grouch! Hello subordinate! Hello, reactionary! Hello, radical! Hello, fatso! Hello, competitor, Hello, militant! Hello, hippy! But not--hello, human being.

Or take older people for example. White hair can be as much a liability as long hair. Sometimes I get the im-pression that this youth-oriented culture wants to get the old folks into a nursing home as ·fast as possible. Advertisers, politicians, preachers, educators, and others cater to the young. Many groups have much more political clout than the old people.

Furthermore, the older people are often the ones who get caught in the changes, some of them inevitable and necessary, but also sometimes frightening. -

How can we learn again to say to the older people in the nursing homes, the offices, the churches and in every other place, "Hello, human being!"

We often dehumanize those who are closest to us. Wife, husband, child, colleague, parent, friend. We get locked into a pattern of action-reaction, a habit pattern, a history of a relationship and we simply take each other for granted. We don't really look at each other, but it's merely a glance, a twist of the head, the raising of an eyebrow, a nod, or some other gesture. We don't see the other person as a human being.

Who bothers you? Who is it hard for you to see or treat as a human being? Who is it hard for you to look into the eye and say and mean it, "Hello, human being!"

And yet when someone has the courage, the imagination, the humor, to do just that, miracles happen. Look at what happened to Zacchaeus when Jesus greeted him in that way. He lost his cool and some of his cash. He said, "I'll pay everybody back what I've defrauded four times over and I'll give half of all my wealth to the poor." That was a costly conversion!

Zacchaeus knew how to deal with contempt. Who doesn't? But dealing with compassion was something new to him. Jesus didn't go up to Zacchaeus and say what we might have said — "Look, buddy, you lousy thief, you traitor, pay back everything you have taken dishonestly. Shave off that beard, start going to the synagogue and maybe I'll have a cup of coffee with you."

No, he just said, "Zacchaeus, I want to stay at your house today." Zacchaeus was surprised and flabbergasted. All kinds of possibilities began to pour out of him. He began to become a new person because of that basic affirmation of his humanity. Love penetrates armor that can resist hate.

All of us live constantly on the border of humanity and inhumanity. And the smallest thing can tip the scales one way or the other. We all know how we've felt at one time or another when surprisingly, someone treated us kindly, with respect, with dignity, as a human being.

On the subway from Hoboken, New Jersey, to Manhattan, one of the trains I used to regularly ride had one conductor who treated us as human beings, rather than cargo to be hauled somewhere. Over the loudspeaker, we would hear a friendly, "Good morning," and sometimes a joke 4. or two, but always a welcome. He treated us not just as customers, or as commuters,

but as fellow human beings. You could see the smile come to us dead-pan commuters as soon as we heard his voice. Here was a touch of humanity in the middle of pushing and shoving and impersonality. We all have this power to trigger these responses in others when we treat people simply as human beings who have dignity.

There are so many ways to say, “hello” to each other. A smile, a squeeze of the hand, a personal note, an in-vitation, a pat on the back, a hug, a wave, a phone call. We Christians are called to be a “hello” people — called to be human beings in an often-impersonal world.

A prayer I heard recently said, “Lord, I keep thinking about that 17-year-old girl who told me her mother hadn’t hugged her since she was in the 7th grade. What makes people hold their hugs back? Is there someone who’s waiting for a hug from me?”

The church is the community where we’re supposed to learn to say “hello” to each other as human beings.

There is one characteristic which all saints have in common. It is not piety or love of God as commonly under-stood. Many people are pious who are far from saintly. The quality all saints have in common is identification. Through some mysterious process, only dimly perceived by the rest of us, they are able to identify with the full range of creation.

They identify with the leper and the criminal; with the disfigured and the stupid; with the thief and the alien; with the coward and the heretic; with the hippy and the square; with the beast in the field and the bird in the air, the fish in the sea. They comprehend the sharing-ness of creation.

This is the kind of person Jesus was. He saw the human being in Zacchaeus, in the prostitute, the cripple, the mentally ill, the child and the thief on the cross. This is what religion is all about. The Bible says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God and hate his brother,’ (and here, brother means any human being) he is a liar!”

The more we can identify with persons unlike ourselves, the more fully we enter into human-hood. This is the whole message of the saints. This is why Jesus moved among the poor, the afflicted, the outcasts, the dis-reputable, the dregs of society.

At one end of the spectrum, we have the pure egotist who cares for no one and nothing but himself; such persons are rare. Then we have the tribal types who are kind and loyal to their own family only, their own kind. Then there are those who recognize the claim of the community be-yond the family. And then those who accept a nation composed kinds of people, but who see all of them as human beings.

The parent who identifies only with his own children is better than the one who does not, but he is still limited. True parenthood means identifying with all children everywhere.

As you can see, being able to say, “Hello, human being!” touches every area of our living. Too often we think and talk and feel only in terms of generalizations or abstractions--those Communists, those hippies, those fascists, those right-wingers, those conservatives, or those liberals. And we fail to see the human being.

The truly terrible thing about any war and the fear and hate and hysteria it generates is that it forces us to think and talk and feel in terms of abstractions. Those gooks, those jerries, those

communists. But the people we are fighting and killing are human beings, not political, geographic, or economic abstractions. They are in the main as decent and fearful and confused as we are. And they regard us as abstractions as much as we do them. It is only after the conflict that enemies emerge as human beings, much like us, hoping the same things for their children, full of the same anxieties and prayers and puzzlements.

Hello, human being! Maybe we all need to make out a “hello” list and a goodbye list. Here’s one. Hello, Zacchaeus! Goodbye scoundrel.
Hello, John! Goodbye boss.
Hello, George; Goodbye subordinate.
Hello, black brother or sister; Goodbye nigger.
Hello, cop; Goodbye pig.
Hello, kid; Goodbye delinquent.
Hello, human being; Goodbye stereotype.

In an increasingly technological and mass society, we’ve got to be especially careful to see each other as human beings. It’s so easy to reduce a human being to an interchangeable unit. And then we label these units in terms of their function: average student, consumer, welfare recipient, patient, doctor, nurse.

We learn so well to look at people and not see them; to listen and not hear them. But when you see someone who you know loves you as you are, then it’s possible to believe that God loves you.

So as you leave this place today; as you walk down the streets of Lincoln, as you work wherever you work, as you meet people in your neighborhood; pick out those persons in particular you have heretofore been labeling, or with whom you find it hard to relate, or even those you hate — look them in the eye and say with Jesus--Hello, human being! Amen.