Sunday, April 1, 1973
TESTING THE SPIRITS
Matthew 7:15-16; I John 4:1,20; James 2:14-17; Galatians 5:22; Hebrews 13:1-3

In this sermon series on the "transcendent dimension," we have been looking again at the spiritual side of human beings and of creation itself. We human beings are more than our physical bodies and our environment is more than the physical universe. There is more to life and the world around us than meets the eye.

The something "more" that we call "spirit" in human beings can be illustrated in a simple way. If it is true and it is, that the cells in the human body are constantly changing so that about every seven years we are composed of utterly new cells — then what accounts for the continuity in a personality?

Take a coat; suppose each week it tore, and we replaced it with a patch, until finally it was a coat entirely made up of these patches. Would it still be the same coat? And at what time, what particular time or at what particular patching would it change from the old coat to a new and dif-ferent one?

It is plain to see that a garment undergoing these constant changes, so that every seven years it was made up of entirely of new material, could not be called the same gar-ment you originally bought. So, in what way is a person the same person he was seven years ago?

Yet we know he is the same in many ways. Except for certain differences that experience and aging make in him, there is something that retains its identity regardless of the molecular and chemical changes in every part of the tissue and nerves. There is a something "extra" to a per-son and this is what we call "spirit." It is something very much a part of the person and the physical, yet more than the physical.

Just as there is a spiritual side to human beings, so there is to all creation. Another way to say it is that God's spirit, the transcendent dimension infuses everything. The Biblical image of Spirit is essentially dynamic. Spirit is active, formative, lifegiving power. And even though the Spirit expresses itself in the material and physical, we can never completely control the spirit. It is always breaking out beyond the range of our concepts and sometimes in surprising places. It has an elusive character which cannot be measured or contained in the categories of finite thought.

The Christian Church is a community of the Spirit, but it is not the exclusive field of the Spirit's working. Jesus pointed out that the Divine Spirit cannot be restricted to any limits. No single community of persons, no particular geographical area or race of human beings, no specially privileged century or epoch can claim the Spirit for itself alone.

There is even some evidence in the Bible that the more people attempt to restrict the operation of the Spirit to what they take to be the approved channels, ecclesiastical or traditional, the more vigorously the same Spirit will manifest itself outside of these channels. No group or individual has a corner on the Spirit.

So, we talk about the Christian Church as a community of the Spirit not in the sense of having a monopoly of the Spirit or of having the Spirit in its sole possession. But it is to be a community of the Spirit in trying to follow the leadings of the Divine Spirit, in trying to be

connected to it. The Church is a community of the Spirit in the sense too that we want to be led in the right direction. So, in the church, we seek the Spirit's leading.

And this is just where the problem comes in. Sometimes there are conflicting voices each claiming to be speaking for God's Spirit and yet disagreeing what is the right direction.

This is a particular problem in our own time when there is an increase in interest in things spiritual, in the trans-cendent dimension, in mysticism, encounter groups, and in all kinds of new religious fads, as well as in the revival of some old fads. It's a problem when there is a deep hunger to make some sense out of life, to find the right direction for living, and yet there seem to be some con-flicting voices. We need to have some ways to test the spirits, to determine what is of God and what is not.

And the usual tests we might use for some other enterprises are not always sufficient. For example, merely because a group which claims to have a special revelation of God's Spirit is fast growing and quite successful in other statistical terms as well1 does not mean necessarily that it has the truth. We can worship false gods and have an emotional feeling of transcendence from that kind of worship or experience. Charles Manson's killers claimed to have an ecstatic religious experience while carrying out their bloody murders.

Furthermore, it's even more confusing in our time because the religious quest today for many is not so much a pilgrimage, based on past experience, discipline and a worn path, as much as it is a frenzied wandering of gurus, Jesus cheerleaders, and some dejected religious leaders who have turned either extremely radical or extremely conservative out of desperation. The Biblical writers knew the problem we are speaking of. They allude to a transcendent evil as well as a transcend-ent good. They also knew that our search for the good can get off the track and become evil Christian murdering heretics was done with supposedly good intentions.

The Biblical writers, along with Jesus knew that it is sometimes quite difficult to tell the difference between what they called evil spirits and what was of God — the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Bible contains numerous warnings against trusting just any spirit. Look again at the scripture selections printed on your order of worship.

Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." In other words, evil is often disguised as good. Jesus goes on in the same statement to warn that just because persons use the right words or the right names and labels, does not guarantee their validity. "Not everyone who calls me Lord, Lord, shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven," is the way he put it.

The writer of I John, picks up Jesus'warning and tells the Christians of his time, "Beloved do not believe every spirit, but test the Spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world." He is also saying — do not always trust your own emotions and feelings — they may be of God, but they may also be of the devil.

In some way or another then, we need to "test the spirits," our own spirit and those which are around us. And this means more than simply rejoicing in the revival of piety and the search for the transcendent. Religion also has the power to distract and divert, to drug and mystify people's spirits as well as to open us and judge us and stretch us to new possibilities. So, to find ourselves in the midst of a religious revival is not automatically a good thing.

The writer of I John reminds us — “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God.” Difficult as it may be, all of us must make judgments about religious movements — however provisional --all the time. And the fact that one kind of religious move-ment is being successful while another is waning does not necessarily have much to do with the validity of either one. The churches that cooperated and blessed what Hitler was doing in Germany in the 1930’s were prospering, while the “anti-Nazi” church was small and suspect and persecuted.

The churches in this country that continued to bless seg-regation and the status quo in the South and in other parts of the country as we11, often prospered during the 1950s and 60s while the churches which challenged prejudice and segregation suffered.

Nor can we say that a faith that emphasizes intellect to the exclusion of feeling and emotion or vice versa, is automatically correct. Reason can be gracious and feeling can be demonic or it can be the other way around as well. Certainly, vitality cannot be the only criterion we use. For those who believed in it, Charles Manson’s cult seemed to possess an enormous vitality.

How then are we to make judgments about the trends and ten-dencies in religion that we see around us and that we feel within us? We can’t take the easy way out and say simply that if religious needs are being met, then what’s going on must be all right. We can meet our so-called religious needs in perverted ways. Indeed, some of what we call re-ligious needs should probably be denied or at least sub-limated. Stamping out heretics no doubt satisfied the perverted religious needs of the Crusaders. There are also some kinds of religion which may very well satisfy the religious needs of people who don’t want any of their attitudes or behavior changed. They simply want to be blessed in what they are doing.

So where does that leave us? The prophets and Jesus were very hard on certain types of religion, but they also enunciated some fairly clear ways by which the truth of religious claims could be ascertained.

“You will know them by their fruits.” But what fruits? What does the Lord require of you? To love mercy, to do justice, to walk humbly. The writer of I John put it plainly — “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar.”

The writer of the letter of James, hits the same theme with other examples — “What does it profit, my brothers and sisters, if a man says he has faith but has not works. Can his faith save him?” And then the example, “If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ with- out giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

To be quite specific in our t.me, the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering we are receiving today in order to help feed the hungry and help clothe the naked is a very practical way of putting our faith to work. Whether or not we give is a test of our spirit and faith.

Jesus put the testing of the spirit most completely in the Sermon on the Mount and later in the Gospel of Matthew in his parable of the sheep and the goats — listen as he describes what the tests are for separating those with true religion from those with an empty religion — “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and clothe you. And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And God answers, ‘Truly I say to you as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'” One of the best summaries of this parable is simply — “THE WAY YOU TREAT PEOPLE IS THE WAY YOU TREAT GOD!”

It’s the most basic test of the Spirits. See how a religious moment or a church or a sect treats the outcasts of society, those in trouble and in need, the losers, the down-and-outers, the cripples, the retarded, the persecuted, the poor. And how do we treat such people as a congregation and in our individual lives? Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. If anyone says, “I love God” and hates his brother, he is a liar.

Last week in the sermon we spoke of “ways of experiencing the Transcendent.” For a person who is starving, transcendence may be experienced by someone feeding him. And this is another place where we meet God, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

A few years ago, a priest working in a slum section of a European city was asked why he was doing it, and replied, “So that the rumor of God may not disappear completely.”

And there are other tests of the spirit as well. A person or church that is filled with God’s spirit and working with that spirit is open to new possibilities and is not a “know-it-all,” but has humility. The Apostle Paul talks of the Spirit and the Transcendent as that which draws a person out of himself into a new manner of life. A person goes out of a self-centered mode of being into a new open- ness. The merely natural life is broken open and the Spiritual person is born. This is the spiritual rebirth. However, it is not a rebirth once for all, but a continuing process of rebirth and renewal.

Paul said, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

And it is also the Biblical witness that we are to test the spirits with one another. “No one individual just as no one church or denomination has a corner on the Spirit. We are to test each other, to work with each other and learn from each other. One purpose of group worship, group discussion, and group prayer is to let the Spirit work among us, to talk over with each other what God’s spirit wants us to do and how to do it.

It is the witness of the Bible that God’s spirit calls us to wholeness, and to seeing the world and creation whole. God’s spirit is that spirit which draws us out of ourselves. It is furthermore the witness of the Bible that those movements, religious or otherwise, those leaders, those spirits which would lead us into narrowness, exclusiveness, dogmatism, are not of God’s spirit.

The more a person goes out from himself or goes beyond himself, the more the spiritual, the transcendent dimension in his life is strengthened and deepened and the more fully he or she becomes a human being in God’s likeness.

Testing the Spirits! My own hope for the church is for a community of vision where joy and intimacy and awe; mystery and prayer can be found but will not distract us from the pain of the world but empower us to share it and overcome it.

We need some of the emotional abandon of our Pentecostal brothers and sisters and also some of the simplicity and love for one another that is found in some of the Jesus communes. Also, there is little doubt that our lives can be enlarged by the ancient spiritual disciplines of the East. I am ready to learn from bioenergetics, Yoga, Gestalt, Arica exercises, transcendental meditation, and other ways of experiencing the transcendent. However, if any of these should insulate us from the needs of neighbors far and near or from challenging the racial bigotries and attitudes of our day, then Jesus'stern words to the whited sepulchers of his day begin to refer to us also. Amen.

Discussion Suggestions

1. Look again at the Bible passages used in the Order of Worship, and as background for the sermon. Look also at these passages from the Sermon on the Mount --Matthew chapters 5 & 6. Also, Amos 5:21-24

2. How do you tell good from evil in your own decisions?

3. Can you think of some movements outside the church which might be of God? Jesus pointed out that God's Spirit is not limited to the church.

4. Do you believe in a kind of "transcendent evil," as well as a "Transcendent Good?" Where do you see evil at work in the world?