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A SERMON PREACHED IN THE
NORWICH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

by
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Traditional Text: "He will remake our body as we have it in our lowly state into a body like his own glorified body." Phil. 3:21

On this day of May, we find ourselves half way between Easter and Pentecost. Now Pentecost simply means the fiftieth day after the Lord took his followers into the beyond, and they could see heaven open. To this day we have a token of those forty-nine days between his own resurrection and the coming of his spirit upon his followers in the fact that Congregationalists don't kneel. You may not know why you don't kneel, but for a fact you stand upright before God as heirs to those forty-nine days. In the ancient Church universal of the first thousand years, and to this day, in Russia, Greece, Rumania, Bulgaria, Abyssinia, Egypt, the faithful abandon the customary kneeling in the services between Easter and Pentecost. By this, they say we are redeemed. The seven times seven of those fifty days represents eternity. Compare the hymn "Ten Thousand Times Ten Thousand"; in it, we eloquently sum up the universe of all the children of heaven. The term Pentecost, seven times seven, similarly articulates the universe of all the times, of God's eternity, the Sabbath of the Sabbath of all the seven day weeks.

Our Apostle Paul in his last days on earth, expecting his execution, tried to describe the Sabbath of the healed, the state of those who stand with Christ. At our funerals, his text is read quite often. But also, its meaning, by the fault of the translators remains in the dark. For in the English and German texts which I have consulted, it would seem as though we were promised a second body, glorified as much as Jesus' body, and erring through the universe under its own steam, in likeness of our Lord's body. This mistake in the translations has irked me, and it is for this, my annoyance, that I have been asked by our minister to talk to you here. Certainly it is no minor matter which we risk to misunderstand if we do not cope with our death in the right way. Christianity is the wisdom of death, or it is folly. When, as to modern men, death becomes repugnant, men become foolish. He who does not ponder death is, even though he be old, childish. And those funeral readings run off from him like water, and when the listeners don't care, such mistranslations continue unreformed and our funerals become a sham.

But did Paul really write that every one of us should receive a body similar or like or in the likeness of his own celestial body? That would be rugged individualism with a vengeance. We, every one of us, would remain shut up in his own ridiculous self-hood. Imagine you and me and John and Kitty rushing like billions of glow-worms through space, everybody for himself. Total futility would be the result. Every one of us in splendid

isolation would continue his solitary walk on earth. It would be hell, not heaven, if the translation stands. For this is the serious distinction between hell and heaven. In hell, everyone, with his own body, his own mind, his own passions, is alone. In heaven we are concorded symphonically, and we are unanimous and orchestrated. Dante's poem, the Divine Comedy, is immortal because Dante, in his truly orthodox faith, has described hell, purgatory, heaven, as those three states of being alone (hell), of being with friends (purgatory), and finally, of being in love even with our greatest enemies (heaven). Dante's song still is admired simply because he sang the truth. The man in hell has a mind and body left to themselves, incarcerated in the self's blind ownership; being mere self, he is not conversing, not inspired, not convinced, not addressed. He can't be loved as he perpetually destroys within himself the organs of communion, of regeneration, of total immersion into the life of the whole.

The man in hell declines the two steps through which we leave behind what Paul calls the body of our lowly state. What is this state? It is the state of our natural self. The natural man exists by himself, and he bases his existence on self-reliance, this side of being loved and this side of being asked to die. This natural man is everyone of us in the beginning. For, before we learn how to be lovable and how to be employed in our death, we cannot help living by will, hunger and reason. And that nature becomes hell when it tries to outlast childhood.

During the last century, the natural man almost has forgotten that it takes decades before we learn to love, and other decades to learn how to die. The poor victims of this nature worship never grasp either love or death. As they add simply more experiences to their nature, love is degraded to sex. Sex is love reduced to selfhood. Similarly, businessmen try to overcome their mortality by incorporating. A legal person seems to become immortal. But how few do incorporate for the purpose of sharing liability! The organization man instead of being incorporated into the army of those who die with Christ, has himself incorporated so that he may escape personal liability.

On an average, modern man, by his so-called healthy sex life, and by his so-called efficient organization, escapes from love as well as from death. This makes him impenetrable to the Christian full growth. As he thinks that he already is a human being by sex and incorporation, he cannot be initiated into the personal life on the level on which humanity begins. Three stages mark man's road into reality: birth, love, death. If you try to develop your character out of birth alone, you remain the slave of your race, your talents, your bend, your will, your sex.

Now you may see that the Apostle Paul not accidentally has been slandered right through this whole last century as the corrupter of an allegedly natural Christianity. The individual who shouts "I am I" regardless of love, regardless of death, refuses the trinity of birth below, love higher, death highest. He must

hate Paul, the great trinitarian of birth, love, and death. The natural man always speaks obscenely of love and of death! They tell this story: two Germans emigrated to the Dakotas. One came from Berlin, the other from Hamburg. Therefore, one founded a new Berlin, the other a new Hamburg in the wilderness, one opposite the other on two river banks. Hamburg prospered, Berlin failed. So when the man from Berlin came to die, he had his grave built on his side of the river. And he had himself entombed standing upright in the coffin, which had to be made standing vertically and carrying the inscription, "Yet Berlin will win." In cultivating his own will this man remained childish. He had avoided the training grounds in which we are trained for becoming lovable and mortal in loving and dying.

Such histrionics of will or sex may make us forget that love and death are not of our own doing. Sex may be in us from one day to the other. But at puberty, we are incapable of loving, let alone of marrying, and childish alliances wrongly called marriage of our time too often tell the story of our remaining one third only of our destined shape, of our remaining mere nature. Nobody can get married whose will has not died once already to his own whims. The Trinity is not outside; it is yours and my divine equipment.

In New Hampshire, across the Connecticut, a lecture was offered four weeks ago by an old friend of mine. A brilliant biologist, he called his address "The Origin of Death". And he gave away the whole bankruptcy of modern man by saying repeatedly, "I know that this topic of death is repugnant. It must be repugnant to you." I did not trust my ears. Are we that childish?

Christ's Easter message runs: Join me in dying. Then, your death, as mine, will bear fruit, infinite fruit. If you wish to bear fruit, learn to die to your private will. Every life may carry three crowns: the crown of a good birth and a good nature; this crown is the crown of hope and America is a land of hope. But woe to the country which glories on hope alone. Two more crowns are needed, the crown of love by initiation into the community of members. And the crown of faith by dying to your own will. Hope is crowding out love and faith among us; and four out of five people I meet have faith confused with hope.

But faith alone can shape the future. Hope may breed bigger and better elephants; it cannot stop breeding elephants. It is in this modern contempt of faith that the mistranslation of Philipians is rooted. You may grasp the central deficiency of modern man when you perceive the translation's deficiency. What? Christ is to give everyone of us a duplicate of his earthly flesh? Heavens, no. Never would Paul place us side by side with our Master. We remain grafted upon the vine. The body of Christ is One and One only, unfolding through history. Think of Abraham Lincoln, this unchurched Christian, and you see him grafted upon the vine of Christianity in our own times, and now he belongs to the ages. There only is one single body of Christ, in his splendor

revealing to us the march of the Creation Story through the ages. Together we march with Christ, together we rise. The Greek text does exactly say this; already in verse 10, Paul speaks as one who longs to be shaped into one coherent shape with his Lord's dying. And in our verse 21, he says explicitly that we enter upon one common shape, better still, become parts of the one unfolding shape which is the total body of Christ. We shall conform to this Body as the Body organizes us into itself, as one of its indispensable cells. Christ makes us indispensable. For this immeasurable gift of our true resurrection, we gladly conform to his sovereign and royal Body's commands and demands. Hence, Paul's text is of the greatest practical use for our own day. For in this at first sight obscure sentence to the Philippians he gives us the yardstick for the great embarrassment of every modern American. We all daily are asked to conform and we are asked to co-exist, as we are asked to incorporate. Now, neither co-existence nor conformism nor incorporation will be more than empty slogans, unless we co-exist with the saints, conform to the Spirit of Christ, and incorporate into His body. The rules of behavior during our natural stay are not found in nature but in the Beyond where there are no enemies nor cowardly fears. Nobody known where to draw the line, who has not taken out his first citizen papers with the risen Christ. Conform, co-exist, incorporate: good things. We all must co-exist, and we certainly cannot help conforming, but to whom? To the crazes of Main Street? To the tyrants of our day? Those secular tempters have stolen the very words "Conform", "co-exist", "incorporate", from our heritage. And solely inside this heritage do we find their lasting meaning and their efficient application explained to us. Read the corrected text of Philippians 3 and you will be equipped with the proper standards for co-existence and conformism. The secular vocabularies have to remain under the eminent domain of the Biblical tongue. A Christian believes in co-existence with all the saints through the ages as he has learned to love, and he believes in conforming to the Body of Christ as he learns to die to his own will.

I trust that by now we have re-gained the access to Paul's Trinity as the text says: "Our Lord will remake the Body of our earthly state by shaping us into our final shape inside his glorified Body."