

(May 25, 1986)

This morning, coming to meeting for worship through Union Square Park a line of graffiti caught my eye: "DO NOT DESPAIR: SUBVERT" it exhorted.

I looked around. All was peaceful. Hardly anyone was about on this cool, sunny Sunday morning in the middle of a three-day weekend. The amount of traffic was negligible. Looking up Park Avenue South, the silent office buildings ranked in the clear air provided a study in light and shade on geometric forms, all bright, solid and innocent. It was hardly a scene which brought despair and subversion to mind.

Yet we know that outward appearances can be seductive and deceptive. The graffiti writer had the more invisible dynamics of the political economy in mind, undoubtedly.

The despair and subversion about which religion teaches us is different than that of a Union Square revolutionary. The despair that Jesus saw was not the despair of the poor and the outcasts, whom he usually lauded and held up as examples, but the despair of the economically successful. He saw the sadness and futility of the chasing after riches, of accumulating and clinging and possessing. He saw the wisdom of insecurity. He drew our attention to the lilies of the field as a model. "The foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head," he said on another occasion. On still another occasion he counselled a rich young man to give away all he had in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus' subversion, too, although real, was different. He did not organize guerrilla warfare, nor did he encourage people clandestinely to subvert or sabotage the political economy. But he was subversive of official values. He understood the full meaning of the commandment, "Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above; . . . thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them." This commandment does not only enjoin us from idols which are crude images, such as a mental image of God as an old gentleman on a gilded throne. But we also must abandon the idols which are our cherished preconceptions of the truth, preconceptions which block the unreserved opening of the mind and the heart to the essential mystery of reality.

Even Jesus, regarded as the special and unique incarnation of God, the "express image" of God, becomes the source of life by the very act of being destroyed. To the disciples who tried to cling to his human form as the manifestation of divinity he explained, "Unless a grain of corn fall into the ground and die, it remains alone. But if it dies it brings forth much fruit." Again, in the same vein, he said, "It is expedient for you that I go away, for if I go not away the Paraclete (the Holy Spirit) cannot come unto you."

And so, if this bright sunny morning does not exactly summon up the images of saboteurs and revolutionaries which the Union Square graffiti writer seeks, neither does it allow us to be complacent and accepting of things as they are. It reminds us that there is a subversion, and anti-dote to despair, always available in our inner silence, in our release of images and preconceptions, in our opening up of ourselves fearlessly to the mystery of the divine nature of things, in our "letting go and letting be."