

# "...Jesus is calling..."

A SERMON  
for the first summer-'03 public  
worship in the Craigville Tabernacle

This sermon is long--in print form. If you like long sermons, you may pick up a copy on the entry table as you leave the Tabernacle (but I hope you won't leave immediately after the benediction: please stay for the Fellowship Time & then for the Circle Conversation, which never continues past noon).

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1 "If at home you spit on the floor, do so here [in the Tabernacle]: we want you to feel at home." This instruction is not for the likes of you: I've been a steady customer here for 23 years & have never seen anybody spit on the floor, though doubtless some have sometimes restrained themselves from this peculiarly effective form of free speech. But long ago here--this is this campmeeting tabernacle's 131st year--that no-spitting sign was somewhere at the entrance & was needed by some rough beasts who slouched in to get saved from sin & domesticated away from uncouth contributions to public proceedings. These rough beasts sat on the same benches alongside smooth sinners, the two groups encompassing the entire assemblage: there were no saints. Lots of sinners: the records shows that on at least one occasion, the sinners numbered some 3,000--most of them, of course, sitting on the grass outside the then-wall-less structure.

2 Beginning in 1872, campmeetings here in Craigville (until 1882 called "Camp Christian") were ten summer-days long with thirty preaching-times (i.e., morning-afternoon-evening daily). The gatherings were for the "religious, intellectual, and recreational needs of individuals and families," to use our historian Marion Vuilleumier's words (on p.54 of her CAPE COD'S CRAIGVILLE: The Vision Still Alive [1994]). She would approve of my adding something like "in addition to friendship, courtship, & both secular & sacred [i.e., church] business." In those early days, getting together was a major transportation-undertaking (risky boats, poor roads, muscle-power only--& from as far away as Bedford); & there was much to be accomplished in those ten days, the only time of the year most of them saw one another.

3 Let's back up a little & ask how that distinctive 19th-century American institution, the campmeeting (or camp-meeting or camp meeting, variously written) came to be. It was in that century's first year, in a long-cabin church out in the wilds of then-largely-wilderness Kentucky--the nearest town (pop. 2,000) being Lexington. Pastor Barton Stone had the urge to merge Christian folk (of many persuasions) for a briefly-extended summer meeting, the purposes being the strengthening of the saints (i.e., those who had responded to Jesus' call) & the conversion of the barbarians (i.e., children [we're all born barbarian], the ignorant, & the resistant, & the rebellious).

Well, word got out over the dirt roads & trails of Kentucky that Brother Barton Stone had said y'all come to my church for seven days starting August 7. It was to be the only show in town, & there was no town, & 20,000 came--ten times the population of the nearest town! That preacher had touched a huge longing-nerve in the lonely, sparse, scattered populace. You can imagine the band-wagon effect, which lasted throughout the century & into the early years of the next! (In 1933 & '34, I attended campmeetings in Ebenezer [exurban Buffalo], NY.)

(NOTE on cultural amnesia: Since we're born barbarian, each oncoming generation is in danger of barbarism. The novel RIDDLEY WALKER begins with people wondering what a vine-covered stone-pile was: it was Canterbury Cathedral. In a Biblestudy I led last evening was a former resident of Ebenezer, who--when Loree & I visited in her present home--told us that most of Ebenezer's present residents have "only the foggiest" as to what that giant old, now-deteriorated building was for. May it not soon be so with the Craigville Tabernacle!)

4 Why did I say that in the early days, there weren't any people in this tabernacle but sinners? Because that's the way Christianity sees everybody, & the building was erected--Craigville was founded--by Christians. Christianity teaches that we human beings are all wayward from God, "all have turned away from God." But now God's way of putting people right with himself has been revealed....It is through their faith in Jesus Christ....everyone has sinned and is far away from

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God's saving presence. But by the free gift of God's grace, all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free. God offered him, so that by his death he should become the means by which people's sins are forgiven through their faith in him....What, then, can we boast about. Nothing!" (Romans 3.12-27 TEV) By grace, God's grace, Jesus calls us, saves us, forgives us, draws us together, sends us "into all the world" to tell his story & do his works of mercy & justice. That is the centering story within the story of every campmeeting--& church. It is the centering & continuing story of the Craigville Tabernacle, which always was & now is the center of Craigville.

5 The Tabernacle Committee asked me to sound this evangelical note after our singing of a century-old gospel invitational song (words & music by Will L. Thompson, Ohio businessman born 1849) sung by congregations many millions of times right after an evangelistic sermon, to invite sinners uncommitted to Jesus to "come forward" as a public witness to their repentance & faith. It sees sinners as wanderers who (as was the Prodigal Son [Luke 15.11-32]) will get a big welcome when they return "home"--& thus the refrain after each stanza: "Come home, come home; you who are weary, come home; earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, O sinner, come home!" And here are the stanzas: (1) "Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me; see, on the portals he's waiting and watching, watching for you and for me. (2) Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading, pleading for you and for me? Why should we linger and heed not his mercies, mercies for you and for me? (3) Time is now fleeting, the moments are passing, passing from you and from me; shadows are gathering, death-beds are coming, coming for you and for me. (4) O for the wonderful love he has promised, promised for you and for me! Though we have sinned, he has mercy and pardon, pardon for you and for me." And what is this "home"? It is the Father's house for the communion of all with all through communion with the One whom we Christians call Father, Son, & Holy Spirit. It is the divine provision for the soul's & society's deepest desire. While it is the heaven to which forgiven sinners go, it is also--as Jesus teaches us in what we call the Lord's Prayer--heaven come to earth, making earth for all its creatures a home, a kingdom where God's will is done "as it is in heaven." In current managerial jargon, that is our Christian Faith's vision statement & mission statement combined.

6 Now, the metaphor of "home"--in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son & in the evangelistic Gospel song we've just sung--is also in the name of our gathering here this morning: "Homecoming," the first Sunday of this new summer in Craigville, which is for some of us home & for others home away from home. In the language of the New Testament, Greek, "home" is the root of the Greek/English word "ecumenical," used by ancient & modern Christians to bespeak all Christians everywhere. "Jesus is calling" always & everywhere, & those who respond with their hearts are brothers & sisters in Christ "whether their heads are flat, broad, or round" (in the words of Craigville eponymous ancestor, the noted scholar/saint **Austin Craig**; particular ideas in our heads [where doctrinal & denominational differences sprout] should be servants, not masters, of our heart's commitment). His broadminded (we would say "liberal") & warmhearted (we might say "evangelical") balance was characteristic of the Churches of the Christian Connection (as the movement called itself), which founded Craigville in 1871 & in 1808 started America's first religion-newspaper, to promote ecumenicity through a latitudinarian understanding of the New Testament, "our only creed." The founding president of the movement's theological seminary, Craig led his students into such mastery of its language that in later years they could carry on correspondence with him--in Greek (to keep the language of the NT alive in their minds & hearts, he said).

7 The Ten Commandments & the Lord's Prayer open with expressions of love for God, which was central in Dr. Craig's teaching/preaching/life. "Jesus is calling" us--through our repentance & faith in him through his cross & resurrection--to love, to love for God (who "so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" [Jn.3.16]) & for our fellow-creatures. Our Christian witness, he said, should "somehow make people think admiringly and adoringly of our Jesus," our Savior & Lord.