

WHEN CHRISTIANS BECOME "SUBVERSIVE"



THE STORY OF ANNE AND CARL BRADEN

A Sermon preached at The Protestant Episcopal
Church of the Holy Trinity in Brooklyn, New York
Sunday, February 6, 1955

by

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A Sermon Preached at The Protestant Episcopal Church of the Holy Trinity in Brooklyn, New York, on Sunday, February 6, 1955, by the Reverend William Howard Melish.

Since so many sermons deal with abstractions, I am going to ask your indulgence this morning in permitting me to speak about a specific situation that raises many questions of immediate concern to the Church. I want to tell you the story of Anne and Carl Braden.

As a child Anne Gambrell McCarty was brought up in a Christian home and given her first knowledge of the Christian Religion in the Sunday School of Grace Protestant Episcopal Church in Anniston, Alabama, where the Rector was the present liberal Bishop of New Mexico and Southwest Texas, the Rt. Rev. James M. Stoney, D.D. Bishop Stoney writes:

"Mrs. Braden, nee Anne Gambrell McCarty, was a member of a lovely church family in Anniston while I was rector of Grace Church there. Anne was a serious sort of a girl and took her church obligations and responsibilities very loyally. Our family and hers were perhaps a little closer to each other as the McCarty's lived just down the street from us and Anne's older brother, Lindsey, was a close friend of our younger son, Paul.

"Anne is a deeply Christian girl and has been from her youth up. Probably she was more or less deeply influenced by my constant teaching and preaching that unless we are willing to accept the idea of the brotherhood of man it is plain nonsense for us to boast the privileges of the fatherhood of God."

While her own family was relatively well-to-do and secure, Anniston, like other Southern towns with cotton mills, was hit by the depression. In these days of unemployment, a constant stream of beggars came to the McCarty home, and Anne's mother, as far as she could, fed them, though some days the number was so great that she had of necessity to turn them away. This left an indelible impression on the eight-year old little girl. In her own words,

"I kept thinking of what Christ had said about all those who saw their brothers hungry and did not feed them going to hell, and I was quite sure my mother was going to hell. I used to lie awake at night worrying about it with all of an eight-year old's literal ideas of heaven and hell."

The parishioners in Anniston were not ungenerous. They took Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets to the poor and held missions to share their religion with the less privileged but even a little girl could see that such charity was no an-

swer to the problem of poverty, as she later wrote,

"I was haunted by the contradictions between the facts of life as I saw them and the things that I had come to believe were true and good and right."

Especially was she made aware of the place of the Negro people in southern society. It troubled her as a child that they had to live under such unbearable physical conditions and, what was worse, that they were treated as a lower breed of humanity by her own friends and relatives.

"I saw these people, who were often good and kind and Christian—until, when the color line was involved, they, without a thought that what they were doing was wrong, treated other human beings like dogs—though often like pet dogs to whom they were very kind. I could not reconcile this with the Christian teaching of brotherhood, and I became convinced that it was the white people who were hurt the most because they were destroying themselves spiritually."

Anne went to college and her college years coincided with World War II. The little girl who had been so pre-occupied with the conflict between the ethic of the Christian Church and the hard facts of unemployment and race prejudice became a mature young woman pre-occupied with the conflict between the ethic of the Church and the mass killing that is part-and-parcel of the logic of modern war. As an adolescent she had dreamed of becoming a missionary. Now a college woman, though still drawn to the Church which remained the emotional background of all her thinking, she came increasingly to feel that the Church was doing little or nothing about the things that cried out for remedy. When she graduated, she had lost her sense of Christian life-commitment. She went into newspaper work. This was in 1945, the year of the war's end. For the next five years she lived her life apart from the Church. She did not repudiate the Church; it just ceased to figure in her primary loyalties.

This post-war period was a time of considerable trade union activity and the rise of the Progressive Party as a political movement on a nationwide scale. Anne began to find a new degree of self-orientation and commitment through participation in organizations and activities related to organized labor. It was at this time that she met an intelligent and active newspaper man and researcher in the labor field, Carl Braden, who wrote for the Louisville Times and a number of other papers and newspaper-services.

Braden had been brought up a Roman Catholic but had drawn apart from the Roman Church because of what he felt was its authoritarian and anti-intellectualist point-of-view.

An omnivorous reader, he had become convinced that a socialist order of society made greater sense than the present competitive anarchy. When Carl Braden and Anne McCarty were married, there developed a real meeting of minds as well as personalities. They found books of mutual enlightenment and among them such writings from a religious viewpoint as those of the Dean of Canterbury and other articulate contemporary Christians. For the first time they began to feel that there might be important influences within the Church of which they had both been ignorant. Anne writes,

"I consider the motivations in Carl's life and mine basically the same. I think, however, that his were not so consciously religious until he knew me and we had interchanged our thoughts. I think I showed him an entirely different kind of religion from what he had seen in the Catholic Church, and he found it was quite compatible with the things he had always believed."

It was at this point in their lives that they met the Reverend J. Albert Dalton, a young clergyman not yet forty who had come from Church Army work in Cincinnati to be the rector of St. Stephen's Protestant Episcopal Church in Louisville. An accident case brought Dalton and the Bradens together. A Negro was injured and taken to a hospital in Hardinsburg, Kentucky, where he was refused admission and, in consequence, died. A committee of citizens was formed to visit the State capitol and demand the passage of legislation requiring all Kentucky hospitals to admit accident victims without racial discrimination. In this successful undertaking a warm friendship developed between the Bradens and Dalton. A courageous man, Dalton felt that his convictions as a Christian required him to challenge the poverty, the segregation and the injustice all about him in a city such as Louisville. He convinced the Bradens that they had a duty to identify themselves with the Church in which she had been reared and to help it become the dynamic thing they wanted it to be. He introduced them to personalities within the Church concerned with vital social action and put in their hands Church magazines concerning which they had not known.

Their friendship with Dalton, coupled with their desire to have a family and give their children the benefits of a Church background, led to their joining St. Stephen's. Carl was received from the Roman Catholic Church and Anne was transferred from her home parish to become communicant members. Anne became active in the parish in the Woman's Auxiliary and in the diocese of Kentucky as a member of the Department of Christian Social Relations. A group of Negro Baptist ministers had formed what they called "The Militant Church Movement" designed to work against

segregation. The leading spirit was the Reverend J. C. Olden who died at Christmas in 1953. This group sought with limited success the aid of white ministers and lay people. Carl and Anne responded, he becoming the Recording Secretary and she an active participant in encouraging "brotherhood meetings" and campaigning for an end to segregation in public places, such as bus and train stations, and in the public schools. With Olden's death, "The Militant Church Movement" disintegrated.

In 1954, in the early spring, there came to the Bradens a Navy veteran named Andrew Wade IV. He had done well as an electrician, had married, had a two-year old daughter and another child on the way, and wanted to secure a house far enough out in the suburbs to provide fresh air and decent surroundings for his growing family. His attempts to buy a house proved futile not because he did not have the cash but because no realtor would sell a house of this character to a Negro. After many failures Wade asked his friends, Carl and Anne, to buy a house in a district called Shively and then transfer it to him. This the Bradens did, Wade putting up the money for the down-payment and the Bradens assuming responsibility for a mortgage.

On Tuesday, May 11, 1954, the Wades began to move in. An angry crowd gathered across the street but did not directly interfere. On Saturday, however, when the Wades went in to town for the day, the windows were broken by stones, at ten-thirty that night a cross was burned on the property, and in the early morning hours shots were fired into the house, narrowly missing a friend of the Wades who was spending the night with them on guard.

The local paper, The Shively Newsweek, began an inflammatory campaign and an organization calling itself the "American White Brotherhood" called for violence. Many Shively and Louisville citizens condemned this incitement and formed a Citizens' Committee. Leading ministers, including the Shively Roman Catholic priest and the Methodist pastor, pleaded for restraint and tolerance. A vigilance committee was set up to guard the home of the Wades and the Citizens' Committee asked for police protection. In spite of such requests, a few Sundays later an explosion took place under the Wade home. No one was injured, fortunately, but the property was substantially wrecked. There was a public outcry for the arrest of the dynamiter and a grand jury began an investigation.

To the horror of liberal and progressive Louisville citizens, an unused statute passed in 1920 by the Kentucky State Legislature at the time of the notorious Palmer Raids after World War I to deal with "criminal syndicalism and sedition" was suddenly unearthed. Seven individuals were indicted for alleged "sedition" in a conspiracy to stir up trouble between whites and Negroes in Louisville. Carl and Anne Braden were arrested as the ring leaders, along with a white truck driver named Vernon Bown who had stayed days as a guard in the Wade home, a 79-year old river captain, named Ford, who was Bown's roommate, a trade unionist, Lewis Lubka, and two women who had been active on the Citizens' Committee and one of whom, a social worker, Miss Louise Gilbert, is a member of the local Evangelical United Brethren Church. All were thrown into jail under high bail which most of them could not raise. Bown and Ford have been in jail since October awaiting trial.

While the accused were in jail, the police raided the Braden home, as well as the residences of the other defendants, and carted off a considerable quantity of books, pamphlets and correspondence. This material covered a wide range. It included some Marxist titles but also many other books and magazines, including material widely circulated in the Protestant Episcopal Church, such as the weekly magazine, The Witness, and pamphlets published by the Episcopal League For Social Action.

Carl Braden was the first of the defendants to be brought to trial in the late fall. The State of Kentucky avoided the issue of the bombing of the Wade home like the plague. Instead it concentrated public attention almost exclusively on the literature seized illegally in the Braden home. The State brought in ten so-called "expert witnesses", names familiar to the general public as professional witnesses in many trials involving Communism, such as Manning Johnson and Leonard Patterson, Martha Edmiston, Matt Cvetic, Maurice Malkin and Benjamin Gitlow. No one of these had ever met the Bradens. They were brought in to testify about Communism and to imply that the literature found in the Braden home was such as Communists might have in their possession, and that the activities in which the Bradens admittedly had engaged were the type of activities encouraged by Communists.

The State of Kentucky carefully ignored a fact that might seem both relevant and crucial that two days after the purchase of the Wade house, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that "restrictive covenants and gentlemen's agreements"

were non-enforceable and in violation of the Constitution of the United States! In brief, the Bradens had broken no written law, only the unwritten law of Kentucky! No proof was produced linking them with the dynamiting, but at the very end of the trial a surprise State's witness was introduced in the person of a Mrs. Alberta Ahearn who testified that she had acted as an informer for the F. B. I. and had joined the Communist Party, being inducted into it by Carl Braden, in whose home the local unit allegedly met. Edward F. Boyle, special agent in charge of the Louisville F. B. I. office, issued a prepared statement to the press confirming Mrs. Ahearn's testimony about her informing: "Alberta Ahearn worked in a confidential capacity as an informant for the F. B. I. since January, 1951." This is astounding. The Louisville Courier-Journal carried a story dated May 6, 1951, describing the arrest and brief imprisonment of the same Mrs. Alberta Ahearn and Mrs. Anne Braden among forty-two demonstrators in Jackson, Mississippi, in connection with a public protest in the case of a Negro, Willie McGee; and another story in October of 1952 indicated that Mrs. Ahearn was at that time a member of the Jefferson County Committee of the Progressive Party and spoke publicly in behalf of its program over Radio Station WLOU. Ostensibly a militant anti-segregation leader soliciting the support of Louisville citizens, the F. B. I. now claims Mrs. Ahearn was one of its operatives since 1951! Obviously someone was engaged in duplicity or else misrepresenting the truth. Subsequent to the trial, the Louisville Defender brought out that the lady was convicted of disorderly conduct on a morals charge in 1952. This was the sole witness concerning the material matters of fact.

On the witness stand Carl Braden had testified that he was an avowed socialist in his views but he had denied under oath that he was at any time a member of the Communist Party. The Jury, however, concluded that the Bradens were Communists and had fomented the Shively disturbance in the interests of the "Communist conspiracy." Carl Braden, standing mute and stunned before the court, found himself sentenced for "criminal syndicalism and sedition" to fifteen years in the penitentiary and a \$5,000 fine. The description of the trial can be gathered from Anne Braden's own words:

"I really think that no matter what testimony had been offered, the outcome would have been the same. The hysteria created by the prosecution was so great that hardly any appeal to reason and justice would have broken through it. I was reminded in a very literal way of all I have ever heard of the original Salem witch-hunts. All of the repressed hatred in the community, all of the unreasoning fear of Communism and all the hysteria seemed bundled up in a little ball and hurled at Carl. He became a symbol instead of a human being."

The U.S. Constitution says that no citizen shall be subjected to excessive bail. The court proceeded to set \$40,000 as the bail for Carl Braden pending his appeal—an amount no one of us in this congregation could conceivably raise. So he is in the Jefferson County Jail today, which he describes in these words:

"I sit in a 6-by-8 foot jail cell. . . My writing tablet is placed on top of a small box which is propped on my knees. I sit on an iron cot with my back against the steel wall, as there are no chairs in my cell. In fact, there are no other fixtures except a commode, a sink and a 2-by-2 foot ledge extending out from the opposite wall. This ledge is too high for anything, except to stand and eat off of it. They say conditions are better at La Grange Prison. I hope so."

How a man acts when he is punished for something that he did not do, or did do but for quite ethical and justifiable reasons, is an indication of the man's integrity of character and motivation. From prison Carl Braden writes the editor of The National Guardian:

"Many people have asked why Anne and I bought the house and then transferred it to Wade. As I stated at my trial, we felt we had a moral duty to do what we did. We could not be true to ourselves and to our beliefs if we did not respond to the call to help break down segregation in the vital area of housing.

"We felt that a blow against Jim Crow in housing would also be a blow against segregation in the schools. We saw that there would never really be integration in the schools without integration in housing.

"The reactionaries harped on the theme that my wife Anne and I had set back race relations here by many years when we helped Andrew Wade IV to move into a previously all-white neighborhood.

"They piously declare that race relations had been improved in recent years by the admission of Negroes to the Amphitheatre, the golf course, hospitals, public libraries and bus depots. They neglected to say that these gains were made as a result of a constant militant struggle by the progressive forces in Louisville and Kentucky.

"For example, the father of Andrew Wade IV was the moving force in a suit that opened the golf course. My wife Anne played a big part in the movement to open hospital facilities to Negroes. . . I give you this background to explain the special fury of the white supremacists when the Bradens and the Wades acted together to challenge Jimcrow housing.

"My wife and I are proud of the fact that we helped rip the mask off the sorry state of race relations in this community. We are glad that we helped expose the widespread lack of concern for those forced to live in the ghetto. We feel that the resulting improvements will more than make up for any personal difficulties we may have as a result of our action.

"Although I sit in a 6-by-8 foot jail cell facing fifteen years in prison, I have not changed my opinion. In fact, I am strengthened in the belief that our country is on the verge of great changes that will benefit the people."

On February 28, 1955, Anne Braden will go on trial. It will be curious to see if the same horrid pattern is to be repeated with all its nicety of premeditated and pre-arranged detail.

In a little while in this church this morning we shall kneel together at the Lord's Table for the Holy Communion, Negroes and whites—something that does not happen quite so easily or frequently in Louisville or in many another part of our country. Perhaps as we kneel this morning we Christians will do well if we think of this sister-communicant who is facing trial, and her two children, Jimmy, aged 3 1/2, and Anita, aged 2. In a letter a few days ago, she writes:

"The communion service is a great source of strength to me, and now with all that has happened I am profoundly glad that I had previously found my way back to the church. Without the strength I have found there, I am not sure I could have come through the ordeal since last May as well as I have."

In the light of a personal tragedy of these social dimensions, we can see a good many things etched with clarity. It is not enough for the National Council of Churches to issue a pronouncement, as it did yesterday for Race Relations Sunday, calling for the bettering of race relations and commending desegregation in the public schools unless the National Council and its constituent bodies are prepared to face what happens to people who try to carry these commended Christian principles into concrete practice! Will the National Council and its constituent bodies say a good word for such militant Christians as the Bradens?

The Protestant Episcopal Church has a stake in this. Here are two of its communicant members, whose lives at least to some degree have been conditioned by the teachings of the Prayer Book and whose rediscovery of a relevant Christianity has been the work of men in the episcopacy and ministry whom the whole Church knows and recognizes as loyal exemplars of the Christian faith and life. What will the Protestant Episcopal Church do for these two individuals in their time of ordeal? Will it stop and bind up their wounds and take them to a place of safety, or will it pass by on the other side?

Criminal syndicalism, sedition and subversion are ugly words. In this case they have been thrown around deliberately and wholesale in their ugliest meaning. Yet, as one examines them, one finds little substance that stands up. Is the desire for simple racial justice seditious and subversive? When Anne Braden writes,

"When Wade came to us and asked us to help him get a house, we were the people who, because of the accident of having been born with white skin, could help him. To my mind, if we had refused, we would have been guilty as those of whom Christ said, 'I was hungered and ye gave me no meat... naked, and ye clothed me not...'"

"I suppose the fact that I think of that passage goes back to my childhood preoccupation with it..."

I want to say to Anne Braden: Would that more Christians in their childhood had such a preoccupation with the explicit injunctions of the Master that in their adulthood they might experience this same traumatic compulsion born of their childhood memories as to make them uncomfortable and ill-at-ease before injustice and unable to rest until they, too, do what you did, Anne—respond to a specific and concrete human appeal that was made to you!

Today, as a Wade came in his difficulties to an Anne Braden and her husband, an Anne Braden in her troubles turns to us. In her childhood she had the insight that the white people of Anniston, Alabama, were the ones who were being hurt by their own actions because they were destroying themselves spiritually. You and I can see that an America that remains indifferent to this sort of case in its very heart, involving individuals nourished at least in part by the creed and ethic of its Churches, is the one that is hurting itself because it is destroying itself spiritually.

Somehow I am less afraid for a Carl or an Anne Braden, or any of the other Louisville defendants, than I am afraid for ourselves, lest we stand revealed in this mechanized and atomized age as having become what the Bible calls men with hearts harder than flint, who have become ethically and spiritually de-humanized. Said Jesus, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

1. Write the Honorable Lawrence Weatherby, Governor of Kentucky, Frankfort, Kentucky.
2. Write to the Rt. Rev. Charles G. Marmion, D. D., Bishop of Kentucky, 421 South 2nd Street, Louisville 2, Kentucky, asking that the Bradens' Church stand by them.
3. Send a contribution to help in publicizing the Braden Case and meeting legal expenses by using the enclosed envelope and making out checks to Arthur H. Fawcett, Treasurer, Episcopal League For Social Action, 157 Montague Street, Brooklyn, New York. All amounts contributed over and above the cost of printing and postage will be transmitted to the Bradens in Louisville.

The Episcopal League For Social Action is a national unofficial organization made up of bishops, clergy and laymen of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, who are concerned with the application of Christian principles to the contemporary social order in such areas as international peace, civil liberties and social change.