Sunday, February 18, 1973
PRACTICING LOVE IN A TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY
Luke 10:25-37

Most of us are well aware that today we live more and more in a highly technological and complex society. What this means is that a variety of increasingly complicated machines are making more and more of an impact on our day to day living.

For example, the first thing which a machine requires is someone with the necessary technical knowledge to operate it. And in addition, machines require that people work together. This may involve the cooperation of several persons in running a single machine. On a larger scale such as in assembly line production, it involves the integration of different stages of work into a smooth flow.

Everything in our kind of world requires organization and planning, and as our world becomes more technological, more and more complex forms 0£ organization are needed. More and more people work together in companies and of-fices and factories. The science of managing and planning is a quite recent development in all of this.

Out of all of this another fact emerges. Because of the increasingly and highly complex organizations and groups, the individual person in his unique individuality begins to disappear from the realm of work. The work of the machine or organization does not represent something done by one individual for another on the basis of a personal interrelationship which exists between them.

We no longer go to a shoe shop and have one shoemaker make our shoes from scratch; nor do we go to the buggy maker — or blacksmith, or rarely even to a corner grocery store in which the owner is also the person who waits on us and collects our money. Our shoes are made in a large factory and often in another country, as are most of the rest of our clothes and they are made by people whom we do not know or see, each doing a specialized operation with a machine.

Then there are the market experts, the importers, the sales-men, the transportation network, the advertisers and a whole host of others who have a part in providing us with that pair of shoes or whatever else we need. Each of these functions have to be coordinated and planned so that the whole system works together.

When we have a complete medical checkup, we more and more face a battery of tests performed by complicated machines with a number of trained technicians.

Even going to the supermarket requires a technical mastery of trade names, prices, and specialized uses and an assessment of competing chain stores and competing product companies. To purchase a box of breakfast cereal, we don’t consult with the store owner about which is best, nor do we reach up casually for just any box on the shelf. One must have enough technical knowledge to choose between the paralyzing variety of products. A person must know the difference between puffed rice full of air, and rice crispies full of sound; between packages which offer coupons for toys on the outside and those which contain actual toys inside; between small sized boxes that are soon devoured and the large sized boxes which will not ·fit ·between the cupboard shelves. Shopping today in many stores does not have much to do with one person talking to and purchasing from another person.

The point is that the kind of technological society in which we live makes our work and much of the rest of our living an organizational matter. What we do and what is done to us is usually done by a kind of collective, by a corporation or group.

Thus because of the impact of technology, we often hear a lot today about the impersonal nature of life. Indeed, today the collective, technical, highly organized, and impersonal activity which is required by the machine and its technology has now penetrated every corner of our public and even private lives.

Along with all of our technology, we human beings have also produced some horrendous incompetence. We have developed bureaucracy to the point where achievement of the simple task may require great amounts of time and effort. We have bult an elaborate postal system, but today it may take longer to deliver a letter than it did in the days of the pony express. We ride in jet airliners in which we swiftly span the ocean only to spend hours circling the airport before landing and discovering that our baggage has flown to a destination of its own. We wait in line for a taxi while taxis are waiting in line for customers. We know the problems.

As a result, many people have sometimes felt a kind of alienation from all of our technological advances. And particularly we wonder how we can practice the love of God and neighbor in this kind of increasingly impersonal complicated world.

There is often nothing very personal about a traffic jam, or an office conference or a laboratory experiment or a hurried visit to the crowded supermarket, or to the hospital emergency room. In such situations a person maybe friendly or polite, but he is completely caught up in the vast movement of impersonal structures. However hard he may try the technical aspects of it all will demand his attention and will often leave him little opportunity to grasp the concrete personal individuality of the people around him.

However conscientious a person may be, he will still often feel the alien, thing-like impact of voices over the telephone or faces at a committee meeting. With often few exceptions, the customer and clients and students will remain faceless names.

Thus, it is that many thoughtful Christians in our time have wondered how we can practice the commandment of Jesus to love our neighbor in these and other kinds of modern situations.

Why is this? Part of the problem is that we Christians in the last several centuries have thought of Christian love only in intimate personal terms. We have usually defined Christian love of neighbor as a relationship of personal intimacy between several people. We have seen it as being sensitive to each other and for better or worse of affirming each other's value' as an individual person. Certainly, Christian love, love of neighbor as Christ defined it, does have this important aspect to it.

But there's much more to an adequate understanding of Christian love than this, and because we have not had a broad enough definition of love, we are now having some difficulty with our increasingly technological society which is by nature more impersonal than the kind of small-town culture most of us lived in not so long ago.

In other words, because we have often limited our understanding of Christian love being primarily intimate and personal, we have sometimes tended to think of technology, mass production, and urban life as being anti-Christian. However, this need not be the case.

What then is the answer to our situation?

1. First of all, it does not have to be true that technology and urban life always dehumanize persons. Nor is it true that such things need violate and crush our human sensitivity. In fact, the contrary can be the case. Individuals often can have their deepest and richest human experiences, not only in relationships of private and personal intimacy, but also when we share in some larger corporate enterprise or purpose.

Far from depriving us of our humanity, such circumstances can give a unique elevation to our lives. Many times, we are needed because we have some kind of specialized skill. Our labor may be part of a larger creative force, the company or department or profession. which reaches beyond our own narrow sphere of life. Everything we do can have an expanded significance because it is joined with the efforts of others.

This is not to say that people can live without some relationships of personal intimacy and love and trust. We all need much of that and will always need it. But it is to say that a man or woman can also be richly and deeply human in his so-called impersonal community as well.

In fact, the Christian concept of love rightly understood underscores this fact. Again, you see, too often in the immediate past we have only emphasized the personal inti-mate side of Christian love. But there is more to love than that. Love and justice cannot be separated.

2. And this is the second answer to our situation in our technological complex society. We can practice love in our situation, but we need to see the practice of love as more than just being intimate or personal. In fact, the New Testament concept and practice of Christian love, of love of neighbor is much more than just being personal and intimate.

Let’s look more closely at it as it is described in the Bible.

To begin with, the New Testament repeatedly describes love of neighbor as a readiness to serve others in their particular situation; a readiness to help them with their particular problem; to do good for them in the face of their specific need. And of course, the word “neighbor” means anyone anywhere who is in some kind of need.

To put it another way, Christian love involves a real effort to do what is best for the other; to use the most satis-factory resources and to do so in the most effective way. There is nothing that only personal resources should be used or only resources that might occasion a personal encounter of some sort. That may be the least what the person needs at the time.

This means secondly, that Christian love is the service of self to neighbor. And by this we mean that it is more than a matter of simply providing useful commodities personally. Our service of self includes our time, our creativity, our technical skill.

For example, there is as much Christian love being practiced if a person uses his skills to work at providing jobs for the unemployed as there is in bringing baskets of food to a family which is hungry because the father is unemployed. Now the fact is that working to provide jobs may not bring me into some kind of direct or intimate personal relationship with the father who is out of work, but it is still a practice of Christian love.

Thirdly, and perhaps most important, Christian love is service to neighbor out of obedience to God. It is not the neighbor, and not the neighbor's need which primarily authorizes our love and claims our service. Christian love is not a form of sympathy. God alone commands and claims us human beings. And what God authorizes and claims from us is that we actively serve the needs of others in order to be a mirror of God's own service to people. So, I don't bring a basket of food to the poor simply because of the good feeling that I may gain from it. If I do it as a Christian, I do it as a service to God.

Thus, God's command through Christ and as Christ is not for us to act toward another for the sake of intimacy and personal encounter, but for the sake of reflecting God's love to people's needs.

In the story of the good Samaritan which we read as our scripture lesson this morning, there is no hint of personal encounter. There is simply the emphasis on the Samaritan's astonishing liberality. The emphasis is on his readiness L to act in this way without waiting.

In fact, as you may know in that time the Samaritans and Jews had no personal relationships with each other. They avoided each other. That is part of what makes the story so significant. The Samaritan saw a Jew in need, and he served that need to the best of his ability. That is the practice of Christian love. In fact, the story says that he took the man to the next town, saw that he was adequately cared for and then left some money for his continued care and the Samaritan continued on his way.

He helped the man in the ditch because it was the right and responsible thing to do. In our time we might stop to help a motorist who had an accident or someone else in need. we are also practicing Christian love in the best sense of the word when we work for safer highways, better driver education, safer cars, and hospitals to which we can take the injured. All of this may not be as direct. or intimate or personal and we may never come into direct contact with the persons we have helped, but it is still Christian love in the full sense of the word.

In a similar fashion we practice Christian love of neighbor when we are concerned and work toward having the best police force possible, the best health education, good courts of law and the most just government. The hospital worker whose job it is to antiseptically clean the rooms to prevent the spread of infection may be practicing Christian love as much as the surgeon who comes into direct contact with the patients.

All of this is to say that the goal of our Christian love is not to bind some person to us in intimacy or to get someone to feel grateful toward us, but the goal is the service to the other in respect to his or her particular needs. For love to be love it need not always be identified with personal intimacy.

Because this is true, this means that the world of impersonal technology can be a perfectly legitimate form of Christian love and service. Laboratories that analyze genetic structures, corporations that produce useful products, persons who work in almost every kind of job — all of these can be suitable forms of Christian love and service. The agricultural researcher who discovers or contributes to the discovery of some new way of raising vital food on a large scale in such a country as India, may do more through and with his technology to alleviate starvation than thousands of persons bringing baskets of food personally. His creative work in research is as much a work of Christian, love as the one who personally carries the basket of food.

Practicing love in our kind of world then requires the disciplined focus one ones' time and creativity. It also many times requires that one work in and through systems and organizations.

Thus, you see in the past few centuries when we have only emphasized the personal intimate side of love, we have had the effect of making Christianity seem irrelevant for precisely those areas of life where people are often the most creative — in all kinds of technological and commercial work — where persons often live most deeply and above all where their service to one another is most effectively affirmed.

We cannot expect to deal with all people on an intimate personal level.•. In our world today, we often confront persons in the world of their corporate and professional responsibilities, or we contribute to the world's well-being by doing our particular job well. But that does not mean that we are being any less Christian or that we are not practicing the love of neighbor that Jesus talked about.

Love and service are not limited to intimate giving but may also be executed in the life of the larger group. Working for a large corporation, or for any kind of institu-tion, or having a small role in a large enterprise which serves a vast body of people can be as much an operation of Christian love and service as the giving of a cup of water to a thirsty individual.

This is the fact we need to keep in mind as we go to the school, the office, or the factory, or wherever we carry out our daily work. Wherever we go can be where our daily life takes on the form of Jesus Christ.