Sunday, July 8, 1973
WATERGATE: ALSO A RELIGIOUS PROBLEM!
Luke 12:1-3

“In the meantime, when so many thousands of the multitude had gathered together that they trod upon one another, he began to say to his disciples first, ‘Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed or hidden that will not be known. Whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.'”

The God we worship seeks truth and openness in all of our dealings, and the truth will come out in one way or another. Yet the powerholders in Jesus’time did not heed this warning and those in our time have not done so either.

In fact, throughout history, establishments both religious and political have generally assumed that what they have “covered up” will never be uncovered, that deeds done in the dark and arrangements worked out in private rooms will never become public knowledge. Yet again and again, Jesus’warning has been fulfilled, and perhaps never more shatteringly than in America today.

Step by step the truth is slowly emerging from the darkness in the Watergate affair as one denial and assurance after another proves false. “The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.”

Dishonesty, lying, planning cover-ups, attempting to rig elections, and all else that “Watergate” has come to stand for is a religious problem as well as a political one. Whenever anyone in power, misuses that power, it’s a religious problem. An old saying goes — “Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad with power.”

There’s a story in the Old Testament with some striking similarities to what’s been happening recently in our country — a story about another government. It’s the story of King David and his affair with Bathsheba. Misguided motives, abuse of power and an attempted cover-up were all present.

King David first used the power and influence of his office to take Bathsheba as his lover. Who dared refuse the re-quest of the king? Bathsheba became pregnant. First, David tried to cover up his sin by having Bathsheba’s husband sent home from the Army on a furlough to be with her so it would appear that it was the husband’s child. But this strategy backfired when the husband refused to stay with his wife. Pursuing the cover-up, David had his Army Commander place the husband in the front line of battle unprotected so that he would be sure to be killed and then no one would know. And the husband was killed as planned.

There were no crusading newspaper reporters in that time or. Federal judges or grand juries or senate investigating committees. But in David’s court there.as a religious man named Nathan who was a kind of Chaplain to the king and a conscience for the nation.

Nathan heard of David’s crime and attempted cover-up, and he confronted the king by telling him a story about a rich man who had a hundred sheep, and a poor man who had only one. A traveler came to the rich man and according to Jewish law, he had to be given food and lodging. Instead of slaughtering one of his own sheep, the rich man killed and cooked the poor

man's sheep. David was angered by the story and pronounced summary judgment on the rich man. "Tell me who he ·is, s.id the King, and I will see that he is punished." Whereupon Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

There are some parallels to the Watergate affair which is what makes it a religious problem. King David abused his power and so in all that Watergate has come to stand for, did the White House. In both cases the persons involved possessed a misguided form of morality.

It's a misuse of power and abhorrent to God to believe that any kind of tactics are justified in gaining a desired end. David thought that since he was King, he could do what he wanted, that he was above the law. In the Water- gate situation, the assumption seems to have been that the success of the President was equivalent to the prosperity and even the security of the country and if this required raising illegal campaign funds or dishing out half-truths, ambiguities, lying or misleading slogans, or using other illegal means, well it was all toward a good cause. Even now what troubles many of the men close to the President is not that they were wrong, but that they were caught!

Like King David, if your plan is discovered, a cover-up operation is begun. But again, the words of Jesus come back to us, "Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed or hidden that will not be known."

Watergate is also a religious problem, not only because of the abuse of power, but because in the whole affair and the explanations which are now being made, we see a confusing of personal piety with corporate sin. In the present situation we see people holding up personal piety while ignoring systemic evil. This was a problem Jesus dealt with continually in his time and which the prophets in the Old Testament dealt with also. Over and over again Jesus pointed out how many people were pious in their personal lives but were unjust otherwise.

In our time too, we hear a lot about "law and order," but too often this is defined only in terms of personal behavior — a mugger snatching a purse, or a person committing adultery. As Christians we are to be concerned about personal behavior, but we are not to separate private religious or ethical behavior from corporate acts.

Remember some years ago when a man named Billy Sol Estes was convicted of massive fraud. But he was such a good man, people said, he didn't smoke or drink and wouldn't even allow young persons of the opposite sex to swim at the same time in his private swimming pool.

In a similar way some people have sought to minimize the significance of Watergate by calling it only a caper, or by voicing questions which imply thinking of morality only in private terms. "Was anyone killed? Was anyone robbed? Was anyone physically hurt?" On a private level, no. Former Attorney General John Mitchell put it succinctly: "I've never stolen any money. The only thing I did was to try to get the President re-elected. I never did anything mentally or morally wrong."

So, Watergate illustrates the religious problem as well as being one. It shows that many of us do not take the fact of corporate sin and corruption seriously enough, or simply shrug it off and become cynical and refuse to deal with it at all. By corporate sin, we mean the sin of a group of people, rather than the sin of one individual.

Read the letters to the editors in the newspapers and magazines. and the problem is further illustrated. One person wrote, for example, “What is all the fuss about? So, they stole the other team’s signals. This is as American as the Avon lady. It’s like a bunch of cars all going over the limit, only the last one gets caught, though they are all guilty.” Another person wrote, “It was just politics and I think it was a darn shame they got caught. If we got rid of all the shady people in Washington, who’d be left to run the government?” Still another said, “The only sin is getting caught!” That’s not the Christian definition of sin.

Watergate is also a religious problem because of another kind of “fuzzy” ethical reasoning that has emerged in the midst of it. This “fuzzy” thinking was shown most pointedly in the testimony of Jeb Stuart Magruder. In part of his testimony, Mr. Magruder tried to excuse his actions and the actions of others on the grounds that public officials had become somewhat inured to illegal activity after years of contending with various kinds of protesters who violated the law deliberately.

The Senate panel unfortunately led this pious explanation slide by, yet from a Christian point of view and from the point of view of our system of government, this absurd and dishonest linkage needs to be challenged.

Most of the anti-war protesters and prior to that those who challenged the segregation laws were acting publicly, in the open and symbolically testing the law and protesting what they considered to be the illegality of the Vietnam War. There is a great deal of difference between the public and symbolic breaking of a law by private citizens to call at-tention to the absence of justice, and the actions of an arm of government that are clandestine, illegal, and deceptive.

When governments engage in illegal behavior secretly, they directly undermine the basic rules of society they are pledged to uphold and by so doing wreck society’s fragile ethical fabric. Even the worst activities of private citizens rarely have such wide repercussions as when the awesome power of government itself engages in illegal activities and does so secretly.

To put it another way, there is a sharp distinction that needs to be made between a public, symbolic act to challenge a law and the secret breaking of a law by government itself to perpetuate someone in office. Jesus was involved in civil disobedience when, for example, he pulled an ear of corn on the Sabbath. He knew that the religious law of the day forbade such an action, but he disobeyed that law in full view of the public in order to make his point that man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man.

History, both religious and civil has long upheld those who openly and peacefully violate a law in obedience to their conscience because they believe their moral witness will help society change an unjust law or an unjust policy. Such people of conscience are willing to go to jail for violating the law, even though they think the law is unjust.

Certainly, civil disobedience always casts up some difficult moral and legal questions, but it offers no pretext or justification for government officials to· violate the law in secrecy and then cover their misdeeds with perjury. Such actions are not acts of individual conscience; they are expressions of the gangster mentality that typifies every authoritarian political movement.

Watergate is also a religious problem because it illustrates how in the past years, we have come to almost worship the office of the President. We’re certainly to respect that office, but not elevate to a position of worship.

Because God is our highest authority, we need not be afraid to challenge the authority of our highest political office. Yet the closer the Watergate revelations come to the inner circle of the White House, the greater the tendency on the part of some to want to separate the President from the affair, as if any person who holds that office is incorrupt-ible. As Melvin Laird put it, “If the president is involved, I don’t want to know about it!”

Our Christian Faith cannot agree with this view. Under our system of government, which is built largely on Christian presuppositions, all persons are equal in submission to the law. Furthermore, our system of government is based on the fact that any person or branch of government is corruptible. Therefore, the framers of the Constitution wisely provided for a system of checks and balances which divides authority because they knew that unexamined power corrupts even the best of persons or groups. If our system of govern-ment rested solely on the incorruptibility of public officials, it never would have survived.

That’s why a lively, open, honest competition between the two major political parties is at the heart of the American political experience. It’s also again what makes the whole Watergate affair a religious problem as well as a political one. To attempt to rig or undermine the healthy competition between opposing parties in an election year by trying to L frame the Chairman of the other party or by tapping telephones or stealing the mail or by sabotaging the campaign activities of opposition candidates and collecting information to black-mail them — to try to rig the outcome of an American election in this fashion is to subvert self-government. It is as subversive as the actions of any Communist agent or Ku Klux Klan lynch mob.

The Watergate affair is a profoundly sinister event because in so many of its aspects it reflects an authoritarian turn of mind and a ready willingness on the part of those at the highest levels of government to subvert democratic values and practices.

In the coming weeks and months, more disagreeable truths will undoubtedly be revealed. We may discover that the President’s decision directly encouraged the idea that the government is above the law.

In the midst of all of this, we in the Christian community will need to encourage the process of justice and work at fostering a new respect for the law. Jesus’words can give us courage to trust the truth no matter how unpalatable it may be. Alibis for the President or anyone else will never restore our national self-respect. Only the pursuit of truth and justice can do that. The majesty of the law far surpasses in significance the reputation of an individual and we have no such thing as “royalty or nobility that exempts'” anyone from the law.

Unfortunately, many of our popular myths have led us to believe just the opposite. Cowboy movies, detective stories and comic books picture their heroes as innocents who by definition are above the law. When they shoot down the “bad guys” without trial or beat them up, the audience applauds.

So, we need a modest sense of moral zeal — a zeal that is attached to the law rather than to some private version of the right, that trusts in due process, rather than in dirty tactics; a zeal that is grounded in transcendent righteousness, and that is not afraid of the truth no matter what it is.

That is the word of hope in this mess. The biblical understanding of judgment is not punishment alone, but also redemption. We have been shown again that a free press is L not to be feared — far from it. We all need our critics to help keep us honest.

There is also cause for hope in that our political system is demonstrating a capacity to identify and correct its own evil.

God grant that all of us will continue to have the courage to seek out the truth and not be afraid of it. Amen.