Sunday March 10, 1974

"GOD'S AIM" Psalm 139:1-12, Luke ~~10:1-10~~ 9:23-25
(No. 2 in a series on the Statement of Faith)

"He seeks in Holy Love to save all people from aimlessness and sin."

Do you ever wonder if your life is counting for anything? Do you sometimes feel as if you are on a treadmill, not really getting anywhere? Sometimes we hear people say, or we say it ourselves, "Back to the old grind," or "I just don't seem to be getting anywhere in life," or "It seems like I'm going around in circles."

We all know the meaning of "aimlessness" in our own lives and in the lives of others. There are periods when our lives seem to lack direction, when we have no purpose. The symptoms show up in several ways.

Not too long ago, the National Observor newspaper carried several articles in a series dealing with some of the problems which persons face in our society. One of the features was on "boredom," and a second one dealt with the subject of "loneliness." The newspaper pointed out that both of these problems were pervasive throughout life in America today.

Both are symptoms of "aimlessness." Loneliness, for example is an unhappy compound of having lost one's points of reference, of suffering the fate of individual and collective discontinuity. Aimlessness manifests itself in other ways too. There are persons who cannot find satisfactory jobs or pursuits; people who cannot maintain personal attachments; and individuals who are unable to discern a connection between their pasts and their futures. Hence their present stage of living becomes meaningless; people then appear distressed, bored or withdrawn, and they feel very lonely.

Part of the problem is that in our changing world, some people have lost meaning in their jobs and daily routines. Years ago, most people had to work just to barely survive and not many had a very wide choice of vocation. If your father was a shoe-maker, the son usually became a shoemaker. But now with a wide choice of vocation and in a more complex society, more and more people wonder if they are doing something significant.

It is from these kinds of aimlessness and more that our Statement of Faith assures us that God seeks to save us.

We'll return to this in a moment, but first let's see how this sentence from the Statement of Faith is related to what we began with last week.

Last Sunday we noted that God, the Eternal Spirit, creates all things and is still creating. God creates us in his own image and gives us freedom, will, mind, spirit, and sets before us the ways of life and death.

We are in a world where choices, decisions need to be made all the time. Most of these choices are not blind ones. We know what is right and what is wrong. Yet often we try to shirk our responsibility and try to fool ourselves and others by making believe that we did not know, or that we couldn't help the choice we made. "The devil made me do it."

At the same time, even though God does not force our choices, because we have freedom of decision, God wants the best for us. God seeks to save us, and really never gives up on us. And this leads us directly to the sentence from the statement of faith we are considering this morning -- "God's aim," God's desire for us--"He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin."

First notice the verb, "God <u>seeks!</u>" Let's approach the meaning of this by way of contrast. In our time and I guess always in religious discussions and in churches and sermons, we hear a lot of talk and get a lot of advice to the effect that we ought to be seeking God; that we ought to be trying harder to follow the commandments of Jesus; that we ought to be living better lives; that we ought to be more like Jesus. Thus we come to think of religion primarily in terms of demands made on us, in terms of a burden. To some it becomes "bad news," instead of good news. Religion becomes a struggle. Instead of the faith being something which enriches, gives power, beautifies and strengthens, it becomes something which is primarily a burden to be carried. We are all the time being told to seek God and we are afraid.

Donald Baillie reports that once an American evangelist described the difference between Methodists and Presbyterians by saying -- "A Methodist knows he's got religion, but he's

afraid he may lose it. A Presbyterian knows he can't lose it, but he's afraid he hasn't got it." Many of us are probably not sure either way. Actually the saying is much more than witty, for it sums up a whole historic theological controversy. But in both cases the word "afraid" comes in.

The point is, even today, sometimes we put all our emphasis on our own effort--seek God, do this or that. And it can become a weary business to have a religion which is only our own effort and struggle with the constant strain of trying to get hold of something, even though some of this kind of emphasis is valid because we do need to be reminded of our responsibility.

But the other emphasis is also needed and it is precisely that contrasting emphasis that the sentence we are considering today points to --"God seeks us!" God is always beforehand with his people. He made us before we ever thought of him. God seeks us before we ever think of seeking him. God takes the initiative!

Now this is good news! God seeks those who are not necessarily seeking Him. He goes after us in the way that Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin--he seeks and searches for us. This is what is distinctive about Christianity in relation to all other religions. We proclaim that God seeks to save all people from aimlessness and sin. He seeks in holy love.

See the meaning of this for us in our everyday living. When doubts come to us; when our convictions fade, when we are tired, we can call to mind this sentence--that God is always present and seeking us even though he seems far away. And God does not limit himslef or his power, or his presence or his comfort to a few choice people, a kind of spiritual elite. God is seeking all people. At all times, in cloud and sunshine, we are surrounded by a love and grace which keeps seeking for openings into our lives. God is not far from any one of us and indeed has been near us all our days.

Thus life is not so much a record of human being's search for God as of God's search for us. From the very beginning, God has made us for himself. He is a living--ever-present inescapable reality.

This is certainly a part of the theme of the Bible all the way through--God cannot be escaped. As the Psalmist put it

in our Old Testament lesson this morning: "O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me! Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up. . . .Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If my make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!"

Wherever we go, whether we know it or not, whether we admit it or not--God is there, seeking us out, seeking in Holy love to save us from aimlessness and sin.

But what do the words, "holy love," mean in this context? Often the word "holy" has meant, separate, completely different, consecrated, set apart from the common and ordinary. The word is used in connection with God, God is holy. In this sense the word also means complete, whole, eternal.

Now apply this to the kind of love in which God seeks us. God's love is extra-ordinary. He does not attempt to force us to come to him; he never violates our freedom. God seeks us with a perfect love--a love unique when compared to ours, although our ability to love is related to God and comes from him.

God's holy love is the kind that never rejects us even though we reject him. This is the kind of love that gave Jesus the power to say from the cross, "Father, forgive them!" This is the kind of love Jesus was describing when he said, "Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you."

It is in and with this kind of holy love that God seeks to save us from aimlessness and sin.

Because it's "holy love," it seeks to save all people! Again, here the emphasis is that in God's sight, we are all important; that each person, no matter who he or she is, or what their station in life, is of infinite value to God. God wants the best for all of us.

It is this fact that forms our missionary motive and message. We, in effect say to other people, to the Buddhist, the Mohammedan and all others--God seeks in holy love to save you from aimlessness and sin. God wants you to lead a fulfilling, purposeful, meaningful life. You are of infinite value to God!

We began this sermon with some symptoms of aimlessness and with the idea that God seeks to save us from it, and we'll see how in a moment; but God also seeks to save us from sin, and it's related in part to aimlessness.

Sin can be described in a number of ways. Usually we think of sin in terms of specific acts or sins. Thus for example, we think of sin as breaking one of the ten commandments or the great commandment and we've heard of the seven deadly sins. And there is validity in this understanding. God seeks to save us from specific sins and from wrongdoing of any kind.

But deeper than that, sin can also be thought of in terms of a condition which we find ourselves in. One way of describing this condition of sin is that it is a state of separation from God and from other human beings. God seeks to reunite us with him and with others and with all creation.

St. Augustine wrote--"Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." But this is not all there is to it. It's more correct to say, "Thou hast made us for thyself and for one another and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee and in one another and in all creation. There's a basic oneness, a basic unity in creation and when we are separated from it, we are in a sense in a condition of sin. We are most well-off when we sense a connectedness, a sense of one-ness with all that is, and particularly with other human beings. The word "atonement" literally means "at-one-ment." To reconcile, is to make peace, to bring things together. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, says the Bible.

All of our life is really an effort to overcome our separation and to find each other in fulfilling relationships. We all know how much a friendly encounter means, especially when we have not expected it. Friendliness itself means at least a partial overcoming of the separation that produces our sense of lonliness and aimlessness. It has something of the quality of salvation in it. And on the other hand, loneliness and separation has something of the quality of hell in it.

In fact a person's life becomes aimless and loses meaning and purpose when his or her relationships with other human beings are severed. Conversely, a person's life begins to

take on meaning when we have positive and fulfilling relationships with others.

We seek in so many ways to overcome our separation and our aimlessness. People join organizations of all kinds, each time hoping to find people with whom they can be close. Many come to the church hoping for the same thing.

Another way in which people try to overcome their separation from others and therefore from God can be seen in the way we seek out anyone who will listen to us when we need to talk. And if the listeners have ears to hear, they hear people talk mostly about their loneliness and their sense of separation. A sign of the state of alienation in which we live is seen in the fact that people often pay to have someone listen to them.

One person put it this way -- Remember there are few people who will pay $25 or more to listen to a speech for an hour, even if a guru is speaking, but there are thousands who pay $25 or more per hour week after week for years in order to be heard, so listen, listen, listen!

In fact some recent studies have shown that people become more susceptible to infections when they are aimless, without direction, or lonely. One study which I recently saw shows that almost all the patients admitted to a general hospital with organic illness during a one month period had sustained some emotional crisis involving a loss of meaning and purpose which incidentally always involved a crisis in the human relationships which surrounded their lives. Broken relationships make us more susceptible to illness! To put it another way, our physical and psychological health are profoundly affected by the degree to which we have strong healthy fulfilling personal relationships with others.

However I have yet to turn on my television set or radion and hear the announcer say: "What do doctors recommend?" Three out of four doctors recommended a restored human relationship and a relationship with God, plus having a group of concerned, accepting, loving persons where one can be himself, as rememdies for nagging backache, headaches, or any one of a number of other ailments." Maybe that's the kind of commercial churches like ours should put in the newspapers and on the air.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin, and God does this by calling us into communities, into relationships with others. Another way to state this sentence in the Statement of Faith is to say -- God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness, and loneliness, and boredom and separation from one another and from God himself.

Thus God wants us to join the world, to say "yes" to other human beings and to life itself. God calls us to be friendly and loving and forgiving with one another. God calls us to risk rather than to safety. Jesus Christ said it this way -- For whoever whould save his life will lose it, and whoever gives his life away, will find it." In this way we are saved from aimless and sin." Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the "aimlessness" in your own life's experience?

2. What does the concept of "sin" mean to you?

3. Has it been your experience that your life has the most meaning and purpose when you have strong and meaningful personal relationships?

4. How can our church help persons overcome a sense a meaninglessness in their lives?

5. Have you felt at times that God was seeking you?

6. At what points in your life have you found life most meaningful and satisfying?