Sunday September 22, 1974

"WE ARE ALL CALLED TO BE CREATIVE!"

We hear a lot about creativity! But what does it mean to be creative? Is it a quality or ability that only some people can have? And why should we as Christians be concerned about being creative?

To be creative is to look at things in fresh and new ways. It is to try to make something new and different or improve on something which already exists. To create something is to put a part of yourself into that which you are creating.

If you write a piece of poetry, or build an article of furniture, or design a dress, or embroider a scarf, a part of you goes into that which you are creating. In that sense we create things in our own image. Our unique imprint is on that which we create. The Bible says--God created human beings in his own image. That's another way of saying God's imprint, God's design is a part of us, is within us.

It also means that God has planted within us the ability, the gift of creativity. All the way through the Bible it is implied that we are in a sense partners with God in his creation. God entrusts this earth to us--to use, to preserve, to improve. That's why we Christians are called to be creative, and we all have the ability to be creative in our own way.
To be creative then, is to imitate God. It is to fulfill part of the destiny God has for us. God calls us to be creative, just as He is creating all the time. We know from the scientific studies of the world and the universe that new worlds are continually coming into existence. Creation is a continuous process. It is on-going!

But how can we open ourselves to be more creative and thus be more God-like? In order to create, one needs a sense of adventure and playfulness--a sense too of the absurd. And one also needs a kind of toughness and daring in order to hazard the risks of possible failure.

Often creativity does not come as a flash of genius; rather it comes from long years of childhood playing, of looking at problems and things from unusual perspectives, of upside-downing a situation, of staying with a challenge until several usable aternatives present themselves.

To be creative is not to have a fear of failure. Thomas Edison tried and failed many times before he found the right material for the incandesent light bulb. He is reported to have said, after he tried several thousand different materials, "I now know 2,000 things that won't work."

So to help people be creative we need to teach them from little on up that failing is not necessarily bad. Part of the problem with some of our education today is just the opposite. The student is more than anything afraid to fail--but the truly creative person is prepared to fail and fail again in order to succeed once in a new and different way.

Much of the cheating that is currently worrying parents and teachers in the colleges and high schools spring from this hysterical "fear of failure" and the absolute need to come up with the "right" answer in exams--the answer that the teacher wants, rather than mastering the subject and seeking new answers to old problems.

The great inventors are willing to try all sorts of new approaches knowing that many will fail, but through failure comes light. All innovation comes from people who are open to newness, who question all closed systems and who don't mind ambiguous answers. Einsteins questioning of a closed system of physics finally brought an entirely new perception of how the universe works.

A few years ago at Washington University in St. Louis, a professor from outside the Physics Department was asked to be the referee on the grading of an examination paper because the Professor of Physics wanted to give a student a zero for his answer to a physics question while the student claimed he should receive a perfect score and would if the system were not closed so that the only answer that could be counted right was the one the professor wanted.

The question on the test read--"Show how it is possible to determine the height of a tall building with the aid of a barometer." The student had answered, "Take the barometer to the top of the building, attach a long rope to it, lower the barometer to the street, and then bring it up, measuring the length of the rope. The length of the rope is the height of the building."

The Professor who had been asked to be the referee pointed out that the student really had a strong case for full credit, since he had answered the question completely and correctly. On the other hand, if full credit were given it would contribute to a high grade for the student in his physics course and a high grade is supposed to certify competence in physics, but the answer did not confirm this.

The referee suggested that the student take another try at answering the question, and he agreed to do so.

The student was given six minutes to answer the question. At the end of five minutes, he had not written anything. He was asked if he wanted to give up, but he said no. He had many answers to the problem and was trying to figure out the best one to submit. In the next minute he dashed off his answer which read -- "Take the barometer to the top of the building and lean over the edge of the roof. Drop the barometer, timing its fall with a stopwatch. Then using the formula $S=1/2\ at^2$, calculate the height of the building. Even though it wasn't the answer the physics professor wanted, he grudgingly agreed to give the student full credit.

As the student was leaving, the referee asked him what the other answers to the problem were. The student said--there are many ways of getting the height of a tall building with the aid of a barometer. For example, you could take the barometer out on a sunny day and measure the height of the barometer, the length of the shadow of the building, and by the use of a simple proportion, determine the height of the building.

And said the student, there is a very basic method. You take the barometer and begin to walk up the stairs. As you climb the stairs, you mark off the length of the barometer along the wall. You then count the number of marks and this will give you the height of the building in barometer units--a very direct method.

And he said there are many ways of solving the problem. Probably the best is to take the barometer to the basement and knock on the superintendent's door. When he answers, you say--"Mr. Superintendent, here I have a fine barometer, if y ou will tell me the height of this building, I will give you this barometer."

The professor then asked the student if he really did not know the conventional answer. He admitted that he did, but he wanted to show that there could be many creative answers to the question.

We are all called to be creative throughout our lives. Age need not dim our creativity. Igor Stravinsky kept composing new music until he was over 80. He was never wedded to one form, one mode of expression, but was constantly inventive, forever pushing against the frontier of his own previous work. There was always more to learn, more to try, more to expand.

Verdi, when nearly 75, wrote his most profound opera, OTELLO, and eleven years later at 86, wrote Ave Maria. Richard Strauss lived and composed until 85; Sibelius until 90. Goethe completed his monumental Faust at 83.

You too can be creative and can continue to be so. We need only to find an outlet. To be creative is to be inventive and to use a part or all of ourselves. It is to make something, or to improve something. It is to express yourself, whether in a dance or writing poetry, or playing the piano, or refinishing furniture, or baking bread, or whittling wood, or making a quilt or a dress, or doing needlepoint, or embroidery, or chrocheting or knitting, building furniture or framing a picture.

We are all called by God to be creative in our own way.