Sunday, November 3, 1974
RISING ABOVE OUR DESIRES
Mark 8:27-33

Often if you ask people to give a capsule version of their ultimate belief, they will say that although they don't know much about religion or philosophy or such matters, their basic belief is — "to thine ownself be true and thou canst not be false to any man."

Many people when they make this statement probably do not know where the statement comes from. Some even believe it comes from the Bible. Actually, the words were written by Shakespeare, and he shrewdly puts them in the mouth of one of his most windy, vapid and self-seeking characters, a man named Polonius. The point is many people who say that the statement — "to thine ownself be true," is their basic philosophy have not looked very carefully at what this statement means and what its implications are. And how does it relate to our Christian faith?

What does it mean to be true to one's own self? In the Old Testament, a man named Esau was true to himself and it was his downfall. Part of Esau's self was that he lived by trying to satisfy his desire for food. He was true to that self, and it ruined him.

Hitler, as a psychopath, was fanatically true to himself. Jesse James, as a reckless adventurer, was gloriously true to himself; and Khrushchev in Russia was finally put out of his leadership position because he was truer to himself than he was to Marx, to Lenin, and to the Russian State.

In our own country there have been many times when some of our politicians and leaders were true to themselves but not true to the constitution. And in the church, there have been many leaders and others who were quite true to themselves, true to their basic inner nature, but as a result quite untrue to others and to God their creator.

The Disciple, Peter, was being true to himself in our scripture lesson for today when he tried to talk Jesus out of the direction of his ministry. Jesus had been telling the disciples that he would be crucified, and Peter said it couldn't go that way. Peter's inner self was telling him that God's purpose could not be accomplished by Jesus'death and resurrection.

Our inner selves, our basic desires can often mislead us and others. As human beings we have both private needs and public responsibilities. And while it is important that we satisfy some of our private needs, it is equally important that we carry out our larger responsibilities. And what do we do when these two come into conflict as they often necessarily do?

If we follow the advice of Polonius- "to thine ownself be true," what is the self to which we should be true — our private selfish needs and desires or our public responsibilities? What happened in the Watergate situation? Not many were true to their larger public responsibilities, but rather true to their private selves and desires.

In each of us there is the self that whispers — "satisfy your desire," and there is the self that sternly urges us to "do our duty." There is the self that says, "you only live once," or the self that says, "this is not right."

The problem with the statement of Polonius — “to thine ownself be true,” is that we are made up of many selves. There is our “mean” self, our “selfish” self, our “rational” self and many more. In transactional analysis, we are told that there is the self whi.ch is the child in us, the self that is the parent in us and the self that is the adult in us.

Each of us tends to be not a single self but a whole committee of selves. There is the civic self, the parental self, the financial self, the religious self, the society self, the professional self, the literary self, and more. And within each one of us these selves are in turn rank individualists, not always cooperative with each other but each shouting out his vote loudly for himself when the voting time comes. So which self are you going to be true to?

The people we revere, the true heroes and saints in our history are those who trained themselves to be true to ideas and principles that were greater than and outside themselves. They were. the people who were able to rise above their basic selves and desires. They subdued greed or lust for power or envy and were willing to live and die for an ideal which could never be realized in their own time.

These are the people who have found a deep center of living, a frame of reference outside themselves which brought the many selves within them into harmony.

The point is that as human beings, we are not and cannot be our own frame of reference. This is what Jesus was saying to Peter — “You’ve got to think of more than just yourself. If you’re just true to your own desires, you may be false to all kinds of people.” Our true frame of reference has to be outside of ourselves. We need to be true to something greater than ourselves — something which draws us out of ourselves even when it goes against the grain of some of our basic desires and appetites.

But how do we rise above our desires and what happens when we do? Let’s look at the Apostle Peter again as an example.

By no stretch of the imagination can the Apostle Peter be considered an extraordinary person. If you read the gospel accounts, it is easy to see that he was far from a saint. He was at first reluctant to follow Jesus and then unable to understand some of Jesus’teachings so much so that he often got on the wrong side of issues. As we saw in our scripture reading for this morning, at one point, Jesus had to say to him, “Get thee behind me, Satan, for you are on the side of man and not of God.”

Yet something happened to the Apostle Peter. He belonged to that little group of persons who led us human beings around one of the most crucial corners in history. And if he himself were to explain how this almost incredible thing happened, I do not imagine that he would say it was because “he was true to himself.” Rather he would say, “it was not because I was true to myself, but that I gave myself to something greater than myself.”

This is the explanation of some of the most memorable names in history. They were ordinary people who gave themselves to be used by extraordinary ideas. They were true to something greater· than themselves. They were used by a great idea.

In fact, if we look at the matter closely, we can see that all the time we are being used by ideas of various kinds. Some are wrong ideas, and some are great ideas. Sometimes the lust for power takes us over. Or at other times, the idea of being true only to ourselves takes charge of

us. We often think that a person gets his own ideas, that they are one's private property. But no, the fact is that ideas get us!

We are all the time being used by ideas and our desires. What we have to do is to choose which ones shall use us, for there are many bad ideas and small inadequate ideas which can use us as well as the great and extraordinary ideas.

Take some events of the recent past for example. It may be the ultimate irony that Spiro Agnew was right when he lectured Americans about the decline of moral values. The problem was not in his· sermon, but rather that he failed to listen to himself.

And so, Agnew resigned in disgrace. Then there is the tragedy in the political amorality of people like Mitchell and Stans and Colson. people who were true to themselves perhaps and true to the idea that the end justifies the means. Then there is the even greater tragedy in the parade of clean-cut young men who, though ultimately sorry about what they had done, seemed puzzled about the reasons why they had done it. They were churchgoing products of upper middle-class respectability, educated in the best colleges and law schools. "It's a question of slippage," said Jeb Magruder. "I sort of slipped into it."

The National Academy of Public Administration, a non-govern-mental study group, wrote in a report recently — "Very few of the top witnesses in the Watergate affair indicated any sense of understanding or appreciation of democratic ideals or principles." No frame of reference outside of themselves had taken hold of them. They did not give themselves to any great idea. They never really rose above their desires. And worse still many tried to excuse themselves by saying they were not responsible. Too many today are used by that mistaken idea.

Karl Menninger put it this way — "If a dozen people are in a lifeboat and one of them discovers a leak near where he is sitting, is there any doubt as to his responsibility? Not for having made the hole, or for finding it, but for attempting to repair it. To ignore it or to keep silent about it is almost equivalent to having made it."

Another mistaken idea which uses far too many of us is the idea that violence can solve our problems. The bombings that are taking place in West Virginia, in the school textbook controversy are an illustration. Ironically, some of those protesting that there are books being used which are immoral, are at the same time using immoral and illegal means to make their protest. Again, too many of us have not been able to rise above our desires. We too easily give ourselves over to small selfish mistaken ideas. And Jesus Christ says to us as he said to Peter — "Get thee behind me Satan, for you are on the side of man and not of God."

The Apostle Peter after that rose above his. desires. He gave himself over to a greater idea — that of following Jesus Christ and all that that implied; that there is more to life than just satisfying small personal desires; there is more to life than just getting all you can get and trying to hang onto it; that there is more to life than the lust for power.

People often say, "It doesn't matter what you do as long as you have faith." But faith in what or whom. A person could have all the faith in the world in a bright red umbrella — so much faith as to go to the top of the Empire State Building, open the umbrella and jump. But his tre-mendous faith in that bright red umbrella would not save him from being killed when he hits the ground. It is not how much faith we have but in whom we have our faith!

The greatest hour in a person's life is when he or she like the Apostle Peter turns the corner and runs into a new a great idea — something which pulls us out of ourselves and helps us in the right way to rise above our desires--when we make the decision not to be true to ourselves but to be true to something greater than ourselves — God Himself.

Often the sign that a child has passed from his or her childish stage and has become an adult is signified in the discovery of some important enterprise or undertaking to which he can say, "I belong to that." "That is my goal." "I'm going to work for that." In fact, the turning point in our lives is not when we say that belongs to me, but when we say, "I belong to that!"

And then something unusual happens, for while it is true that one does not need to be much in himself or herself to be taken by a great idea or cause, the remarkable thing is that no person can be used by a great idea without becoming greater himself. And that's exactly what happened to the Apostle Peter, and it can happen to you!

Our hope for the future lies in powerful truthful ideas that are of God. These ideas are in the air, and they still speed from mind to mind and take hold — such ideas that war is wrong and stupid; that violence never really solves a problem — that we human beings are one family, interdependent and that it is insane to try to evade the spiritual and governmental implications of that fact. All of these and more are ideas inherent within our Christ-ian faith.

To what have you given yourself? What are you being true to? If it's only to yourself, then be careful for it's not enough. Only God will suffice. Shouldn't we all be a bit haunted by that court scene in Jerusalem al- most 2000 years ago. How typical it is of much. of history. All the educated, well-born, worldly-wise prosperous people there were on the wrong side of the supreme issue of their time. Will it be that way with us? Amen.