Sunday, April 6, 1975
SIMPLE ANSWERS
Luke 9:51-56

Whenever things are not going the way we think they should, or when problems seem to be too much for us, we are in danger of settling for an answer tha.t is too simple and therefore misleading and false. Our willingness to accept a simple solution may in fact cause more trouble, rather than solving the problem.

This is not a new tendency as our scripture lesson for the morning shows. Jesus had made up his mind to go to Jeru-salem. In planning for the trip, he had sent some of his disciples ahead to Samaria, to make preparations. However, the disciples reported that the people there would not receive him. Tl1ey did. not want Jesus and his followers to come through their territory or stay overnight among them. So, the disciples proposed a simple answer to the problem — "Lord do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" It was another way of saying, "Let's kill them all, that will solve the problem." But Jesus would have none of it. Instead, they went a different direction.

It wasn't the first time the disciples had been tempted by a simple answer, nor was it the last time. More importantly, we still succumb to the same temptation today--the temptation to propose or accept a simple answer. There are several categories of simple answers.

1. One type of simple answer is the kind the disciples proposed — namely that force of one kind or another, or a show of force will solve the problem. That kind of simple answer has not lost its appeal.

Recently we were told that crime in the United States according to the FBI is up 17% in the nation as a whole over the previous year. In Lincoln, crime increased 24%. All of us are concerned about any increase in crime. Even if it stayed the same it w0uld be too much.

But what should also bother us are some of the "too simple" answers that are proposed as a way to quickly solve the crime problem. We want to believe, like the disciples, that a show of force will do away with it. This attitude is found in a number of places.

Some weeks ago, in the Dick Tracy comic strip in the Sunday paper, the writer of the strip had Dick Tracy saying to group of citizens in the opening frame, "When the law and the courts back up the trained policeman in using his gun whenever and if he deems necessary, without fear of being censured, harassed, or indicted — street crime can be reduced 50% in thirty days." In the next frame, the people to whom he has been speaking are shown responding, "Tracy, you said words every law-abiding citizen has been waiting to hear?"

Certainly, these were words they had been waiting to hear. Tracy proposed a simple answer for a complex problem. If only problems like crime could be solved that easily1 The Jews and Samaritans had been enemies for centuries. So, the disciples proposed a simple solution to the problem, kill as many Samaritans as possible.

2. A second type of simple answer that is particularly prevalent in our time is that money can solve the problem. Whatever the problem is, we like to believe, if we only had enough money, the problem could be solved. Take the area of crime again as an example.

A few years ago, the U.S. House of Representatives authorized expenditures of $2 billion to help cities and states fight crime for the next several years. The vote was 391 to 0. Not a single representative dared oppose the bill.

Yet it is doubtful that throwing money at a problem, no matter how large the amount will settle the problem. Let's say for example, that most of the money would be used to hire more policeman with better equipment.

Twenty years ago, New York City had a police force of some 18,000 persons. Now it has double that number of police officers, while the population of the city proper has actually gone down a little. Nevertheless, the crime rate in New York City has far more than doubled in the intervening two decades. There is not the slightest indication that the added personnel or the more sophisticated equipment has done anything significant to decrease the incidence of crime. Of course, you might say, if we hadn't spent all that money and added more police officers and personnel, the crime problem would have been much worse.

But maybe not. In fact, in a police study done in Kansas City from October 1, 1972, to Sept. 30, 1973, the following conclusion was drawn after a careful experiment of adding a lot more police officers to an area for a period of time and then later greatly reducing the number of police officers. The conclusion was that merely adding more police officers and more equipment to an area does not affect the crime rate at all. Thus, the simple answer that more and more police officers patrolling the streets will solve or reduce crime does not seem justified.

The liberals have been blamed and justly, for believing that merely spending more money would alleviate our social problems; but it's more than just an answer for the so-called liberals. Any of us make the same mistake when we begin to believe that simply spending more money will in and of itself in a particular area help answer the prob-lem, be it crime or welfare national defense.

Take a medical analogy. Suppose we appropriate 2 billion dollars to relieve the victims of a plague, to provide them with medical care. hospital rooms and sustenance during their illness. All of this, while necessary and humane would not do anything to prevent the source of the plague from spreading to other people and to other communities.

3. A third type of simple answer is to find a scapegoat that we can blame everything on, believing therefore that if we got rid of that one thing or person our problem would be solved. The disciples were ready to fall for this simple answer. Get rid of the Samaritans, and then we'll have R. serious obstacles in the way of the ministry of Jesus.

Adolph Hitler in the 1930's used the simple-answer-scape-goat principle to a large extent in Nazi Germany. He blamed almost everything on the Jews and the Treaty of Versailles. And enough people believed him so that an enormous amount of tragedy and death Cc1ffie to much of the world.

The fact is that every radical leader of the left or the right is a simplifier. He cuts the world down to fit his own shrunken self and proposes deceptively simple answers that will solve all of our problems. And usually, a scapegoat is found who is the cause of most of our problems. The scapegoat may be killed, but the problems remain.

Regularly in our time, reports of events and descriptions of the people involved, imply that somewhere, somebody has done something bad, regrettable, and that he or she or 4. that group is the cause of all of our problems. Then we are led to believe, if we can find him or her or that group, punish them, fire them, throw them out or destroy them, our problems will be solved.

There is an intense conviction on the part of most of us when confronted with unpleasant circumstances that somebody, somewhere has done something or failed to do something that brings us to this sorry situation. In the tragedy of Vietnam right now, we see the tendency to want to find one scapegoat, one group, or one event, who is the cause of the whole problem. Ah, if only it were that simple!

In the case of community problems, we. like to blame the outside agitators. We forget that if there are no problems to agitate about the agitator has no cause and no following.

In essence, we use simple answer scapegoat method to satisfy our own emotional need to explain a distressing state of affairs without implicating us. It's a powerful device we employ to protect ourselves from anxiety, from guilt or from any sense of personal responsibility or blame. In the comic strip mentioned earlier, Dick Tracy tried to place the blame for crime on the courts and others who are always hindering the police in their work.

The desire for a simple answer is at least part of the reason that we see a mounting emphasis on pills or remedies for everything and anything that ails us. Consider much of the advertising today and you will find the endlessly repeated theme of offering instant, simple solutions, for all manner of needs and problems. "Want to save your marriage?" "Try our brand of coffee!"

We all would like to believe that out there somewhere is the scapegoat, the scoundrel who is the one cause of all of our problems, but part of that cause is never in me.

Not too many years ago, it was fashionable in the "scapegoat" method to blame everything on the Communists, implying that if all Communists were gotten rid of the world's problems would be gone.

What we forget is that crime and corruption flourished long before the Communist party was ever heard of. Our acute housing problem would persist. Juvenile delinquency would still plague us. Racial conflicts would not be abolished, or even diminished. Labor and management would still have sharply divergent views. Traffic congestion would not be improved, and the list could go on and on.

There is no one scapegoat, no one group or person responsible for all of our problems.

There is another type of simple answer which doesn't fit any of the categories already mentioned, although it's related to the "scapegoat" type. It is seen now and in the past few years in the attempt to put prayer into the public schools as the answer to most or all of our problems.

At last count, 27 different resolutions have been introduced in Congress to amend the constitution so that every school day little Johnny will have a chance to hear someone pray to a deity that he may or may not recognize or worship.

Now we may certainly differ as to whether or not prayer should be in the public schools. What we need to beware of is the spurious argument that some of the pro-prayer people are pushing, namely, that this society is plagued by bribery, alcoholism, rape, drugs, pornography, sex permissiveness and much more because we've gone ten years without any prayers in the public schools. Even before the Supreme Court decision, most of the schools didn't have prayer in them anyway.

But it's a fraud when supposedly religious people want to delude us into believing that, while they can't pray enough at church or at home to halt cheating, killing, burglary, sex orgies, and all the crimes they deplore, just put prayer in public school 31, and this nation will become a diadem of morality again.

In the Bible, the prophets and Jesus Christ warn us that the trappings of religion do not improve the quality, the integrity, or the decency of public business. In fact, Jesus severely criticized many of the people of his time for their public piety. He was concerned because the society of his day was covered with all the trappings of outwar4 religion, but rotten underneath.

Jesus warned his disciples to beware of simple answers and that warning applies to us. Beware of the person or group who says he or she can solve all of society's problems or our problems by doing one simple thing, or who blames all our troubles on one factor.

The real danger of the simple answer is not only that it misleads us and covers up or glosses over many of the real causes of the problem and so often makes matters worse rather than better, and more than that it keeps us from seeing ourselves as part of the problem. With the simple answer we usually excuse ourselves.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer who has been exiled from his homeland speaks directly to this issue. In his book, Gulag Archipelago, he warns his readers by

So let the reader who expects this book to be a political expose slam its covers shut right now. If only it were that simple! If only there were evil people somevrl1ere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

During the life of any person, this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn't change and to that name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil.

So, beware of simple answers! Most simple answers do not include us as part of the problem. And we often are. Better to ask yourself, Am I a part of the problem or the answer? Amen.