Sunday, April 20, 1975
SURPRISING CONCLUSIONS
Isaiah 55:6-9; I Corinthians 1:25-2

Events in life often have surprising conclusions. A child who has been brought up under the worst of conditions turns out to be a person who makes a major contribution to society. Another child who has been brought up under the best of conditions ends up in prison as an embezzler.

And then there are those surprises when we discover that a person is not really what we thought she was. Sometime ago an article appeared in the newspaper which told how a 14-year-old girl who was born deaf and was considered retarded picked up two years of education in just three months when she was finally taught how to communicate.

Tania was born with a moderate case of cerebral palsy and deafness. A doctor labeled her retarded and advised her parents to put her in an institution and forget about her.

Ellen Pillard, Clinic Administrator at the Nevada State Mental Health Institute, said no staff members were trained to help the deaf so Tania didn't even learn to communicate for the first eight years of her life. Then Jim Pollard, a technician just out of college, took a class in sign language and began to teach Tania. For the first time in her life, Tania could communicate with someone, "Mrs. Pillard said," and we began to wonder about the label, retardation."

Within four months, Tania was using a typewriter to communicate in three- and four-word sentences. Staff members now became convinced she was not retarded and began searching for a foster home for her. "I thought she was unplaceable, but my staff wouldn't take no for an answer. They started knocking on doors," Mrs. Pillard said. A woman from Newcastle California, herself deaf, gave Tania a home where people could communicate with her.

She made such fast progress in learning that all doubts about her being retarded were ended. The Nevada Board of Education certified her as qualified to attend a school for the deaf — removing the label of retardation. She is now developing into a happy normal adult person.

Life is filled with surprising conclusions when we look beyond labels that have been hastily applied. Other times changes come about because someone begins to ask — "Is this the way it always has to be?" Or, "Is this the only choice we have? Can there be some other kind of conclusion to the matter at hand?"

When Aristotle Onassis was trying.to build an oil por. and refinery on the New Hampshire coast last year, much of the local resistance centered in the beautiful little town of Durham. At one point the Onassis agent on the scene, a man named Constantine Gratsos wrote to a woman in Durham:

My family background, academic education and personal inclinations would make me the last person on earth who would like to desecrate a beautiful landscape. Unfortunately, the evolution of the world will inevitably result in the elimination of all that you and I and many other people cherish. Humanity has reached the point where we shall have to choose between existence and beauty.

Mr. Gratsos didn't believe in any surprising conclusions. "He saw only one choice — build the refinery in that particular spot and he put his argument in a particularly chilling form — the argument of necessity. However, his argument failed. The people of New Hampshire said," maybe there are other ways to do what needs to be done. Maybe there's another and more surprising conclusion.

The Bible tells us that there are very few things which are inevitable. As Christians we are called always to look for fresh openings, new answers, surprising conclusions. Just because the automobile has been the main means of transportation in the United States for the last 40 years does not necessarily mean that it has to be or will be in the future. Undoubtedly there are alternatives, particularly for transportation within cities.

Life is full of surprising conclusions if we are open to them. A few weeks ago, in the sermon on Easter Sunday, we noted that Easter itself was that kind of conclusion. No one would've predicted that once Jesus Christ was crucified, dead and buried, anything significant would come of the movement he had begun just three years earlier. No one can accurately predict the surprising conclusions all around us. Often the new is being born in us and in creation when we least expect it. Easter was the surprising conclusion to the crucifixion.

Part of what makes the Bible so interesting is that like life itself, it is full of surprising conclusions. As our Old Testament scripture lesson reminds us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways, my ways, says the Lord."

We can see many of these surprising conclusions in the parables which Jesus told. Take the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example. In the story, we might have expected the religious persons, the priest, or the Levite to help the man who was lying hurt in the ditch by the side of the road. But no, the surprising conclusion is that it was a hated Samaritan who stopped to help a Jew who was hurt. No one would've predicted that. We sometimes are surprised to find out who our real friends and helpers are. They can be the people we least expect.

Or take another parable as an example. Jesus told about a rich man whose farms produced enormous crops, and so he thought to himself, "What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? I will do this, I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, (after all isn't bigger always better?) and there I will store my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul you have ample goods for many years, take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.'" But now the surprising conclusion. God said to the man, "Fool, this night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

The man in the parable accepted the usual conclusion which most of us accept — that what is possible is always best, or that more is better. But not according to the ending of this parable. It comes to another conclusion — more is not automatically better. The value or importance of a person's life is not to be found in the abundance of his or her possessions.

In the Gospel of Luke there's also a story about Jesus healing ten lepers and it too has a surprising conclusion. According to the story, the lepers asked Jesus to have mercy on them and heal them. So, Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priests. As they went, they were healed. But surprisingly, only one of them, when he saw that he was healed, came back to thank Jesus, and he was a Samaritan. Turning to this one man, Jesus said, "Your faith has made you whole."

Nine lepers were cured of their leprosy, but only one of the ten was made whole. There's a difference between the two.

Not long ago, I was reading about a famous medical missionary. As a young man lie was an intern in the London Hospital, working himself to the bone among the poor in London's east end. He was constantly patching people up, but there came a day when he asked himself, "What is the point of curing a man's broken arm if he only goes home again to beat his wife and children? There's a difference between curing a particular disease and helping a person become whole.

In the same way, the Bible reminds us of the surprising conclusion that there's a difference between knowledge and wisdom. We often mistakenly believe that having more and more knowledge automatically leads to wisdom. But here as in other things, more is not automatically better just because it's more.

You may have seen the cartoon in the New Yorker magazine. Two prisoners are sitting in a cell. One of them has a pile of books by his side. He has taken advantage of the library and the educational program offered by the prison authorities. "Yes," he is saying to his cellmate, "I'm getting educated, and one day while you're a common thief, I'll be an embezzler."

That cartoon reminded me of a saying attributed to Theodore Roosevelt, "Give a person an 8th grade education and he may steal from a box car. Give a person a college education and he may steal the whole railroad.

More or bigger is not necessarily better. Quality has nothing to do with size or amount. That may not sound to you like a very surprising conclusion, but then ask yourself how you ordinarily judge things.

The point is, God's ways, God's judgments are not always like our ways or judgments. There are some surprising things about God's conclusions and listening to some of these may cause us to question our usual way of looking at life.

I read recently that most of the institutions of our society are almost entirely committed to the idea that growth in the sense of bigger and bigger is the answer to all of society's ills. But maybe there's also another kind of growth — that of quality, inward growth. The important point is that there is no one "simple answer" as our sermon of two weeks ago suggested, but there may be some surprising answers that we haven't yet considered.

If nothing else, our faith calls us to question some of our common assumptions. Is what is possible, always desirable? Is being able to travel somewhere faster and faster always better?

The Bible is filled with surprising conclusions that often call into question our common-sense way of looking at things. Paul said, "When I am weak, then I am strong." We would say, "Then I have all the power, money and right people behind me, then I am strong." But Paul was saying, "When I am vulnerable and know it; when I come to realize that I don't know it all and can't control everything, when I realize that I have limitations, in other words, when I am weak, then I am strong."

Listen to some familiar words of Jesus and their surprising conclusions:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Again, our common-sense, everyday way of looking at things would be to say — Blessed are the strong and the bold for they shall control the earth.

Often Jesus would say, “You have heard that it v1as said of old, but I say unto you.” And then he would add the surprising conclusion. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’”

Yes, life is full of surprising conclusions, and no one is more surprised than the faithful saintly person and surprised in the right way. In a parable, Jesus told it this way — One day God will say to the righteous people — “Come blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer with surprise, “Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And God will answer them --"Truly I say to you as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.”

That’s the kind of surprising conclusion we can all hope for. So, this morning ask yourself again, What’s really important in my life? You may come to some surprising conclusions yourself. Amen.