Sunday, July 20, 1975
EARNING THE RIGHT TO BE WRONG
Matthew 11:2-6

You can earn the right to be wrong! But some of you may be thinking — "I can be wrong for free and I'm wrong often enough as it is, so why should I worry about earning the right to be wrong. I can be wrong anytime I want to. It's easy for me." And I reply, "Of course you can be wrong anytime you want to. No one can stop you. But there's more to it than that. There's a right way to be wrong and a wrong way to be wrong." Or to use different language--there's a right way to fail and a wrong way to fail. And it can make a difference in our lives.

The story we read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew about John the Baptist and Jesus describes an incident in which Joh. the Baptist is wrong in the right way. John the Baptist understood his job as being the forerunner, the announcer of the Messiah. He felt called to prepare the people of his time for the coming of the Messiah.

A year or two before the incident we read about took place, Jesus had been baptized by John in the Jordan River. At that time John was certain that Jesus was the promised Messiah. They went their separate ways, each having his own group of disciples. Then John was put in prison for his preaching. While in prison he kept getting reports of Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing. The more he heard about the work Jesus was doing, the more he began to doubt that Jesus was God's promised Messiah. Thus, he sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" In other words, "I'm not at all sure anymore that you are the Messiah."

Jesus didn't give the disciples of John a direct "yes" or "no" answer. Rather he said, "Go, and tell John what you hear and see; the blind receive their sight and the lame walk. Lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.

Jesus did not get angry at John for his doubts. He knew that he had earned the right to be wrong. John had taken Jesus Christ seriously and was still taking him seriously. He knew the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah and now Jesus did not seem to be fitting the preconceived notions he had about the Messiah. So even though at this point Jesus knew that John was wrong in his doubts, he also understood that John had earned the "right to be wrong." He furthermore knew that John would reconsider.

Let me illustrate what we mean here in another way. Two qualified historians might disagree about the causes of World War II; one might be right and the other wrong. But the wrong one has earned the right to his opinion, for he or she has studied the subject earnestly and at length and therefore did not arrive at the opinion in a superficial manner.

Or two musicologists might argue about the respective merits of Bach and Beethoven; one might be right and the other wrong. But here again, the wrong one has earned the right to his opinion, for it is based on love, study, diligence and seriousness.

In a similar fashion, two physicians might come to a different diagnosis of a medical problem a person has. Each has studied the symptoms carefully but one of them is wrong. Again, he has earned the right to be wrong.

You see, the right to be wrong can be won only in this way. The works of the mind and the spirit, history, philosophy, literature, the arts, and science, are much more than a mere matter of taste and preference or feeling. It's true of religion also.

We are called to be open to the world, to be ready to see things new, to be willing to look at all sides of an issue, to open ourselves to new possibilities and combinations. If we have done all of this and then are still wrong, we have earned the right to be wrong.

The person who says, "I know what I like" almost always stigmatizes himself or herself as an ignoramus. The fact is we like what we are used to; what we expect; what reassures us and makes us feel comfortable; what massages our egos and confirms our good opinion of ourselves. That is all that "I know what I like" really means.

Now of course, every person is entitled to his or her opinion. But "opinion" is a tricky word. It should mean, a "reasoned view," or a judgment, which is based on study, looking at alternatives, and not just a prejudice.

When a judge hands down an opinion, it is based on something more than his personal preference. It rests upon a tradition and an organized body of knowledge in the field of jurisprudence. The judge has researched the history of similar situations.

Not everyone of course, can be an expert, or should be on every subject. But all of us have an obligation to refrain from passing off our prejudices as reasoned opinions. John the Baptist had the good sense to even doubt his opinion. So, he put it in the for111 of a question — "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" We might call that, "doubting our doubts." And it's a good practice.

We've all met persons who attend a play or a concert or an opera, or an art show and are quick to ventilate their prejudices, defending them as considered opinions. They are not considered opinions in many cases, because they are not based on anything but subjective preference, like choosing vanilla over chocolate ice cream. Now of course you can say that we have a right to our prejudices, and we do as long as we don't pass them off as reasoned judgements and as long as they do not harm anyone or contribute to the already too large body of ignorance.

It's better if we earn the right to be wrong.

Let's go deeper into this matter because it touches every area of our living. Have you noticed that often the less we know firsthand about a situation, the firmer is our opinion about the way to handle it?

I remember in the days of active student dissent on the campuses, it was the people who knew the least about what was going on in the nation's colleges who were the most dogmatic about resolving the problem of student dissent. To them it was clear-cut and simple: punishment for rebels and restoration of the old order.

But the closer one got to the campus scene, the less clear-cut the picture was. There were many kinds of student revolts, and for many reasons; some of them no doubt valid and some not so valid, so each needed to be looked at on its own merits and resolved accordingly.

The same kind of thing is true for almost all of our social problems. The persons closest to them, who have studied them from many angles, are sensitive to many factors and are aware of the complexity and the vast difference between one situation and another. And they have no effortless easy prescription for solving them — knowing that many times such superficial prescriptions make things worse rather than better.

Ignorance does not breed bliss as much as it generates certainty. The more you know, the more you know you don't know. If you have never had a delinquent child in your family, it's easy to say exactly how such a child should be handled and what should be done with all delinquents. But if you are confronted with the personal reality, your attitude immediately changes.

Knowing a situation firsthand makes one think of it in terms of people, rather than of problems and of individuals more than of people in the abstract. The more we know of a problem, the more we have studied it or experienced it, the less willing we are to make a flat glib generalization. And if we are wrong or have doubts after having studied something thoroughly, we have earned the right to be wrong.

Again, John the Baptist had the right to his doubts, the right to be wrong about Jesus, and Jesus knew this. Jesus also knew that such a person would doubt his doubts and would reconsider his opinion.

Earning the right to be wrong is similar and in the same category as earning the right to fail or to make errors.

In baseball history, Honus Wagner is generally conceded to be one of the greatest players of all time. For years he was the mainstay of the Pittsburg Pirates of the National League. He was the idol of fans and players alike. One year, Honus was voted the most valuable player in the league. In the same year, he led the league in errors. How could it be that the most valuable player could at the same time make the most errors. The reason was that Honus went after everything. Nothing was too hard for him to handle. He made more errors than anyone else, but he also made more putouts.

Some people who make few mistakes or errors or do not fail in life are those who do very little or have not tried their best. If so, they have not earned the right to fail.

Babe Ruth struck out 1330 times, a record in futility unapproached by any other player in the history of baseball. But that isn't what we remember about him. His 714 home runs completely obliterated the 1330 strikeouts. Now if Babe Ruth had been called out on strikes most of those times without swinging the bat and had not hit so many of those home runs, it would be a different matter.

We can earn the right to make errors, to strikeout, to fail and we can earn the right to be wrong. And when we're wrong in that way, it's a different kind of wrong. In fact, it can be the right kind of wrong.

We're talking here about an approach to all of life and that includes our religious faith. It means that if our doubts are honest doubts and arrived at through study, thought, and by looking at many aspects, then doubt is one of our noblest powers. In the same way, earning the right to be wrong can strengthen us.

It also means that we are to doubt our doubts as did John the Baptist in his doubts about Jesus. It means too, that when we have truly earned the right to be wrong, we will be open to new possibilities and new ways of looking at things which can lead us to new knowledge and a strengthened faith. Amen.