Book 6

Sunday April 25, 1976

"FINDING THE GOOD LIFE" Mark 10:17-22, Matthew 13:44-46

We've all seen the bumper stickers and the signs which say, "NEBRASKA, THE GOOD LIFE." The slogan means, among other things that this state is a good place in which to live. We still have some clean air, there is lots of open space, and over the state as a whole such things as unemployment have not been as serious a problem as in some other parts of the country. It's also a fact that persons in Nebraska live longer than in any other part of the country.

Being able to find the good life has always been part of the American dream and this dream and definition of the good life has a number of versions. One of the latest versions of the good life emerged after World War II, and has been part of many people's definition of the good life ever since. The formula goes something like this--a home in the suburbs, or in the case of Lincoln, a little bit away from the downtown area, two or more cars in the garage, or usually just in the driveway because the garage is filled with other things, television, patios, outdoor barbecues, green lawns, perhaps a boat and added to this today might be a citizen's band radio in the car.

Part of this definition of the good life is based on the assumption that meaning and happiness can be found by accumulating more and more creature comforts and status symbols. In this definition, for example, an automobile becomes more than just a basic means of transportation. It becomes a symbol which will remind ourselves and others of our success--that we have it made.

There was a man who believed this very firmly. He thought that if he could once have and drive a Cadillac, life would be complete. He got his wish and he believed in this car so much that he requested he be buried in the car when he died. He died not long after. His request was granted. He was placed in the driver's seat of the car, a large grave had been dug, and a crane was used to slowly let the man and his car down into the grave. As this was being done, one of his friends who was at the graveside was heard to remark, "Man, that's living!"

A second version of the good life in addition to the accumulation of all kinds of things, is that the good life

consists in being successful--climbing the ladder of social and vocational mobility. This success definition of the good life has often been symbolized by the Horatio Alger stories whose heroes embody the virtues and blessings of success. Alger's heroes were aggressive, individualistic, lucky, hard-working, honest enough to secure the trust they needed to succeed, and of course, masculine.

Here too, the good life consists in making lots of money, having the right kind of connections and achieving social power through success in the business world or one of the professions. That this definition is still widely held can be seen in the fact that such new books as "Winning Through Intimidation, " remains on the best-seller list. People want to get ahead and win, no matter how, because they are convinced they have then obtained the good life.

Status, power over others, money, social prestige, are believed to lead to human wholeness, meaningfulness and happiness--the good life.

Incidentally, the real Horatio Alger had his own troubles. Despite the fact that his popular success stories brought him wealth and fame, his own life was little short of tragic. He never married or experienced the fulfillments of genuine mutuality with men or women, though he wanted these relationships desperately. He had two affairs with women who remained married to their husbands; he eventually suffered serious mental illness and spent his last days in the kind of boarding houses from which his successful fictional heroes had escaped.

These versions or definitions of the good life are essentially false promises of salvation--false gods, idols which too many in our time worship.

What does the Bible say about finding the good life? By way of explanation, such words as Kingdom of Heaven, Kingdom of God, and Salvation are almost synonomous with the phrase, the good life. Salvation, being saved, kingdom of heaven, all mean wholeness, finding that harmony with God and others here and now and also after death.

1. Note first then, that for the Christian, find the good life is more than a matter of "doing." Let me explain.

The rich young man in our scripture reading this morning who came to Jesus was searching for eternal life, which

means he sensed a lack of meaning in his life. He was looking for salvation, and so he asked Jesus, "Good teacher, what must I do to find this?" He had kept all the commandments, he was an upright moral person, he was successful as we would define success, he had wealth, but he still found an emptiness in his life.

Note especially that he asked Jesus, "What must I do?" His life was filled with doing things. He had kept the commandments, he had done enough things to be successful. So naturally he thought, "there are some more things I must do. I must have two cars instead of one, a bigger house, a job that pays more money, and I must have more power.

But all of this is a misconception about life. The idea that the good life, or salvation or finding wholeness can be won by doing any one thing or a number of things is completely false. The young man was on the wrong road and this was part of what Jesus told him. He was looking for some ack to be done, or a series of acts which would be the end of all his search. It's like a person asking--"What must I do to be happy?"

Jesus said to the young man--"You lack one thing." In other words there's nothing else you must do in the sense of accomplishing something, or having more things with which to surround yourself. "Go sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come follow me."

Jesus was saying to the man that he needed to be a different kind of person. He needed to be transformed, converted into a kind and loving person, not only in relation to a project or an organization, but in relation to everyone around him. In this man's case, Jesus knew that his wealth was a block to what he needed to become. It was keeping him from being the kind of person he needed to be if he was to find the good life.

II. This means, secondly, that finding the good life is primarily a matter of being instead of doing. The question is not, "What must I do to find the good life," but "What must I be, what must I become to find the good life?"

So whether a person is a farmer, or a teacher, or a dentist, or a preacher, or a lawyer, or a factory worker, or a street sweeper, or a homemaker, or an artist, the

essential elements of the good life are to be found in ourselves and in our relationships with others wherever we find them. And if our wealth, or our possessions or anything else blocks us from that kind of being, then Jesus says we have to get rid of whatever is the block.

That's what Jesus meant when he said to the young man to sell all and give away the proceeds. "Follow me and I will help you become the kind of person who experiences the good life.

In the matter of finding the good life, it may be that as Americans we have too often only emphasized one part of our past and present. We have emphasized the fact that here a person as an individual can become successful, move up the social ladder and get rich. But there has always been another story to America besides upward mobility, status, wealth and individual success.

It begins with the story of Pilgrims grinding out a meager existence from a punishing wilderness in the name of religious liberty. These pilgrims did not come to these shores to get rich. Their definition of the good life was something quite different.

It is the story of people working in community, working together, sharing, taking care of one another, supporting one another and in these relationships came life's meaning. This was the experience of the good life, even though its outward circumstances were difficult.

So the good life consists of being, of experiencing a sense of place, a sense of belonging to one another and to God, of being somebody with family and neighbors, of having an inner sense of personal dignity which does not depend on outward circumstances like the size of our home, or the kind of car we drive or a boat or whether or not we have a citizen's band radio. The good life comes from the experience of being loved and accepted for ourselves and of loving and accepting others in the same way.

The Christian definition of the good life consists in persons working and living together, in building community--that's what the phrase "kingdom of God" is all about.

Now the right kind of job or vocation can certainly help or hinder us in our finding the good life. A job or vocation

helps develop you and your potential and where your skills are put to the best use and where you feel you are not wasting yourself and your energy for nothing. So the good life is a matter of being more than doing.

3. Thirdly, finding the good life does not mean that our lives will be devoid of trouble and tragedy. Indeed for the Biblical writers, life is tragic as well as happy. To experience life in its fullness is to experience weakness as well as power, losing as well as winning, sickness along with deah, anxiety as well as confidence. But if we are part of a loving community, we can come through such experiences and find resurrection.

All this means that finding the good life is not always easy. The last part of our scripture reading illustrates this. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

This person kind of stumbled onto the good life, the Kingdom of heaven, accidently. But when he found it, he knew its value and he was willing to give up everything else to possess it. He was not necessarily even looking for the good life, he was simply doing his daily routine work faithfully, and contrary to all expectation found everything. We've all seen that happen to some people. They just seem to have stumbled onto the good life and they go about their business and are happy.

There are others who are continually searching. The rich young man in our earlier scripture reading was one of these, however when he found it in Jesus Christ, he didn't accept it, he went away sorrowful because he wasn't willing to pay the price.

Jesus also said, "The Kingdom of Heaven, the good life, is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

This person like the rich young man was looking for the good life, but when he found it, he was willing to sell all that he had in order to possess it. It's a decision we all have to make time and time again. Are we willing

in order to find the good life? Are we willing to change, and to give up something, or are we going to play it safe like the rich young man who came to Jesus and then go away sorrowful because the risk is too great?

Finding the good life is not a matter of "doing," but a matter of becoming the kind of person who can love and live in relationships to others. It's a matter of accepting life in its fullest. It's a matter of helping build and nurture human community and living as loving, risking neighbors. Amen.