Sunday June 13, 1976

"THE RIGHT KIND OF SELFISHNESS" Luke 2:41-49
Mark 3:31-35

Introduction

Most of us have heard a lot about the importance of losing one's self, of dying to self, about the necessity to give one's self away. We've heard much, in other words, about the importance of being unselfish and serving others. And all of this is often equated with being a Christian.

While there is a kind of unselfishness that's certainly part of being a Christian, a kind of dying to self, there is also another side to the matter. There is also a kind of selfishness that is part of our Christian faith and our Christian living. To be a Christian does not only mean that we are unselfish, but it also means that we are selfish in the right kind of way. To be a Christian does not mean that a person hates himself and his own life, but rather that a person learns to love himself properly.

To put it another way, just as there is a right kind of unselfishness, there is also a right kind of selfishness, an art of selfishness that needs to be practiced and understood. There is a right kind of selfishness that is part of being an individual, a human being and a Christian--a kind of selfishness that's necessary and which can be used for good. That's why Jesus said--"Love your neighbor as yourself."

Now the problem is that since we often forget that there is a right kind of selfishness, we sometimes run scared and haven't the courage to say "no" to people or situations that nag us, or destroy us, or where we can be of no help anyway. Thus we often feel guilty when we refuse someone's request, no matter how preposterous. We carry the world on our backs and suffer the tortures of the misguided righteous.

We haven't learned to practice the right kind of selfishness. And so sometimes we take a job that goes against the grain. Or we accept a responsibility that constricts our usefulness. We take on people as a burden who could take care of themselves. We deny the expansion or development of personal gifts because their development seems impractical. Or we let intimates nag or dominate us in

order to keep the peace and all the time we may be telling ourselves how really unselfish and long-suffering we are. Pretty soon we find that we can take it no longer. We have spread ourselves too thin and are no help to anybody not even ourselves.

One person recently wrote when she had reached this point--"I've found that I'm sick and tired of helping others all the time. I'm sick of being asked to be understanding, kind, patient, loyal and all the rest when I feel many people couldn't care less about my feelings. . . . I have come to the point in my life where I feel that too many outside forces control how I must react, act, feel and think. I'm asked to be too many things to too many people and there's no time, energy or intelligence left over for me. . . . I know how I want to act or react to situations, but there is always pressure to do the expected."

I suspect most of us feel that way at times. We've forgotten how to be selfish, how to think of ourselves, in the right kind of way.

Now we are not talking here about anarchy, doing what one pleases at any and all times. Neither are we talking about greed or lust. Nor are we defending the barbarious ruthlessness so apparent to some people; that kind of careless selfishness that tramples the flowers in a garden, runs a car in the ditch and just in general doesn't care how he treats anything or anyone. That kind of arrogance and rebellion are not a part of constructive selfishness. They are closer to insanity.

We are talking here this morning about the proper love of self, the kind of selfishness that sees that one takes care of himself--the kind that assesses one's talents rightly and that is not ashamed of developing some ability, some skill just for the pure joy of developing that skill.

We are talking here about the kind of selfishness that helps a person search for truth and integrity in his own life.

A young boy traveling with his parents was separated from them and did not communicate with them for days. They searched for him anxiously. When discovered, he paid little attention to the sorrow his absence had caused. Was this conduct selfish or unselfish? "If he'd been my boy, I'd

have shown him," many have answered. But remember how Jesus lingered in the temple with the teachers and scribes? I think his parents were wise in their treatment of him in this episode. Jesus was becoming an individual in his own right. He was beginning to practice the right kind of selfishness. He had questions that he needed to have answered and he was seeking those answers.

And there's the story of a young unmarried man who, forsaking his trade, left home, left his widowed mother without saying precisely where he was going or what he was going to do with his life. When his mother and her family went looking for him, he spoke questioningly of their right to have any special claim on him. Was his conduct selfish? Who are my mother and my brothers, he asked? Perhaps his conduct was selfish in the right kind of way.

This man later became involved with the authorities. They considered his activities revolutionary. An arrest led to his death. Yet there is no evidence that at any time he limited his conduct out of consideration for his relatives. Jesus here was practicing a kind of selfishness which we can call the right kind of selfishness.

At another point in the gospel stories we read of Jesus asking his disciples to take him out in their boat so that he could get away from the crowds. He wanted to get some needed rest. Here again is an example of the right kind of selfishness.

Many times we have to practice the right kind of selfishness so that we can also practice the right kind of unselfishness. The two are connected.

In reality there can be no wise right kind of unselfishness without also having some basic self-concern which we are here calling the right kind of selfishness. There is no permanent power for goodness if the organism which fulfills that goodness is limited or injured. There is a duty which we have to ourselves as well as that which we have to others.

He is truly unselfish with the right kind of unselfishness if he does those things nature endowed him to do and therefore fulfills his constructive possibilities. What happens is that sometimes we use the excuse of our wrong kind of unselfishness for not fulfilling our creative possibilities, or because we are simply afraid to be ourselves.

Recently I read of a man who decided to go abroad in preparation for his vocation. His mother was sixty-two at the time. Eight of her friends wrote this man reminding him that his mother was well along in years and advised and begged him not to go until she died. She died at the age of 93. The writers of those letters condemned him as selfish because he left as he did. His mother also suffered to have her wishes disregarded, but she told him a few weeks before she died that one of the best things he had ever done for her, was to leave her when and as he did.

Now was he being selfish in what he did, or was it the right kind of selfishness?

Or listen to this story. A man wrote--"It began in my childhood. My parents adored an older brother. It was Percy this and Percy that. I believed it my unselfish duty to keep it up. So I worked at home while he went to college. When girls came into my life, I was shy and uncertain. I fell in love, but my mother didn't like the girl. She convinced me that it was my duty to stay with her. My Father wasn't well and soon died.

After some years, my mother changed her mind and decided that I ought to marry. She picked out the daughter of her oldest friend. I objected at first. Agnes was nice enough, but I felt that I didn't love her. Mother talked and cried. It would be such a good match, she said, and it would make her so happy. Besides, Agnes' mother owned part of my father's business that I then managed and we'd keep more money in the family. So the man said, I yielded in the end, as I always had. It seemed selfish not to.

But then to make things worse, my new wife was as much under the spell and control of her mother as I was under mine. Her mother used to tell her every day how much she'd suffered to bring her into the world. She demanded that Agnes sacrifice for her. So you can see the situation.

There the man was with a wife he admired but really hadn't wanted to marry. He had a home which he revered but didn't like, a mother and a mother-in-law which he secretly hated. He had inherited a job and was totally unfit for it. And all of it had happened in the name of duty and unselfishness.

What should this man have done? First, he should not have allowed his parents to make him into his brother's slave. Second, he should have refused to go into his father's business which he hated. He had always secretly wanted to do something else and he had the talents and skills for doing something else, but he had not allowed himself to develop these skills. Third, he should have gone away from home to get the type of education he needed and wanted, and fourth, he shouldn't have married Agnes, no matter how much his mother fussed.

You see, what we are talking about all through this sermon is the right of a person to be himself--to develop his special talents and abilities. In fact, it's not only a person's right, but a person's responsibility to do so. This, then, is the right kind of selfishness, the proper love of self.

What then can we actually do to help ourselves and others be selfish in the right kind of way?

1. First we need to face ourselves and our motives honestly. This means among other things, getting to know ourselves. It means getting over any guilt about being the person you are. It means being able to forgive yourself and being able to love yourself for what you are. Hatred of one's self is tantamount to blaming the creator for your nature.

2. It means secondly, developing your own special skills and talents--letting your light shine. Evaluate what you are. Individualtiy is only successful when concentrated. There are some ways in which each one of us is bright. Shine there. This also means retiring from activities that are often better carried on by others.

The artist, Whistler, once remarked that a great painting was made by knowing what not to put upon a canvass. Successful living also depends upon knowing what not to do. He who realizes when to say "no" and can say it pleasantly and without embarrassment, has won half his battles.

This means letting others do some things. You cannot do it all anyway. It also means never taking all the credit and honor alone. You may be the crowning stone at the crest of the pyramid, but it's the other stones which keep you there.

And when we do a favor for someone, we ought not to do it unless we can give whatever the favor required without expecting anything in return--even adequate thanks. Some things are a matter of give and take, a favor isn't. We need either to let people take what we have to contribute of time and consideration, or we need to admit that we are not generous enough to stand the test.

There is nothing more disappointing that to anticipate a reward for kindness. Somehow it leaks out when you expect gratitude, and it changes a blessing into a barter.

3. Being selfish in the right kind of way means also taking time out to simply be alone and do what you want to do. All of us need this. When people won't let us alone, it may be because we have not learned how to get away. Jesus often spent time alone, away from people.

All of this is to say that some examples of the right kind of selfishness which are a part of our Christian faith are:

To believe your only duty is to do the best you can.
To allow yourself time to think, to decide and to develop.
To protect and foster your inherited abilities which means to respect your own hature and accept it as a trust.
To Love your neighbor as yourself and know what AS means.

To defy and ignore all evil forms of selfishness. And some of the forms of evil selfishness are --

To continually talk of our "self-sacrifice" while all the time remaining possessive and expecting payment in return for our sacrifice. To deny ourselves and to talk about it endlessly. To do good and tell everyone about it.

So there it is. There really is no conclusion to this kind of sermon. The conclusion you will have to write in your own lives.