Sunday, June 12, 1977
LIVING A RELAXED LIFE IN A "HURRY" SOCIETY!
Exodus 20:8-11; Matthew 6:25-34; Luke 10:38-42

An astute observer is lamenting the times: "But the present world is a different one. Grief, calamity, and evil cause inner bitterness.... there is disobedience and rebellion... Evil influences strike from early morning until late at night... they injure the mind and reduce its intelligence and they also injure the muscles and the flesh."

This observer lived 4,600 years ago in China, even though his observations appear contemporary. It shows tha.t we human beings have always· felt subjected to stress and that we often look longingly backward to what we believe were more peaceful times.

Listen to people today and a common complaint stands out-- "I don't have time to relax. There are so many demands on me. I wish there were more hours in the day." You've probably made such statements. Everywhere people are in a hurry and few stop to ask: "why the hurry?" Some people are even in a hurry to relax!

According to Meyer Friedman, who has done much basic re-search on heart disease, this kind of "hurry sickness" is a major contributor to heart disease. He named it the "Type A personality." Incidentally, there is no evidence that the person always in a hurry accomplishes more than the relaxed person.

As most of you know, I do regular book reviews on radio and television and thus I try to keep track of new books being published. Over the past several years I have been amazed at the number of books being published having to do with "how to relax," and the importance of relaxation.

All kinds of people want to discover a fast way to relax. Some people drink alcohol in an attempt to relax, others take various kinds of pills to calm them down. Still others are massaged and some jog, and others are trying meditation in one of its various forms.

If you ask people why it's so difficult to relax and let go, most blame it on the environment, on forces outside themselves. "Life is so complicated these days," is the reason given. Our complex living is due to the complex world in which we live with its radios and television and autos and planes. We get more stimulation per square hour than used to be given per· square day to our grandmothers.

This explanation leads people to turn wistfully in some moments to thoughts of a quiet south sea island, or to the horse and buggy days of our great grandparents. But as Thomas Kelly, the Quaker mystic discovered when he visited the South Sea Islands: "I found th.at Americans carry into the tropic their same madcap feverish life which they knew on the mainland." Thus, Kelly concluded that the "complexity of our program cannot be blamed on the complexity of our environment," much as we would like to think so. Nor does simplification of life with less stress and worry necessarily follow simplification of environment.

The problem is that we are not skilled in the inner life, where the real roots of our problem lie. The true explanation of our inability to relax and find peace is an inner spiritual problem, not an outer one.

Think about it! Many of us try to· be several persons at once, or as Kelly puts it, “Each of us tends to be, not a single self, but a whole committee of selves. There is the civic self, the parental self, the financial self, the religious self, the society self, the professional self, the literary self. And each of our selves is in turn a rank individualist, not cooperative, but shouting out his vote loudly for himself when the voting time comes.”

We lack a center which integrates all of our various selves. No wonder we find it difficult to relax with all of these selves pulling at us from within and in all directions.

What’s: all of this got to do with the Christian faith? If the Christian faith has anything to say it is about the way in which we live our daily lives. The Christian faith which tells of our connection with God and with one another is about the inner life as well as the outer life. In the Bible we are promised that if we seek God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness then our live will have an inner balance and strength and direction that can be found in no other way.

Let’s look at this more closely now so that we can determine how to live a relaxed life in a hurry society. Our faith gives us these guidelines.

1. First of all, our Christian faith reminds us that all of life has a certain rhythm and that we are to have a rhythm in our lives. We need work and we need rest. The fourth commandment of the ten puts it in religious terms. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work. . . “Among other things, this commandment is underscoring the need for relaxation and rest, for change of pace, and for regularity in this change of pace.

In addition to weekly worship, our faith also emphasizes the need for daily times of prayer and relaxation, for being alone with oneself and with God, for getting oneself together. Included in this rhythm of living is the need for the proper amount of sleep and rest and for regularity in our eating habits.

Relaxation is a part of the rhythm of life. Nearly two hundred years ago there was a poet who was aware of the centrality and ubiquity of rhythm throughout all of our living. In one of his beautiful “Hymns to the Night,” Novalis has this to say about rhythm — “Seasons, times of day, lives and destinies, are all strikingly enough, thoroughly rhythmical, metrical, according to a beat. In all trades and arts, in all machines, in organic bodies, in our daily functions everywhere; rhythm, meter, beat, melody. Anything we do with a certain skill we do rhythmically without being aware of it. Rhythm is found everywhere.”

And so, it is. The life of the human body is an intricate complex of interrelating rhythms: waking and sleeping, action and rest, feeding and evacuation, delicate rhythms of the brain, mood swings and more. There is the rhythm of the heartbeat and the rhythm of regular breathing.

Almost daily new stud.es are discussing more subtle rhythmical manifestations in human beings — cycles in body temperature, regular sequence of dream activity, electrical cycles in heart and lungs and liver, hormonal changes running parallel to changes in the seasons and more. And we are all part of the rhythms of the universe and of creation which have their effect on us. So, in each of our lives we need to find the appropriate rhythm and flow with it. Meditation and prayer can be defined as being in rhythm in a very deep sense with God and with the one-ness of all creation.

2. Secondly, in addition to finding the rhythm in our living which includes periods of regular relaxation, there is also a deeper kind of relaxation which depends on our total attitude toward life and death. Here it's a matter of perspective, of seeing our lives and the issue we face daily in the proper perspective so that we do not get upset over things that shouldn't upset us.

You've heard me use this illustration before, but it's worth repeating again and again. It's from a column by Harry Golden — he wrote:

"I have a rule against registering complaints in a restaurant; because I know that there are at least four billion suns in the Milky Way — which is only one galaxy. Many of these suns are thousands of times larger than our own, and vast millions of them have whole planetary systems, including literally billions of satellites, and all of this revolves at a rate of about a million miles an hour, like a huge ova1 pinwheel. Our own sun and its planets, which includes the earth, are on the edge of this wheel. This is only our small corner of the universe, so why do not these billions of revolving and rotating suns and planets collide? The answer is, the space is so unbelievably vast that if we reduced the suns and the planets in correct mathematical proportion with relation to the distances between them, each sun would be a speck of dust, two, three and four thousand miles from its nearest neighbors. And mind you, this is only the Milky Way — our own small corner, our own galaxy. How many galaxies are there? Billions. Billions of galaxies spaced at about one million light-years apart (one light year is about six trillion miles). Within the range of our biggest telescopes there are at least one hundred million separate galaxies such as our own Milky Way, and that is not all, by any means. The scientists have found that the further you go out into space with the telescopes the thicker the galaxies become, and there are billions of billions as yet uncovered to the scientists'camera and the astrophysicist's calculations. When you think of all of this, it's silly to worry whether the waitress brought you string beans instead of limas."

See your life in its proper perspective and many of the things we worry about disappear.

To go even deeper into how to live a relaxed life, note that stress, tension, the inability to relax, all of these have their origin in our inner selves — in our giving our lives over to false values. Much of the pain, discomfort, and mental suffering we go through doesn't have to exist because there is no basis for it in reality. It's based on a false image in our minds of what life is all about.

Think how much time we all spend on seeking wealth, fame, glamour, power, social influence, status, and collecting and buying more and more things to have around us. Such pursuits lead us to become uptight, disgruntled, despondent, and nervous. In seeking such values, we become abusive, obstinate, domineering, and proud.

To live a relaxed life in a hurry society, we need to learn renunciation. Usually when we hear the word "renunciation," we get a mental picture of wild-haired, skinny, bearded old men in the desert or in a cave; or the beautiful nun hidden away, entombed within convent walls. But there is another definition of renunciation; "Renunciation is not giving up the things of the wor1d. it is accepting that they go away." That's the meaning of the phrase, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." Only God is eternal and can be counted on. It's also the meaning of the cliche, "You can't take it with you!" Renunciation is allowing, letting, not becoming too attached to all that is around you because of the knowledge that they do go away. Renunciation means relaxing the grasping grabbing hand. Then we can begin to live all of life in a more relaxed way.

But how hard it is for us to stop our hurry activity. In the national parks the visitors stream from busses and automobiles, cameras ready, kids in hand, naming the flowers and trees, stunned for moment the first view, soon hard at work, looking and doing. All the while the mountains stand there waiting to speak if the noise would just die down. But we can't let go and stop.

It's no accident that the Christian model of the fully developed human being includes the saints. They have been revered for many reasons: their compassion, devotion, inspirational words of wisdom, service to the world. But the trait that is of particular importance for us here is their equanimity, their tranquility, their ease of mind and peace of heart in the face of circumstances that for most others would be extremely stressful, if not overwhelming.

What has been their secret? Each of them, in his own way from his or her particular tradition has discovered the truth of the saying, "Let go and let God." When a sense of the infinite and the transcendent God replaces our usual narrow self-centeredness there is no longer a mental basis for fear, anger, tension. Instead, the perfectly harmonious functioning of God begins to operate in and through us and we learn to live a relaxed life no matter what is going on around us.

As Thomas Kelly puts it, "Life is meant to be lived from this Divine Center. Each one of us can live such a life of amazing power and peace and serenity, of integration and confidence.... Life from this center is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It is amazing. It is triumphant. It is radiant. It takes no time but occupies all of our time. And it makes our life programs new and overcoming. We need not get frantic. God is at the helm. And when our little day is done, we can lie down quietly and in peace, for a11 is well."