Sunday November 6, 1977

"NEVER MIND!" Romans 12:1-2, I Corinthians 7:20-24
NO. 1 in a series: "How are Christians to be different in our kind of world?"

"Never mind!" A two-word sentence, the shortest possible. You've no doubt said it many times. The Apostle Paul used this brief sentence at one point in his first letter to the church in Corinth, "Never mind!" Paul was trying to point out that Christians, church members, believers in Jesus Christ, are to be in some ways different from other people in the world.

The main point in life, St. Paul said, is not the outside condition of a person, his or her station in life, whether or not one is rich or poor, but the inside realities of the spirit. No outer condition can separate a person from God, unless we let it do so. Paul said, "Were you a slave when you became a Christian? Never mind! Don't let that worry you. The important thing is that you belong to Christ.

It was not that Paul was indifferent to slavery. He went on to say, "If you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity."

It's a great phrase, "Never mind!" Don't let the most important goal in life be missed by making other things first. Christians are to be "never mind" persons. Of course there is a right way and time to say "Never mind" and a wrong way of using the words, and we're going to look at some of those ways in a moment. But first let's get some background on the whole subject of "How are Christians to be different in our kind of world?" That's the theme of this series of sermons.

I. When Jesus Christ began preaching and teaching, he indicated that the community of God's people he was gathering was to be different than anything that had been known or seen before. To be sure, the Christian community has its roots in the Hebrew tradition, and much of that Hebrew tradition was to be continued in the Christian community--the new Israel, but there were also to be differences.

Thus the sermon on the mount in the Gospel according to Matthew, contains a number of teachings of Jesus which begin with the phrase, "You have heard that it was said

to the people of old. . . . but I say unto you." For example, "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 so that you may be children of God. For God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those you love you, what reward have you? Then you are no different from anyone else in the world."

So here and in many other places, Jesus Christ indicates that we Christians are to be different. We are not to act as the world normally acts or reacts.

In his letters to the churches, the Apostle Paul often makes the same point--the followers of Jesus Christ are to be different. So in this sermon series, we are going to consider some of the ways in which those of us who are trying to be Christians and church members are to be different in today's kind of world.

And when we talk about being different, the Bible means more than just surface differences. Not too many years ago, it was possible to tell Roman Catholics Christians by the fact that they did not eat meat on Fridays. It became a point of identification. Important as this practice may have been as a reminder to Roman Catholics of who they were, Jesus and St. Paul were concerned about deeper differences than fasting or other religious practices.

Thus Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, "I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

The translation of J.B. Phillips puts it more plainly--"Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves toward the goal of true maturity."

So we are to be different. How? By not letting the world squeeze us into its mold. Not only individual Christians,

but the Christian community, the church, must not be squeezed into the mold of any type. The individual Christian and the church as community has to be careful lest it is captured or embraces some particular form of economics or politics. There is no purely "Christian economics" as such, or no totally Christian form of politics or government. Some forms of government may embody more Christian ethics or be more just and offer more freedom to individuals than others. But Paul reminds us that we can maintain our Christian faith in any form of government or any kind of economic system.

It's not that we are as Christians to be indifferent to various forms of government or economic systems. Certainly we are to work for systems that embody as much justice and freedom for persons as possible. But at the same time it is necessary to remember that Christianity always stands over and beyond any particular system or government and that this transcendence involves judgment as well as grace.

So Paul's warning to the Church in Corinth and in Rome is good for us in our day when he said to them, "Never mind," and "do not let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold."

Our modern world is filled with fads and new movements, many of which promise almost instant salvation. And unfortunately the church has had a way of embracing and baptizing fads from the secular world as if some new movement would solve most of our problems.

T groups were popular in the 50's, followed by sensitivity training. Then the "Secular City" was going to save us, or perhaps Transactional Analysis, or Transcendental Meditation. There was the "counter culture," the youth culture, liberation theology, the war on poverty, or Key '73, or the human potential movement.

This is not to say that we as Christians can't learn from such movements, but we need always to look at them critically before we embrace them in total.

We can be sure that more new cultural movments and gurus will appear in our lifetime and some of them will be diametrically opposed to the presently dominant ones and there will be those who will hail them as redemptive events.

We will be confronted by new gurus of a new polytheism or by a triumphantly successful ideology of the new Right or new Left, or by mind-blowing new life styles originating on the surface of the moon, or by movements of fanatical asceticism among the youth. Will we in each case have to go through the same dreary cycle of wild enthusiasm and sober second thoughts.

Again, it needs to be emphasized that we Christians should listen and pay attention to other ideas and movements and we need to participate in the political struggles of the times. What we have to be careful about is not listening or paying attention as such, but that of listening with uncritical adulation, if not idolatrous intent, of listening with wide-eyed and open-mouthed wonder.

One verse of a hymn reminds us, "Our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be." This is good news for us because it reminds us to be calm, to stop our frantic search for new cultural and ideological refuges. It reminds us that there is no abiding refuge except the Almighty God.

So we are back to Paul's advice to the church in Corinth, "Never mind." We Christians are to be people who know when to say "never mind."

Unfortunately some people say "never mind" at the wrong time and to almost everything. That's not what Paul meant. Some people say "never mind" to religion. To them it is not important. It's mainly a matter of words, they say.

But by just saying "never mind" to all religion, they are being about as wise as the passenger on a ship which had had its rudder broken off in a high sea. She consoled the captain by saying, "Never mind, it was down where nobody could see it. It won't make any difference."

To throw over all religion because there is so much false religion around, makes just as much sense. In both cases, rudder and religion, it is what steers the ship. And each one of us is giving over our selves to some kind of religion even though we might not be aware of it. But we need to know what religion is steering our lives--what we are worshipping. So just to say "never mind" to all religion is foolish.

If. But there is also a good use of the phrase, "Never mind," and that's what St. Paul was talking about. And it gives us some advice on how we Christians are to be different in today's kind of world.

1. We Christians are to be those who can say "never mind" to the many things of the world. This is not to say that we de-value material things. We are to take them very seriously. We know that God's creation is good and meant to be used responsibly by us. But we also know that ultimately all things pass away, that nothing is eternal, save God.

We can say "never mind," because we know that we live in two worlds at once. While we are alive, we are always in this world and yet we know that that is not all there is to life. Our lives are connected with God and with eternity.

2. This means secondly, as Christians we can say "Never Mind," when our friends and neighbors seem to have more of this world's goods than we, and some things which we are sure that we could very well use. We can learn to say "never mind." We can say it and have no covetousness in our minds. We know that true life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions. Jesus said, "What does it profit a person if that person shall gain the whole world and lose his or her own soul?" That's why the Apostle Paul could say, "I have learned in whatever state I am to be content."

3. This means thirdly that we Christians are different because we can say never mind to the worries and anxieties that trouble so many people in our time. So many people worry because they have not arrived at a "top place" in life and have no great fame or position.

Others worry because they are sure they are a failure as parents. And some if they have trouble finding something to worry about will search and search until something is found or they worry because they have nothing to worry about., To all such, the Bible says, learn to say, "never mind."

As Christians we can say "never mind," because as the letter to the church in Rome puts it, "If God is for us, who is

against us? . . .Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separte us from the love of God in Christ Jesus or Lord. Amen.