Sunday November 20, 1977

"ANOTHER STORY" Matthew 25:1-12
No. 3 in a series: "How are Christians to be different in our kind of world?"

How are Christians to be different in our kind of world? Let me tell you another story. It is about one of my friends and his family. I believe the story illustrates how Christians are different in the right kind of way when unexpected problems come into our lives.

To begin the story, listen to some of my friends' own words. December 1970. Reading is important to me. I am the editor of a magazine. Two years ago at the age of 34, Providence smiled on me. The threads in my life had come together in a beautiful pattern. . . I am the founding editor of THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY, a professional journal for parish clergy. My wife, Margie, and I have never been closer. She has grown with me through our changing locations; a teacher who put me through seminary, a pastor's wife, and now the mother of three lovely children. We look like the all-American family. Between my work as a journalist/minister and the loving ordered life in our new home I am a happy man. I feel good about everything.

December 1971. I cannot read what I have written. Something awful has happened! I cannot read. If I cannot read, I cannot edit or write or work. I cannot drive or play tennis. I cannot even play catch with my son. A strange disease has struck my eyes, first one, then the other. Something has caused the back centers of my eyeballs to hemorrhage. Scar tissue has built over the hemmorrhaging tissue, and it is opaque to light. I have two blind centers. I am not totally blind; I have peripheral vision. But I might as well be. My little home and family is in jeopardy and disarray. Margie and the children are confused and frightened. My friends at the church are worried for us. My moods range between despair and anger. What happened? What have I done to deserve this? O God, what is to become of us? The doctor said it is 'permanent, irreparable, irrevocable.' There is not future.

December 1972. I can see what I have written, but with great difficulty. I have not been fired from my editorial position. The magazine is still being published but against great odds. I have made up my mind to do the best I can. I am being helped by some weird glasses. Some wonderful people have helped a lot too. My family has been good to me, and some special people have helped in special ways.

I think I can do some things even though legally blind. The church where we are members wants me to become its minister. I cannot do that. Whoever heard of a blind minister? I know that church. It is large, vigorous, discerning, and demanding. Thank you God, but I am not up to that. It's nice to be asked, but I just couldn't do it.

December 1974. I am senior minister of the First Congregational church of Western Springs. I preach, teach, and administrate that large, vigorous church. I love my work and it is going very well. In addition, I am a consulting editor for the Christian Ministry Magazine. I teach a course in homiletics for Chicago Theological Seminary. There are some things I do not do well; there are some things I do not do at all. Margie is happy in another role. She is learning to be the chauffeur for the family, the repairman for the house and the bookkeeper of the household. It is not the way either of us wants it to be, but we are managing and that will have to do. Thank you God for saving me.

These vignettes cover four traumatic years in the life of my friend. He is legally blind and it is not likely that his eyesight will ever improve. But he has learned to live with it. His story is filled with hope. He has learned to live with eyesight that has failed. It can be done. The story is about lost eyesight. But it could have been something else or someone else. It could be you or me. We all lose something precious to us and do not always know how to cope with that.

His is a religious story because he is a religious person. However too many religious stories, except those in the Bible, are about "HOW GOD AND I MADE A MILLION DOLLARS SELLING REAL ESTATE." In that kind of psuedo-religious story, God is usually made a bit player, a minor character. My friend could have written his story with the title--"HOW GOD AND I OVERCAME BLINDNESS," but that is not how he lived it. My friend does believe that he was saved by God's grace, but more than anything else, you will find in his story a man trying to understand what happened to him and how God was involved in the happening.

My friend first noticed his eyesight failing when he began to see double. When the double vision persisted and when eye-examinations were made by specialists, and after he had tried every eye-specialist he could locate, he was told by the final physician, "Mr. Kemper, I have studied all your

tests and reports. You have a form of macular degeneration. There is an 80 percent chance it will stay the way it is forever; there is a 10 percent chance it will worsen; there is a 10 percent chance it will slightly improve. You will not go totally blind. The damage to your central vision is permanent, irreparable, and irrevocable. There is nothing more we can do for you." "But Doc, what do I do now?" asked my friend. "You learn to live with it." said the Doctor.

Looking back on that day, my friend said, "I have to appreciate the way the doctors--all of them--steadfastly refused to promise me anything, not even hope for a better tomorrow. . . .They told me straight that my string had run out, I had reached the end of the line."

He went on to say that he learned something very important. "The tougher problem is the patient's projections onto the doctor. It is the patient who surrenders his power to the doctor. 'Heal me O mighty one' should be a Biblical prayer, but more often than not it is the contract between patient and doctor. In some instances, healing will not happen until the patient regains some of the power he has lost in the process of transformation; power he had given to the doctors in the hope for recovery.

"That was my problem," said my friend. "And that is what Dr. Gass told me; 'You learn to live with it.' That was his compassion for me. I needed to be freed from the physicians' power."

"But there was one snag. Even freed, learning to live with it was my problem in an even more powerful way. My problem became the struggle for rehabilitation."

One of the first things my friend noticed was the amazing adaptability of his injured eyes. Those eyes wounded as they were had not given up. They wanted to make do with what they had. They would not quit trying to see. Had they thought or felt as my friend had, they would probably have been angry or scared as he was, but they moved to the direction of other stimuli.

The coming months were not easy for my friend. Outwardly, his rehabilitation seemed to be progressing, but inwardly he was carrying a heavy load of anger. He was trying hard

to follow a normal routine, but that normal routine was interrupted constantly by his anger at other people and circumstances that were part of it. He was trying hard to do what he used to do, but he always seemed to be angry about what he did.

Listening to one of his angry tirades over some trivial matter, his seven year old daughter asked her mother one day, "Why is daddy so angry?" During these months, my friend asked himself all the questions that most religious people ask. Was God punishing him for some wrong-doing? He knew that repentance is healthy and he also knew that the search for punitive explanations is not healthy and that it is bad biblical theology.

The anger and soul-searching were but part of the story in those days. There were some other wonderful and gracious events happening to him to. It did not come clear to him until some time later, but even in his time of desperation he was the beneficiary of some powerful help. His children did not love him for his eyes. They accepted with remarkable equanimity that he no longer played catch with them after school and that he could not see them in a play at school, or that mom had to drive the family where they wanted to go.

And as for God, that great benefactor of his life to whom he had been thankful, that God at that very moment of desperation was offering help and hope to him. That Psalmist said something about the valley of the shadow of death; that is where he was. And the psalmist went on to say--thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. There was a rod and a staff there, but he could not yet grasp them. As he said in his own words, "An angry person on an island feels very sorry for himself."

He discovered in those months that his effort alone would not solve the problem. If his problem was blindness, then effort might be the best solution. But if his problem was the pain of loss, then effort alone would not do it. All this time he was refusing to admit what had happened; that he, a rising young man was blind, permanently, irreparably, irrevocably. He had suffered a loss.

Thus when he was offered the position as Senior Minister of the congregation where he was a member, he at first

turned it down. Listen to his own words. "I had told the congregation no because I had not yet confronted the truth. I did not need help with my eyes--I had that. I did not need more effort to make the loss less powerful in my life--I had done that. I needed inward healing, forgiveness. I need grace and I needed God. I would not be healed by my effort. I could be healed by grace. I had to discover that my life, even in its affliction, was in God's hands not mine. I could not save myself. All that effort was an attempt to heal myself. I could not forgive myself for what had happened to me and to those I love and work with.

What a fool I had been. I had made it a win/lose situation. I had made myself into something I wasn't. I was handicapped in spirit, not in the eyes. I wanted to be loved for something I wasn't, an unfortunate victim of circumstance. I could not accept the love that was given to me for what I was and not for what I was not.

What a big dummy. All the time I had been loved. All the time I had been free. All the time I had been healed. The healing I had sought was at hand all the time. God does not punish anyone. We punish ourselves. God wants all to be whole. The forgiveness I had sought was always there. I just would not face my own anger. I was hostile to doctors, to presenters of cures, and most of all to myself.

I had thought if I were any kind of man at all, I could master loss. The grace I had sought had always been there. Luther was right. Man cannot save himself by works. What I had prized as independence was faintly masked pride. I had wanted to work everything out for myself, trusting no one but me. O God, could I trust you? That was my hope. The rest was grace.

The subject of this kind of story has no end. It begins with the acceptace of loss as a fact and goes on with the ways in which one lives with that loss, exploring the ways in which grace is a powerful presence in all of life. As my friend says, "This is a story about personal liberation from the circumstances of my very own life. My impression in looking around me is that this imprisonment is familiar to all of us. We make ourselves prisoners of ourselves."

There is within all human life a process of acquisition and relinquishment. Most of us are much better, more skillful at acquisition than we are at letting things go at loss.

Yet in the arithmetic of life, the two processes must be equal. Everyone loses. We lose life, we lose work, we lose innocence, we lose power, we lose friends, and we lose many other things. Life is made up of gaining and losing. As Christians we have some remarkable discoveries to make about loss, about letting go.

We will discover that in God's wisdom, God has fashioned us to meet loss. We have in our human being a power to encounter the losses of life. And we discover too that often in losing, we win.

We Christians also have something else. Like my friend Bob Kemper and like the five wise young maidens in the parable, we have some oil in our lamps so that when the unexpected comes into our lives, we have a residue faith and undergirding to meet it. Even though we get very angry, very depressed, try to do things on our own power, underneath it all, stands our faith in God, and then we discover that God's grace is sufficient for us. That's how Christians are to be different in our kind of world. Amen.

** The details of this story are taken from the book, "AN ELEPHANT'S BALLET" by Robert Kemper, the Seabury Press, 1977.