Sunday, February 26, 1978
WE CAN BECOME WHAT WE HATE
I Samuel 28:3-10; Romans 7:15-20

We can become what we hate! We often do things to which we are opposed! We find ourselves acting in ways that are opposite to what we say we believe! It happens to all of us and it's not something new in our time.

Saul, the first King of Israel sought to be loyal to the God of Israel. He disliked wizards, mediums, and fortunetellers. Saul had seen how they led people astray and contributed to false religion. Thus, he issued an order which banned· all wizards, mediums, and fortune tellers from practicing their profession. But then just four verses later in the same Bible story we read: "Saul said to his servants, 'Seek out for me a woman who is a medium that I may go to her and consult her.'"

The Apostle Paul in the New Testament described this same tendency with these words, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

How does it happen that we often do what we hate or that we can become what we hate?

1. First of all, like King Saul, we like to make exceptions of ourselves. He saw witchcraft as a public evil, but when his own bad days closed in; when he felt that God was silent and far away, his old superstitions were rekindled, and he made an exception of himself. "Find me a woman who is a medium that I may consult her."

At the root of almost every corrupt practice in our society we find persons who although say they believe in justice, fairness, and honesty, make an exception of themselves. They put themselves above the law. As modern psychology puts it, we rationalize with endless excuses dispensing ourselves from obligations that we wish all others would observe. We make ourselves the exception.

2. Secondly and related to this tendency of ours to make exceptions of ourselves, is the belief that the way we behave is our own private business and no one else's. Nowhere is this more evident today than in the field of personal health practices.

Over 99% of us today are born healthy, but we are made sick as a result of personal misbehavior and environmental conditions. Thus, the solution to the problem of health care in this country involves first and foremost individual responsibility for one's own good health.

Now it's true that some of our attempts at healthy living may be thwarted by the temptations of a culture whose economy depends on high production and high consumption and self-gratification. To be frugal and saving and defer self-gratification is almost unheard of. "You deserve it. You deserve the very best. Buy it now. Do it now! Don't wait for anything. Look out for No. 1, and you can do it all on the installment plan."

But good health and prevention of disease means forsaking the bad habits which many of us practice — overeating, too much drinking, taking pills, staying up at night, en-gaging in promiscuous sex, driving too fast and smoking cigarettes — or, to put it another way, it means doing things which require special efforts and discipline on our part — exercising regularly,

doing away with bad habits, watching one's diet, reading the labels on processed food and more.

Today in our culture we live a contradiction — the idea of individual responsibility is slowly dying while at the same time we continue to sanctify individual freedom, yet we continue to narrow individual freedom through the continued development of the beneficent state.

Thus, today the cost of sloth, gluttony, alcoholic intemperance, reckless driving, sexual frenzy and smoking is becoming more a national responsibility rather than an individual responsibility, and we justify this under the banner of individual freedom (I can do what I please). We forget that one person's freedom to practice bad health habits is another person's shackle in taxes and insurance premiums.

Meanwhile we are led to believe that more insurance coverage, more doctors, more hospitals, new technologies will improve health. None of them will. We may have better care while we are sick, but the next major advance in the-over-all health of the American people will come from the assumption of individual responsibility for one's own health and a necessary change in habits for the majority of Americans, and this will include doing away with the tendency of always making an exception of ourselves and the belief that what we do with our own health is entirely our own business.

Convincing people to assume more individual responsibility is not an easy task because the culture and peer pressure try to do the opposite. Awareness of danger to body and mind isn't usually acquired until a person is in his or her mid-twenties or later and by then patterns of behavior are set which are hard to change. Children tire of "scrub your teeth," "don't eat that junk," and "go to bed." By the time they are 16, society says they shall have cars, drink beer, smoke, eat junk at drive-ins and have a go at fornication. If they demur, they are sissies or queer or both. The pressure of the peer group is hardly balanced by the limp protestations of permissive parents, nervously keeping up with the neighbors in houses crammed with snacks and mobile bars. Like King Saul, however, we make an exception of ourselves.

What's true in the field of health is true in other areas of life as well. Individual rights to do as one pleases are stressed in our culture while individual responsibility and being responsible to others is being eroded, and we become what we hate.

3. Third, we can become what we hate because often our thoughts, our good ideas, our principles become inverted when translated into action.

In the case of individuals, for example, a child or an adult seeking love and affection will often in his or her desire for that love and affection become so demanding and therefore so unlovable that he or she actually drives away the very persons from whom he or she is seeking love and affection.

To put it another way, sometimes our efforts to overcome our separation are made in such alienating ways that we accomplish the opposite of our intention. A friend of mine went to a meeting with the intention of mending a broken relationship by acknowledging his part in the difficulty. He did it, however, in such an arrogant way that he worsened the situation he had hoped to help.

And not only can we become what we hate as individuals, but institutions and systems face the same problem. There is a scientific law which states that any natural process, whether physical or chemical, tends to set up conditions which oppose the further operation of the process.

Although this law has very broad applications, it is usually looked upon more as a curiosity, but it contains within it a profound insight into the nature of individuals and the nature of systems and institutions.

For example, government regulations often come into being with the good intention of protecting people, but then we find that the system we have created for our protection gets larger and larger and has more power and so begins to encroach on the very citizens it was originally designed to protect. What was supposed to protect us becomes our enemy.

Incidentally, one theory of infectious disease in an individual, is that our body's defense mechanism somehow overreacts, and it is not the bacteria itself which causes the illness but somehow our own system's defense mechanism works against the very organism it theoretically protects. According to Dr. Lewis Thomas there are not many infectious diseases in which you can prove actual direct damage to cells or tissues by the invading organism, but rather the invading organism causes the body's defense mechanism to overreact and thus do damage to itself. It's over-reactivity on the part of the host that does the damage. That's true of so much of life.

Our thoughts, our good intentions often become inverted when translated· into action or into systems. Sometimes the irony of it all is staggering. For example, we are supposed to be a spiritual, God-fearing nation in conflict with the godless materialism of the Communist countries. But today, Communist China is built on self-sacrifice, hard-work, and frugality, some of the very same ideals of the Puritans who helped put this country together. Mao thought he was creating a religionless society, but really, he has created the largest "Puritan" state in the history of the world.

We can become what we oppose or hate. This also has its humorous side. One of the most amusing and revealing episodes of the Chinese cultural revolution was the fact that when hundreds of thousands of inspired youth flooded Peking in 1966, they found that each contingent wore button badges announcing its city, out some badges were scarcer than others. Immediately and spontaneously a market arose in which different badges were traded at discount. Youth proudly showed off the scarce badges they were able to get by trade. They were practicing fundamental capitalism as they demonstrated against capitalist tendences and for the cultural revolution.

Inside Russia, similar contradictions can be found. Hedrick Smith, chief of the New York Times News Bureau in Russia for a number of years wrote, "The longer I stayed in Moscow, the more I began to wonder whether anomalies weren't the rule. I found that in spite of the climate of aggressive state atheism, there are twice as many church adherents as card-carrying Communists; that in a society that has enshrined state ownership of property, more than half the living space is privately owned; that in a system of rigorously collectivized agriculture, nearly 30% of farm output is grown on private p1ots and much of it sold through sanctioned free enterprise markets; that in spite of rigid ideological conformity imposed from above, large numbers of people are politically indifferent and privately mock the inflated claims of Communist propaganda; that in the land of the proletariat, people are far more rank, class and status conscious than in the west."

The very systems we devise often tend to set up conditions which oppose the further operation of the process. In our own society on the one hand, we want persons in our businesses and companies and other enterprises to work hard, pursue a career, and yet in many of our products and advertisements we are told to seek pleasure, instant joy, to relax and let go, to buy and consume and not wait until one has the money in the bank to pay for it. Work is no longer seen as an end in itself but as a means to consumption and display, and then we wonder why people take no pride in their work.

Sometimes the fact that the systems we devise begin to work against themselves becomes very humorous. I came across an item recently — The largest building in the world is the space vehicle preparation shed at Cape Canaveral, Florida. However, it is so large that it generates its own weather, including clouds and rain. Designed to protect space rockets from the elements, it pelts them with storms of its own.

What's all this got to do with the Christian faith? Sometimes the fact that we tend to become what we hate is not a serious matter at all, it's merely something to laugh about and it teaches us not to take ourselves or the systems we devise too seriously. As the verse of one hymn puts it, "Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be." We are never going to be saved by systems we devise. Sometimes we only make matters worse.

But equally important the fact that we can become what we hate or become wha.t we oppose needs to be taken seriously by the church and other institutions as well. Often the church as a system or institution becomes what it is supposed to be fighting against. The church by its very nature is to be inclusive. It is the Christian faith which teaches that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave or free. We are all creatures of one Creator, brothers and sisters in the human race.

Yet churches often become exclusive. Christian churches were reluctant to integrate, and some still haven't allowed persons of another race to become members. Some Churches are in the forefront of the battle against equal rights for women.

What all these paradoxes of opposites are about is the fact that it is part of the very nature of passionate conflict to become what we hate. We can become bigoted in our reaction to bigotry. We can become proud of our humility. By our intensity of hatred, individuals and nations and institutions can create in themselves the very character they imagine in their enemies and. then we ourselves are done in, not by our enemies, but by our reaction to them. Beware, lest we become what we hate! Amen.