Book 7

Sunday April 9, 1978

"LIVING ON BORROWED TIME!" Luke 12:16-21

A few days ago someone told me about a young man who's about 30 years old. I don't know his name. But three times a week or more this young man comes close to death. He looks much older than his age. A number of years ago he was told that his kidneys were failing. He was offered a transplant operation, but said, "No, he had seen too many horror stories lived out in destroyed hopes." "No, thank you," he said, "I'll just take the dialysis treatments as long as I can. He takes them three times a week.

In the city where he lives, he works with the youth commission. A few weeks ago on Monday night, he was at the drug council working with young people and their drug-related problems. He was giving his time and efforts to others. He feels that once you have accepted the fact that you're dying, you may as well fill your life with living.

So he was at the drug council when he discovered that his muscles wouldn't work--he couldn't stand up. People from the drug council rushed him to the hospital which was some miles away. But before dialysis could be started, his heart stopped. They resuscitated him, and he was in the hospital for a few days before he came back to work with the young people.

He looks kind of funny. The powerful drugs he has to take make his fair fall out in patches, so he has shaved his head. Fad and fashion don't mean much to him--so he dresses the way he chooses. A lot of people think his clothes are odd. They are. Many say he looks a little frightening. He does. A number of people think he says strange things. He does. Some think his attitude about death is different. It is!

Don't misunderstand. This young man is not any great hero. He is simply a young man who comes very near death quite often. He goes to the hospital to have his blood vessels cut open and attached to a machine for several hours at a time. To be an appendage to a machine, to know that your life depends on stainless steel tanks and a few yards of plastic tubing--this is living death.

Yet this young man has found a way of living with death. Each day brings its own cargo of cares. Diet has to be

carefully controlled. He must live within a reasonable distance of the machine on which he is dependent. Medications must be taken in careful dosage and at prescribed hours. It doesn't sound very much like he's free. But he is!

He is free because his way of living is to fill each of life's moments with meaning. He is free because he is not afraid of death. He has found away to be useful to other human beings. He works with young people because he likes and understands them. After they get beyond his strange appearance, they seem to like him too. He has a brilliant mind. But he has told the young people with whom he works nothing about his physical condition. They don't know about his frequent trips to the hospital. He is simply a human being relating to other human beings. He does not suffer from the illusion of immortality.

What would be our reaction in this situation? Would we be filled with self-pity? Would we always be trying to wring that last ounce of self-gratification out of every precious second? Would we always be looking out for number one? Would we have no time for others and their cares and worries? Or is this the way we are already living?

Jesus Christ told a story about another man. This person had everything in terms of material possessions. He was a rich farmer and he was in good health. He had so much wealth he didn't have room to store it all and he was highly pleased with himself and his increasing wealth.

Furthermore, because he was wealthy, he also thought he was wise. In fact he thought himself so wise and so deserving that he couldn't imagine ever dying and having to give it all up. He was sure that he could plan every part of his life to his satisfaction, after all he was in control. He could decide how and how long he was going to live. He could've written the bestselling book, "LOOKING OUT FOR NO. 1" a long time ago.

This man fell into the trap of thinking he was a self-made man and that he needed no one else and was responsible to no one.

So he decided that he would build larger storage barns and store up all his wealth for himself. Then one day

he could pat himself on the back and say, "You certainly have been good all these years, now take it easy, eat, drink and be merry." But God said to this man, "Fool, this night your soul is required of you--so what good are all these things to you."

Yes, Jesus called this man a fool and his attitude toward himself, toward others and toward God--foolish. He was a fool because he failed to take into account that there's more to life than this life. He failed to take into account that one day he would die like all the rest of us--rich or poor.

There comes a time in each person's life, when as the Bible puts it, our soul is required of us. The one inevitable fact of our life is our death. We live always on borrowed time. Thus Jesus told a number of stories about being ready. He didn't say that we are to be continually pre-occupied with the fact of our death, but simply that we are always to take that fact into account. If we live empty and selfish lives then after death our life will be empty and selfish. That much we can and do take with us.

To say that our soul is required of us is also another way of saying that God is in ultimate control of our lives. We did not bring ourselves into the world. We do not really own any part of the world. We are finally responsible to God and through God to others.

In contrast, the young man with the kidney disease was always fully aware that he was dying. As a result he had also learned that love of neighbor is very different from just being a jolly good fellow. The peace which passes all understanding is not the same ~~with~~ as the peace of having one's house mortgage paid off or knowing that one has lots of money stored away for the future. Trusting in God has hardly anything in common with calculating the probabilities of a successful future.

To be a follower of Jesus Christ is to die to the world. It is to realize deep down that all things pass away. Only God is eternal!

All of us need at times therefore to step back from our habitual ways of thinking about our affairs and get ourselves free from some of the attitudes which hold us in bondage to the things of the world.

We need, for example, to take another look at our temptation to over-rate the opinion of other human beings. If we desire the prestige which comes from wealth and ability and high position--if we so desire it that we would be crushed were it denied us or taken from us--then we are worshipers not of the true God, but of human beings. Then, like the rich fool in the story Jesus told, we are subject to the illusion of immortality.

We are also subject to the same illusion every time we search anxiously for another person who can break the chains of our loneliness and every time we build new defenses to protect our life as an alienable property.

Although we keep telling ourselves and each other that we are living on borrowed time, our daily actions, thoughts and concerns keep revealing to us how hard it is to fully accept that fact.

Sometimes small events and those which are seemingly innocent tell us how easily we give eternal qualities to ourselves, our possessions and the world. For example, it takes only a hostile word to make us feel sad and lonely. It takes only a rejecting gesture to plunge us into self-complaint. It takes only a small failure in our work to lead us into a self-destructive depression.

Although our faith teaches us that we are worth more than what the world makes us, we keep giving eternal value to the things we own, to the people we know, to the plans we make and the successes we collect.

Indeed it takes only a small disruption to lay our illusion of immortality bare and to reveal how much we have become victimized by our surrounding world suggesting to us that we are in complete control. Aren't the many feelings of sadness and despair connected with the exaggerated seriousness with which we have clothed the people we know, the ideas to which we are exposed and the events we are a part of?

All of us need at times to get some spiritual distance from our immediate situations, then we can increase our awareness of those aspects of our modern consciousness which cut the center out of our Christian experience; and so help to free us from them. We need help in gaining a sense of humor about ourselves which comes from taking a

less contemporary and more eternal perspective--a perspective in which our love of God and our concern for our neighbors will have a chance to grow. And we need always to remember that we are living on borrowed time.

Every moment is a precious gift, an opportunity to use as best we can. Just suppose for a moment that each of us lived in this way, always conscious of the fact that we are dying. How different our lives might be. Maybe we would be more kind and loving to one another, always aware that this might be our last time together.

We prefer to believe that there will always be another chance to say, "I love you," or I'm sorry. We live our lives as though there will always be another tomorrow in which to send that friend a card, give the church that gift or take a flower to someone we love.

For years Louis Esposito worked three jobs to pay the medical expenses of his daughter, Elaine Cindrella, who has been in a coma for 36 years.

He borrowed money to send her to Lourdes, France, looking for a cure in the healing waters. He never complained. He was slowed by three heart attacks that forced him to quit job after job until he was unable to work. Social Security and Medicare took over. But he never complained.

He shouldered the burdens silently and put off going to a doctor for his own pains. Last week he did call a doctor after a bad cold left him hoarse. An examination found his lungs and liver almost destroyed by cancer, and he was hospitalized immediately. Doctors offered no hope. Still he never complained.

Louis Esposito 69, died quietly Saturday. He will be buried Wednesday in his native Chicago. He was a good guy, one in a million," says Lucille Esposito, his wife of 43 years. "He always wnated to do everything together. How many wives can say that? He couldn't go to the store but that he wanted me to go with him. He was a shy guy, a good guy."

Doctors said Esposito wouldn't make it through the night. Mrs. Esposito went to the hospital Saturday to see him. "he was waiting for me. When I walked into the room, he died. He was like that. He never wanted to do anything

without me. That means more to me than anyone could know." Esposito's casket is adorned with roses and a banner reading "Dad" from his sleeping daughter. Elaine was 6 years old when she slipped into a coma after a simple appendectomy. Doctors rushed to the waiting room to tell Esposito and his wife that something had gone wrong. Their only child would die before morning, they said.

Esposito fainted. "I looked at my husband on the floor, my little girl dying in bed with a 107 temperature and I thought, "This is the end. God give me courage. I waited that night for her to open her eyes and recognize me. . . but she never did.

Elaine never woke, lingering somewhere between life and death. She is 43 now. Mrs. Esposito has turned her unmoving daughter every few hours each day since 1941, to keep away bedsores. She has tube fed, cleansed, applied medication and responded to the moans night and day. She never complained either, and she won't now.

All of us live on borrowed time. How are we going to use our borrowed time? Amen.