Sunday, September 24, 1978

LIVING IN A DISPOSABLE WORLD (NO. 3 IN A SERIES: SPIRITUAL PROBLEMS WE ALL FACE)

Romans 12:1-9

A few weeks ago, I was given this new camera as a promotional gift while attending a service club meeting in downtown Lincoln. What is different about this camera is that it's a disposable camera. The camera comes sealed with the film already in it. Once the 12 pictures are taken, the entire camera is sent back to one of the manufacturer's factories, and while there, the film is developed, and the 12 photographs and a new camera loaded with film is sent back in return.

This little camera is just one example of thousands of disposable items which are a part of our life in today's world. Such items have become so common and so much a part of our everyday living that we no longer think much about them.

Some months ago, while visiting the emergency room of a hospital here in Lincoln, I had my temperature taken with a small disposable thermometer. It was put in my mouth for a short time, then read by the nurse and after that thrown away. As I inquired about this new type of throwaway thermometer, I was told it was more economical to do it this way· than to clean, sterilize and store the more permanent type. Anyone familiar with hospitals knows that more and more of the supplies are disposable, from hypodermic needles to diapers.

So much is disposable or throwaway in our society. Years ago, razor blades were resharpened, but now all blades are throwaways. One can buy disposable flashlights with the battery sealed in and when the light no longer works, the whole thing is thrown away and a new one used. Of course, we're all familiar with throwaway dishes and bottles. There are even throwaway disposable clear plastic communion glasses. It saves the time and work of washing the tiny glasses.

We live in a world that is so filled with processing and packaging, disposables, and throwaways, that litter has become a major problem. We hear a lot of talk about the continual need for recycling and one of the major debates in our society is how to control litter. Some states have passed laws requiring a monetary deposit on all soft drink and beer containers as one possible way of dealing with a part of the litter problem. Such a proposition will be voted on in Nebraska this fall.

This summer while on a trip out west I had forgotten to take along my swimming suit. I inquired in a motel where we were staying where I could purchase a swimming suit. The woman behind the desk pointed to a vending machine where for $1.50, one could purchase a throwaway swimming suit. Wear it once or twice and then dispose of it. Perhaps the way to solve the parking problem in cities will be to have people drive to the city in disposable automobiles.

In addition to the trend toward things being disposable or thrown away after being used, is the similar trend toward having items become obsolete in a few years or sooner — out of style, even though the item may still be usable. Obsolescence increases consumption and then we have the problem of disposing with the out-of-fashion items which increases waste. Some years ago, Vance Packard a popular writer on trends in society, wrote a book on this subject entitled, "THE WASTE-MAKERS." Planned obsolescence can have the tendency deemphasize quality workmanship, since the products will be obsolete in a few years anyway.

Because of the emphasis on disposable products and planned obsolescence, the watchword of so much of our living is not “hold fast to what is good,” as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans in the New Testament, but get rid of it as soon as possible, don’t save it or take care of it, it will be obsolete in a short while anyway. Buy the latest improved model. It may not work any better, but it is designed in the latest style. Throw away the old and buy the new. The emphasis today is on consumption. Our economy depends upon high production and high consumption.

Living in a disposable world in not just a material problem, it is also a spiritual problem. We are so conditioned to using things and then throwing them away, so conditioned to consume, that partly from habit and partly from the spirit of the times, many people go on to throw away some of the precious possessions of life and of our intellectual and spiritual culture.

Most of us would admit that many of the disposable items have made life more convenient and sometimes even more economical. The danger is that we get in a disposable mood or habit and then all things in life become too easily disposable.

We can get so used to abusing the material of life that we begin to abuse people. We can get so in the habit of disposing of things, throwing them away, that we treat all of life in the same fashion.

Tired of a husband or wife, then dispose of him or her and get a new one. The issue of abortion is in the news almost every day. The big debate now is shall there be a constitutional amendment forbidding abortion, or shall women have the right of freedom of choice in this matter concerning their own bodies and spirit? But no matter which side one takes in the debate over a constitutional amendment, the deeper issue is for us to not take human life lightly, so that it becomes easily disposable. Thus, both side in the debate agree that abortion is not a proper means of birth control.

For some time now another major issue in our society con-cerns longer living people. Because of our often-extreme emphasis on the young and on youth, we have treated older persons as if they were disposable — something to be pushed aside as obsolete and no longer valuable. Again, the danger in a disposable society is that we soon come to think of people as being disposable.

Some even treat their health as if it were disposable. Furthermore, our attempts at healthy living are often thwarted by the temptations of a culture whose economy depends on high production and high consumption. Said John Knowles, “Asceticism is reserved for hair-shirted clerics and constipated cranks, and every time one of them dies at the age of 50, the hedonist smiles; inhales deeply and takes another drink.”

Almost everyone is a gambler and knows someone who has lived it up and hit 90 years. Three decrepit, gray-haired gentlemen were seated together in the park while discussing their personal philosophies for achieving a ripe old age. “I’m eighty-six,” said the first, “and I wouldn’t be here today if I hadn’t scorned tobacco and alcohol in every form, avoided late hours and the sinful enticements of the opposite sex.” “I’m ninety-three,” said the next, “and I owe my 93 years to a strict diet of black-strap molasses, wheat germ bread, and no drink stronger than milk.” “When I was eighteen,” said the third man, “my father told me that if I wanted to enjoy life as much as he had, I should smoke black cigars, drink nothing but hard liquor and spend a lot of time with the opposite sex, and that’s exactly what I’ve done.”

“Incredible,” said the first old man. “Amazing,” said the second, for their friend was obviously the grayest, most elderly appearing of the three. “Just how old are you,” they asked. “Twenty-three,” said the third man.

Some people think of their health as disposable because as they see older people being pushed aside, they are not sure they themselves ever want to get old and would just as soon die early.

Others see their health as disposable or throwaway because of the cultural faith in progress through science and technology. So, what if part of my body becomes defective. I can always have it fixed and my health insurance will pay for it. Too many believe that national health insurance, more doctors and greater use of high cost, hospital-based technologies will improve health. Unfortunately, none of them will. The next major advance in the 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.

Changing human behavior is never easy. It involves sustaining and repeating an intelligible message, reinforcing it through peer pressure and approval, and establishing clearly perceived rewards which materialize in as short a time as possible. Advertising agencies know this, but it is easier to sell deodorants, pantyhose, and automobiles than it is health.

All of this is to say that the deeper and real problem in our time is a religious one. It is a problem of belief. It is a spiritual crisis. We no longer have any anchors to our lives which transcend what goes on day by day. We lose sight of the eternal dimension. We no longer have anything to hold onto because we too easily give ourselves over to the god of consumption which increases disposal and waste and that’s not a very adequate god.

This also means that our kind of society too much finds its reality in style, fashion, and appearances. What one displays, what one shows, is a sign of achievement. Getting ahead is a matter of displaying a particular style of life — belonging to the right clubs, artiness, travel, hobbies, a boat, skiing, snowmobiling, all of which mark one as a member of the consumption society.

Again, none of these things is necessarily bad in itself-- the spiritual problem is that more and more people actually believe that this is what life is all about. An article in the newspaper a few weeks ago, told of young executives who believe that such things as luxury homes are the key to the executive door for young businesspeople. “No matter what the sacrifice, if you want to succeed in business or whatever, you must live elegantly and get a reputation for observing the amenities, like serving the right wine.” The person who said this was simply believing all the advertisements he sees every day.

Living in a disposable world there is also the danger that intangible items such as freedom will become disposable simply because we are in so much the habit of throwing away things which no longer seem useful. Too often it seems easier to dispose of something or easier to set it aside than to work at keeping it. Freedom is a good example. At times freedom must even enlist in the fight against itself to save itself.

Not long ago in Skokie, Illinois, we had a situation where the American Civil Liberties Union, found itself in the noble but ironic position of having to rush to the aid of an organization whose first act if it were ever to attain power would be to abolish organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union.

Yet the willingness to help one's foes in such cases: to defend even freedom's most dedicated enemies against infringement of their freedom — is the specific test of one's devotion to freedom. The danger is always with us that we will too easily dispose of freedom in our effort to protect it and then in the long run lose it.

So, the Apostle Paul's words speak directly to our situation: Hold fast to what is good! "Do not be misled in a world where so much is disposable.

1. This means first of all that as Christians, we always need to be making careful distinctions. "Hold fast to what is good. Hate what is evil." In our time this making of distinctions is more important than ever. Before lightly disposing of anything, think it over. Should it be kept, or should it be thrown away, or should it be recycled?

2. Secondly, our Christian faith teaches us to have a deep respect for life and for all the materials which support life. In a world of diminishing natural resources and where energy conservation and other forms of conservation are becoming increasingly necessary, we need to be careful lest we give ourselves over too easily to planned obsolescence. It means being resistant to many of the temptations of a consumption society. It means treating the material and the spiritual with great respect.

There is a passage in Willa Cather's novel, "Death Comes for the Archbishop," in which she describes the deep respect our native American brothers and sisters had for the environment in which they lived:

"When they left the rock or tree or sand dune that had sheltered them for the night, the Navajo was careful to obliterate every trace of their temporary occupation. He buried the embers of the fire and the remnants of food, unpiled any stones he had piled together, filled up the holes he had scooped in the sand ... It was the Indians'way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through water, or birds through the air..."

"They spent their ingenuity in accommodating themselves to the scene in which the found themselves. This was not so much from indolence, as from inherited custom and respect. It was as if the great country were asleep, and they wished to carry on their lives without awakening it. When they hunted, it was with the same discretion; an Indian hunt was never a slaughter. They ravished neither the rivers nor the forest, and if they irrigated, they took as little water as would serve their needs. The land and all it bore they treated with consideration...they never desecrated it."

We need more of that attitude. "Hold fast to what is good!" Amen.