Sunday, October 8, 1978
INFLATION: ALSO A SPIRITUAL PROBLEM
Matthew 6:19-21,25-34

Hardly a day passes when we don't hear some comment or news report about inflation. Furthermore, all of us continue to experience personally many of the consequences of inflation. It is changing the shape of human institutions and eroding human hopes and expectations.

Now you may be wondering what a preacher is doing talking about inflation in a sermon. I'm not an authoritative economist and do not pretend to be one. I am often amused, however, with all the many pronouncements of the expert economists, their diagnosis of the causes and their prescriptions for the cures of inflation. Everyone is against inflation, but no one really wants to do much about it, particularly if it means doing away with one's own pet projects.

The members of Congress often speak of the evils of an unbalanced federal budget and runaway federal spending, but when it comes to building congressional office buildings or voting money for their favorite "pork-barrel" legislation, then it's a different matter. Inflation thus is a political problem as well as an economic problem. Both political parties are afraid to apply too harsh measures against inflation because it may deter economic growth and cause disastrous political consequences.

Inflation, however, is more than just an economic and political problem, it also is a spiritual problem, and it affects all of us in that way, too.

Most of us are aware of the usual economic explanations for the causes of inflation. There is an increase in demand for products and commodities on a worldwide scale, and also an increased demand for services of all kinds. Add to this the continually rising cost of energy and our reliance on foreign energy sources, plus the inability of the federal government in particular to reduce expenditures and we have inflation.

But underneath all these economic and political causes are some deeper character, expectations, and values of the society of which we are a part.

To put it simply, rising prices are also caused by social change and that gets very complex. For example, the price of a tube of toothpaste also pays for television executives'salaries and truck drivers'dental insurance. Most things in our society are more intricately connected than before.

Furthermore, in the last two decades, economic growth has been tied to various social objectives, the chief of which have been full employment and a steady increase in consumption. Such things have led to a powerful and maybe irreversible revolution in social expectations as well. Where workers once feared losing a job, which was the common experience of the Depression, we now expect a job and with it a rising standard of living. The government has difficulty in denying these expectations.

What this has meant practically, is that governments necessarily will increase spending and run larger deficits. At the same time, governments are called upon to increase social expenditures, particularly in the areas of health, welfare, social services, and the like.

These tendencies all point to a deeper spiritual problem--to a change in values in society. The value question is: what kind of society do we want to become?

Let's look then at what's been happening to us, at what kind of society we are becoming, at our changing values. These changing values which have a spiritual base are both a cause and an effect of continuing inflation.

1. First of all, we are becoming a society which emphasizes more and more the self. As the Wall Street Journal pointed out in an article last week on the. editorial page, studies of society point up a pervasive trend: we really are becoming a more self-centered people. As accepted values, sacrifice for children and for general self-denial are declining, and the pursuit of individual pleasure and interests is rising. It's not for nothing that the new magazine from the publishers of Vogue will be called "Self." We're now a country of "what about me?"

Studies in consumer buying show that the trend in general means consumers are willing to spend on "me" items from perfume to entertainment, but they look closer at the price-value relationship for the "we" items like family room furniture.

Since I'm especially interested in books, it's been revealing to note the increase in sales for books that deal with the self. Books such as "LOOKING OUT FOR NO. 1," continue to sell in breath-taking numbers. A new book just out and is already a best-seller is called, "PULLING YOUR OWN STRINGS." We are worshipping a new idolatry of self.

2. Related to this increased emphasis on the self, is the fact that consumers are increasingly willing to pay for new experiences for the self. The quest for fulfillment in the 1960s, also with an extreme emphasis on the self, is giving way to a thirst for excitement in American society. Individuals have the desire to experience all things — nothing is to be forbidden.

Some years back, people looked for personal fulfillment through their work, through their avocations, through their relationships with others and even social service. But now research shows a declining percentage of people seek fulfillment in these ways. Fewer than one-fourth of the people, according to a recent survey, now look to work as a source of fulfillment, compared with nearly half in 1970. Individuals are increasingly looking for experience and escape. People want to make sure that nothing in life passes them by. So they go to Europe, play backgammon, go on a survival weekend, try each new restaurant and every new drink. The emphasis is on consumption.

In the early development of this country, the unrestrained desire to have and to experience everything, was held in check by Puritan restraint and the Protestant work ethic. One worked because of one's obligation to one's calling, or to fulfill the covenant of the community.

In days past, people saved in order to buy those items they needed or wanted. But now with instant credit, and installment buying, one can indulge in instant gratification, and we are encouraged to do so every day. Individuals more and more attempt to find fulfillment in their lives through buying and consuming. We no longer believe very much in the ethic of buying and consuming only what one needs--but rather we are encouraged to gratify every desire as a way of life. Today everyone joins in the demand for more, not because we necessarily need it, but because we want it and believe we have a right to it. "You deserve the best for yourself," we are told in ads every day.

More and more we are giving ourselves over to the twin gods of self and consumption and the worship of these two gods provides continuing fuel for inflation. What were once considered luxuries for most of us are now considered necessities. Enjoyment is to be found in spending and consuming. These values are continually undermining the traditional values of thrift, frugality, self-control, and responsibility to one another.

Today we are encouraged to go into debt, to buy on the installment plan, not just for necessities, but to satisfy any desire or whim. It's no wonder we have difficulty in getting people to worry about the national debt. Being in debt is a way of life. People are no longer afraid of debt and deficit spending. No one need be deterred from gratifying his or her impulse or desire. It's increasingly difficult to demand of the government that which we do not demand of ourselves.

Sometime ago, I saw a double-page advertisement by Eastern Airlines which said, "TAKE THE BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE AND PHIL AND ANNE VACATION." The theme of the ad was a takeoff on the movie, "Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice," a film about the fumbling at tempts of two friendly couples to engage in husband-and-wife swapping. Here was Eastern Airlines suggesting, "We'll fly you to the Caribbean, we will rent you a Cabana. Fly now, pay later. You can postpone the money and forget the guilt and take this vacation and you can even engage in some illicit behavior on the side and all this on the installment plan. At the same time, one can imagine the President of the Airline giving a speech in which he bemoans the lack of morals in our culture.

On the one hand we expect an individual to work hard, pursue a career, accept delayed gratification and yet in our products and advertisements, we promote pleasure, instant joy, relaxing and indulging the self, and all on the installment plan. One is to be straight by day and a swinger by night.

3. These changes in values lead to a third social fact about inflation and its causes and effects. While consumers are gloomy about inflation and see little chance for curbing it soon, they are not gloomy enough to stop buying. We are in the inflation habit!

A surge in inflation used to cause consumers to cut their spending but no more. Such getting used to inflation adds further to inflationary pressures. Higher and higher prices no longer seem to effect consumption, particularly when it comes to items associated with self-indulgence. Gasoline prices are now about twice as high as they were several years ago, yet consumption continues to increase. People also spend now because they are certain that the prices are going to be higher in the future.

Now let's see how these values which are becoming dominant in our society relate to the Christian faith.

Historically, there have been two Christian traditions concerning wealth and spending. One tradition was rooted in the prophetic faith and shows a profound distrust of wealth and a glorification of poverty. Thus, the prophets in the O.T. often castigated the predatory rich on two grounds-- their injustice to the poor and their proud deluded self-sufficiency. For centuries the church has puzzled over one of the sayings of Jesus — "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." What needs to be remembered from this tradition is the warning against the danger of an easy accommodation to wealth.

The second tradition regarding wealth and spending pays a higher respect to productive wealth and to productive work. This tradition encouraged discipline, diligence, honesty, and thrift. In this tradition, John Wesley, founder of Methodism, advised his followers, “Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can.”

In some ways these two traditions differ from each other. The one glorifies poverty, the other inculcates habits that promote wealth. Nevertheless, the two traditions agree on one thing — they condemn extravagance and vulgar ostentation. Indulgence in luxury and display are frowned upon as sin — an offense against true religion. Both these traditions clash in no uncertain manner with much of the spirit of the present-day consuming society. Frugality, once a religious virtue, in now regarded as a social threat. Debt contracted for indulgence, once deemed sinful, is now looked upon as the basis for prosperity. Greed, once castigated as the enemy of the common good, is now exalted as the servant of social welfare.

All this goes directly counter to the words of Jesus — Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume. “In other words, do not put your faith in consuming. Do not put your faith or expect to find your meaning in life by acquiring more and more things to play with or with which to gratify yourself.

Inflation is also a spiritual problem. because it reflects a basic change in the values which govern our society and our individual lives. What kind of society to we want to become? Do we like the direction in which we are heading? These are the key questions we Christians need to be continually asking.

If we do not like the present direction, there are some things we can do.

1. We can conserve energy and other natural resources. We can do our best to cut down waste in every form. In this regard we need to find ways to reward conservation rather than penalizing it. (water and college)

2. We Christians need to keep asking the awkward questions about the way in which all of us use our wealth. Some of our present practices stimulate some of the worst motives of pride, envy, and greed, and at the same time contribute greatly to inflation. We need to ask such awkward increased questions about how all public agencies spend money. We need to debate the amount of money spent on armaments.

3. Thirdly and hopefully we can begin again to find fulfillment in things other than spending and consuming. We need to recover the fulfillment that comes from a job well done, and the fulfillment that comes from human relationships and. being of help to others rather than just trying to gratify our own selfish desires.

Only when we as individuals begin to change our own values and our own expectations, will we begin to win the battle against inflation as well.