Sunday March 11, 1979

"ONE THING AT A TIME" Matthew 6:5-13, 14:22-23

Some years ago, one of his students asked historian Charles Beard if he could sum up everything he had learned in life in five minutes? Mr. Beard replied that he could do better than that; he could do it in just four lines. Here's what he said:

1. Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad with power.
2. The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.
3. The bee fertilizes the flower it robs.
4. When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.

Each of these sentences of course, opens out on a universe of thought and experience. Each could be the theme of a sermon. Each of these statements seems enigmatic or paradoxical. All represent a challenge to the individual mind--not just to see fully into and beyond the separate statements, but to relate them to one's own personal experience.

Short statements like these, sometimes called apothegms, are often a useful way of describing and remembering bits of truth about life and our own behavior. Little sayings like these can be helpful guides.

Listen to this one: "There is no natural conflict or inconsistency between free will and determinism. Life is both. Life is like a game of cards. The hand that is dealt you represents determinism. The way you play the hand is free will. Thus it is better to make the most of what you are than to worry yourself into exhaustion because you are not someone else."

Someone once asked Dr. Albert Schweitzer what he had learned throughout his long life and he replied: "I have come to feel that the greatest discoveries in civilization have to do with ethics." "For me," he said, "the greatest ethic is life and world affirmation. If we can develop true reverence for all life, we may be able to understand it."

If someone asked you what you had learned throughout your life, what would you say? Could you sum it up in several sentences?

This morning we are going to examine in more detail a short saying that can be of tremendous help to all of us. It's printed on the card which was given to you with the Order of Worship. "DO ONE THING AT A TIME AND BE ALL THERE WHEN YOU DO IT!"

There is expressed in this statement a profound practical truth and also a deep spiritual truth and the two are related to each other.

1. First let's look at the practical side of this statement: DO ONE THING AT A TIME AND BE ALL THERE WHEN YOU DO IT.

Most of us have times in our lives--in fact some of us have these times almost every day, when it seems that there are just too many problems facing us or two many things to be done, so much so, that we don't know where to begin. We say something like, "I just don't know what I'm going to do."

Right here is where this little saying has its practical value. Instead of trying to do everything at once: instead of rushing in quickly and trying to solve every problem simultaneously and usually making things worse: we can do one thing at a time and be all there when we do it. And if you're in doubt about what to do first, then for a short time do nothing! Take some time to decide what you need to do first, then what you need to do second and on down the list. In the process you may also discover that your list is too long and that some of the things you thought needed to be done by you, do not need to be done at all. Some of the problems you thought you needed to solve may in reality be someone else's problem

DO ONE THING AT A TIME AND BE ALL THERE WHEN YOU DO IT! A lot of the secret of making good grades in school; a lot of the secret of doing a job well so that you are proud of it; a lot of the secret of being happy; a lot of the secret of accomplishing quite a bit in a short time; a lot of the secret is to do one thing at a time and to be all there when you do it. It's a way of bringing some order into our usually fragmented lives. It's what professional athletes call--concentration.

DO ONE THING AT A TIME AND BE ALL THERE WHEN YOU DO IT! It sounds so deceptively simple that we often ignore it.

2. This little saying not only has its practical side, but also contains the secret to attaining spiritual depth in our living. If you have trouble with prayer, part of the reason is that you have not learned to do one thing at a time and to be all there when you do it.

Last October, I had the privilege of attending and participating in a five day seminar on meditation and healing. Most of the time in those five days was spent on learning how to meditate and we discovered that the most difficult part of meditating is learning to do one thing at a time and to be all there when doing it.

We learned through daily practice how difficult it is to train one's mind and body to do one thing at a time. What we did for five days was to practice meditation nine hours a day under the leadership of a skillful and trained teacher who could point out to us in our discussions some of the pitfalls and some of the temptations. Again, we discovered that learning to meditate at the deepest level involves above all esle--learning to do one thing at a time and to be all there when doing it.

We learned too that all meditation, whether it be eastern or western, transcendental meditation or the relaxation response meditation described in the book of that name involves the same basic principles. We learned too that there are some definite aids which can help us to do one thing at a time. There are at least four.

1. The first is a quiet environment. Some of us are distracted by things going on around us more than others. In order to meditate or in order to effectively do one thing at a time, it helps if we have a quiet place away from the usual noises and sounds. Jesus reminded his discipes of this a number of times. He said, "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret." He followed this practice himself as the Gospel of Matthew points out: "Then he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. When evening came he was there alone."

2. The second aid in learning to do one thing at a time whether it be in meditation or prayer or something else, is to use some sort of mental device or object to focus

the mind and attention. The mental device can be a sound, a word or a phrase repeated silently over and over in the mind or an image held in the mind. Or it can be concentrating on one's breathing and saying a word or phrase over and over again in rhythm with one's breathing or it can be a fixed gaze or passive contemplation of some single simple object.

You will discover as I quickly discovered, that it is very difficult to keep your whole mind focused, very difficult in other words, to do one thing at a time and to be all there when you do it. Our minds begin to wander even without our being aware of it. We are so easily distracted even when there is nothing external to distract us.

3. Thus the third part of learning to do one thing at a time is a passive attitude. It is an emptying of all thoughts and distractsion from the mind. The repeating of a word or phrase silently or counting one's breaths, or gazing on an object is a help in focusing the mind and emptying the mind of all thoughts and distractions, but it is not enough.

In fact the achieving of this passive attitude is probably the most difficult part of learning to do one thing at a time and of being all there when you do it. Thoughts, images, feelings, and more are constantly drifting into our awareness. A passive attitude does not get upset when this happens, but rather acknowledges it quietly and with patience and then brings the mind back once again to the phrase or counting of breaths or proper mental image.

The difficult part here is not to be overly concerned with how well one is doing in keeping distractions and thoughts and images out of our minds. Distracting thoughts will occur. Do not worry about them. When these thoughts or images present themselves and you become aware of them, gently push them aside and return to the process. The fact that distracting thoughts appear and that your mind drifts off into other areas does not mean you are performing the technique incorrectly. It simply means it is difficult to do one thing at a time and to be all there when you do it.

4. The fourth element in learning to do one thing at a time particularly as far as meditation is concerned is a comfortable physical position. A comfortable position is necessary so that there is no undue muscular tension.

Some methods suggest a sitting position; some the cross-legged "lotus" position. If you are lying down, there is a tendency to fall asleep. Overall, you should be comfortable and relaxed, yet alert.

All these four elements or aids are just that--aids to help us learn to do one thing at a time and to be all there when doing it.

Actually these same four elements with a few changes are helpful at times in every part of our living. All of us need times and environment as free from distractions as possible if we are going to accomplish very much. 2. We need to learn to focus our attention as completely as possible within that environment--concentration. 3. A passive attitude is necessary at times so that when distractions do bother us we can send them quietly away. 4. We need to have our physical bodies as comfortable as possible with as little muscle tension; relaxed yet alert.

What else is necessary to learn to do one thing at a time and to be all there when you do it? Practice! We cannot learn to do one thing at a time without practice. It can't be learned in five or ten or even 100 easy lessons.

And at the same time along with continual and regular practice is the need to cut down on the number of things in our lives which we think we have to do. It's called the simplification of our lives. Much of the stress, tension, nervousness and anxiety which is part of our lives doesn't have to be there because there is no basis for it in reality. It is caused by false images in our minds and lives.

We begin to build many of these false images from infancy. We pick up all sorts of ideas and values which we come to believe are of the utmost importance and are the key to sucess and happiness. That's exactly what Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount when he said such things as. . ."Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. . . No one can serve two masters. . .Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink or what you shall put on. . .Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

Jesus did not say have no thought at all about these things. He was not talking about irresponsibility. He said, "Do not be anxious about such things." Do not worry to excess about these things. Do not make them the primary goal of your life.

In other words, learning to do one thing at a time also involves dropping our shallow vain pursuits which engage too much of our time and which lead us to be uptight, disgruntled, despondent, belligerent and alone.

Isn't it true that many of us feel trapped by social and economic demands? Learning to do one thing at a time means weeding out those false values from our lives.

WE are apt to think that our greatest problems are external, environmental, but a large part of our problem is that we are not skilled in the inner life, where the real roots of our problem lie. The outer distractions of our interests reflect an inner lack of integration of our lives. We are trying to be several selves at once, without all of our selves being organized by a single, mastering Life within us.

We have seen and known some people who seem to have found this deep Center of living, where the fretful calls of life are integrated, where No as well as Yes can be said with confidence. We've seen such lives, integrated, unworried by the tangles of close decisions, unhurried, cheery, fresh, positive. And these are not people of dallying idleness; they are busy carrying their full load as well as we, but with quiet joy and springing step. They have learned the secret of doing one thing at a time and of being all there when doing it. They have also learned the deeper secret of keeping God in the center of their lives and then all other things fall into proper place. Amen.