Sunday, May 4, 1980
PAIN IS NOT THE ENEMY
Matthew 6:25-34

In his best-selling book, ANATOMY OF AN ILLNESS, Norman Cousins notes that Americans are probably the most pain conscious people on earth. “For years we have had it drummed into us — in print, on radio, over television, in everyday conversation — that any hint of pain is to be banished as though it were the ultimate evil.” “As a result,” says Cousins, “we are becoming a nation of pill grabbers and hypochondriacs, escalating the slightest ache into a searing ordeal.”

Most of us know very little about pain, what it is, what causes it, how to deal with it without panic. Yet almost everyone knows the names of many drugs that can deaden pain from every conceivable cause. But as Mr. Cousins points out, “There is far less knowledge about the fact that about 90% of pain is self-limiting, that it is not always an indication of poor health, and that most frequently, it is the result of tension, stress, worry, idleness, boredom, diet, smoking, excessive drinking, inadequate exercise, stale air, or any of the other abuses encountered by the human body in modern society. Pain is not the enemy; therefore, it is rather a signal to us that something is wrong.”

The most ignored fact of all about pain is that the best way to eliminate it is to eliminate the abuse. Instead, many people reach too quickly for the painkillers — aspirins, barbiturates, codeines, tranquilizers, sleeping pills, and dozens of other analgesics or desensitizing drugs, or they turn to smoking or alcohol as a way of attempting to deal with pain.

The physicians I talk with are deeply troubled over the extent to which the medical profession today is taking on the character of a pain-killing industry. Doctor’s offices are filled with people who are anxious because they believe something dreadful is about to happen to them because of some new ache or pain they are experiencing. And patients tend to feel indignant and insulted if they are told that no organic cause can be found for the pain.

We all need to be reminded that many forms of pain have no underlying physical cause but are the result, as mentioned earlier, of the abuse of ourselves and the pain is simply warning us that we are abusing ourselves or being abused in some fashion. So again, the point, pain is not the enemy in such instances. It is more often our friend who is trying to give us an important message. Thus, to simply take some kind of pain-killing drug and attempt to do away with the messenger can be even more destructive in the long run.

Certainly no one is advocating that any one of us ignore symptoms that could be a warning of a potentially serious illness. Some people are so terrified of getting bad news from a physician that they sometimes wait too long to get an accurate diagnosis. Thus, neglect is not the answer to hypochondria.

First of all, then, we need to see pain as a friendly messenger and not as an enemy.

Secondly, we need more information about pain and what it’s trying to tell us so that we can begin to understand its messages.

According to our best knowledge of pain, most of us begin to feel some kind of ache or pain whenever tension or fatigue reaches a certain level in our lives. It can take the form of a

migraine-type headache or a squeezing pain deep in the abdomen or cramps or a pain in the lower back or even pain in one's joints. Once we learn to make the connection between such pains and their underlying cause, then we will not panic when they occur. Rather we will do something about relieving the stress or tension in our lives at that point. Then if the pain persists despite the absence of apparent cause, we will telephone the physician.

The problem with taking some kind of pain-killing drug too quickly is that most of these drugs conceal the pain without correcting the underlying condition. They deaden the mechanism in the body that alerts the brain to the fact that something may be wrong. The body can pay a high price for suppression of pain without regard to its basic cause.

If, for example, an athlete does not pay attention to pain but rather too quickly turns to a painkiller, he or she could cause long term or permanent damage to the body.

If a baseball pitcher did not pay attention to his sore arm, but instead took painkillers and continued to pitch anyway, irreparable harm could be the result.

Pain-killing drugs are among the greatest advances in the history of medicine. Properly used, they can be a boon in alleviating suffering and treating disease. But their indiscriminate and promiscuous use is making psychological cripples and chronic ailers out of millions of people.

If we want to truly understand how pain is our friend much more than our enemy, take a look at the disease of leprosy. Medical science now knows that it is a disease of painlessness, and it is the fact that lepers lose their ability to feel pain that causes many of their problems.

It used to be believed, for example, that the bacillus which is related to leprosy was responsible in some way for the loss of fingers and toes and even of hands and feet. However, medica1 research some years ago showed that this was not the case, but at the same time it was discovered that the bacillus killed nerve endings in the body. This meant that the delicate sense of touch was missing or seriously injured.

As is often the case in research, some of the most important discoveries come about through accident. Dr. Paul Brand who began work among lepers in India, in 1947, noticed the incredible strength in leper's hands. Even a casual handshake with a leper was like putting one's finger in a vise. Was this because something in the disease released manual strength not known to healthy people? The answer came one day when Dr. Brand was unable to turn a key in a large rusty lock. A leprous boy of twelve noticed Dr. Brand's difficulty and asked to help. The Doctor was astonished at the ease with which the youngster turned the key. He examined the boy's thumb and forefinger of the right hand. The key had cut the flesh to the bone. The boy had been completely unaware of what was happening to his fingers while turning the key.

Now Dr. Brand had the answer! The desensitized nerve endings had made it possible for the child to keep turning the key long past the point where a healthy person would have found it painful to continue. Healthy people possess strength they never use precisely because resistant pressure causes pain. A leper's hands are not more powerful, he reasoned; They just lack the mechanism of pain to tell them when to stop applying pressure. In this way, serious damage could be done to flesh and bone.

Was it possible, asked Dr. Brand, that the reason lepers lost their fingers and toes was not because of leprosy itself, but because they were insensitive to injury? In short, could a person

be unaware that in the ordinary course of a day's activity, he might be subjecting his body to serious physical damage? He observed lepers as they went about their daily tasks and was convinced that he was correct. So, he began to educate lepers in stress tolerance. He designed special gloves to protect their hands; and he set up daily examinations so that injuries would not lead to ulcerations and to disfigurement, as bad previously occurred. Almost miraculously, the incidence of new injuries was sharply reduced. Lepers became more productive.

Some mysteries sti11 persisted. How to account £or the continuing disappearance of fingers, in part or whole? Why was it that parts of fingers would vanish from one day to the next? Were they knocked off? There was nothing to indicate that bones of lepers were any more brittle than the bones of normal people. If a leper cut off a finger while using a saw, or if a finger were somehow broken off, it should be possible to produce the missing finger. But no one ever found a finger after it had been lost. Why?

Perhaps rats were attacking the lepers while they slept. Since the hands of lepers were desensitized, they wouldn't know they were being attacked and so would put up no resistance. Observation posts were set up at night in the huts and wards of the leper colony. It was just as Dr. Brand thought. The rats climbed into the beds of lepers, sniffed carefully, and when they encountered no resistance, went to work on fingers and toes. The fingers hadn't been dropping off; they were being eaten. This didn't mean that all lost fingers had disappeared in this way. They could be knocked off through accidents and then carried away by rats or other animals before the loss could be observed. But a major cause of the disappearance had been identified.

Lepers know more than almost anyone that pain is not the enemy, rather pain is a friend, for it is both the warning system and the protective mechanism that enables an individual to defend the integrity of the body. Its signals may not always be easy to understand, but at least they are there and rather than too quickly trying to get rid of the signal, until we understand its message, we need to correct the abuse that is causing the pain in the first place.

There are times also when pain can deter us from doing something that ought to be done. Very few if any individuals feel like getting out of bed and walking a few steps following surgery. But we know that if we want to regain our strength, we peed some exercise even though at first it hurts to try. If we pay attention to the pain, it can keep us from overdoing it, but sometimes we have to endure some pain in order to get well more quickly.

What does all this have to do with our Christian faith? Our faith with its Hebrew heritage has always maintained that body and mind are one. We human beings are not simply mechanical devices like an automobile which need mechanical repair from time to time. We are rather children of God with built in healing capabilities which if encouraged and not interfered with can keep us quite healthy.

An important part of this built-in healing capability is the signal-giving aspect of pain. It's our body's way of letting us know that something is wrong. Thus, we are to understand pain as being a friendly messenger rather than the enemy.

Furthermore, our Christian faith reminds us that there's more to life than merely taking care of our physical needs as important as that is. We are also spiritual beings and as our spirits are nourished and healthy, it affects our whole self for the better. We need meaning in our living if we are to be healthy in every respect. We need also to be aware of and cultivate our

connection with God, for this dimension adds a quality and depth and joy to our living that can come to us in no other way.

The cultivation of this relationship with God can give us an attitude toward life which in itself is health giving. It doesn't mean that troubles will not come our way, but it does mean that we have the power and the strength to deal with any trouble or pain that comes into our life.

Then we can life as Jesus advised and we are not anxious about much that goes on in the world — we are still deeply concerned and care, but not filled with tension and anxiety which in itself is the cause of much pain.

Listen to the words of Jesus Christ again as read in our scripture lesson from the Gospel of Matthew: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on....Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? ...But seek first the kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these shall be yours as well...Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

A vital relationship with God and with human beings takes away much of the stress and tension which surrounds us, and which causes pain. Also then, when pain comes to us, we can pay attention to it, understand its message, and correct the abuse which is causing it. Amen.