Sunday, October 12, 1980
WHAT GOOD DEED?
Matthew 19:16-22

Sometimes when we ask a question, we do not get the answer we want or expect. Such was the case with the man who came to Jesus one day and asked, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Behind this question was the man’ s desire to find some meaning in his life. Perhaps he was in what we today would call a mid-life crisis. Let’s try to imagine for a few minutes what was happening to this man and what kind of person he was.

No doubt he was an individual who took life seriously. He was a seeker and that’s to his credit. He was also a good man morally. He had kept all the commandments, had observed all the rules of living. He was trying to do the best he knew, yet he was at the same time experiencing an emptiness in his life. Something was missing. Even though he had all the money he needed and had a fine home so that in a material sense, nothing was lacking ·from his life, he knew there was something else lacking. He was a highly respected citizen and a. hard worker at his job. Promotions had come to him on schedule. What more could a person want?

Yet in the interior of his life, there was a gnawing suspicion that something was missing. At such times a person asks, “What’s happened to my life? What’s it all about anyway?” “What am I breaking myself for? Is this all there is? What have I accomplished anyway? Why isn’t it making me happier? How can I find more meaning, more significance in my life?”

The man had a deep sense of unfulfillment, and no doubt was bored. Boredom is a sentiment of disconnectedness. While he was busy with many things, he wondered if what he did and was doing made any real difference. To be bored does not mean that we have nothing to do, but that we question the value of the things we are doing. The great paradox of our time is that many of us like this man are busy and bored at the same time. While he was running from one event to the next, he wondered in his innermost self if anything was really happening.

While he could hardly keep up with his many tasks and obligations, he was not so sure that it would make any difference if he did nothing at all. In short, while his life was full, he was unfilled. Sound familiar?

So, the man came to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” To put it into other words, the question was, “How do I find meaning, how do I find that which is eternal in my life here and now?” “What do I do when my life has lost its meaning and excitement?”

It is characteristic of men or women who have established themselves vocationally and have achieved some degree of stability in family relationships and have arrived at some position of standing in a community, to then begin to wonder what life is all about and if the struggle is worthwhile at all.

It is then that we wonder if we should change jobs, or change spouses, or move to another place. People in this kind of situation often express the fee1ing by saying, “I’m stuck,” or “I feel trapped.” And so, we begin to ask questions about life itself. “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”

1. Note first of all that this man's question was based on an unspoken assumption; namely that if he would find the right good deed to perform, that would solve his problem. He assumed that finding meaning is based on doing something, but he didn't know what.

Jesus did not say to him, "You're all wrong, you're headed in a mistaken direction to find meaning and the eternal dimension in your life." Rather, like a good counselor, Jesus said, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments." "But which ones?" the man asked. Jesus named the various commandments and the man replied, "All these I have kept since I was a child, but there is still something missing in my life."

Now the man should've realized that his initial question was based on a mistaken assumption — namely that meaning is found in life primarily by doing good deeds or keeping the commandments or following the rules. He had been doing all this and still something was lacking.

2. Now Jesus moved on to the heart of his answer to the man's question. He said, "There is one thing you still lack, Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me!"

These words of Jesus are the same as what he said in the Sermon on the Mount. "Do not worry! Do not say, what are we to eat? What are we to drink? How are we to be clothed? Your heavenly father knows you need them all. Seek first God's Kingdom and God's righteousness and all these other things will be yours as well."

In other words, Jesus said to the man, "Put God first in your life and then you will find the meaning you are seeking; then you will truly have eternal life here and now and forever. The eternal dimension which you seek can only come from that which is eternal — God!"

3. But that was too much for the young man. When he heard the answer that Jesus gave, he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.

So even though this man knew that his life had a vacuum, he didn't want to change that much in order to fill that emptiness.

Aren't most of us like that? In distress we seek the guidance of some spiritual leader, and we think we do so because we are ready to make some basic changes in our life. Actually, as in this story, what we want is to remain the same but feel better about it. In psychological terms what we really want is to be more effective neurotics, preferring the security of known misery to the misery of unfamiliar insecurity.

Listen again to the words of Jesus. Listen to the meaning underneath the words! "You lack one thing, Go and sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me." Jesus offered the man his freedom, which is another word for nothing left to lose. But instead of the excitement of freedom, the exhilaration of the constant companionship of Jesus, the rewards of truth and righteousness, the man chose the security of his golden chains no matter how pedestrian the possibilities.

But how about you? Did you come to worship today to change? Or did you come to seek a way to stay the way you are and simply feel better about it? Jesus is looking upon you. and loving you and saying, "Come, follow me!" "Come, follow me." That's what we might call the growth choice, as opposed to the fear choice, chosen by the man in the story. To make such a

change was more than this man could manage. So often we choose the fear choice instead of growth choice — not only in our religious life but in other parts of our life as well.

II. But what does it mean to sell all and give to the poor and follow Christ in our time?

1. First of all, it means getting rid of any obstacles in our lives which we put ahead of God. In the case of the young man who came to Jesus with the question — his possessions were in his way. If we are really serious about following Jesus, it means that we have to leave some things behind and give some things away.

In this case, Jesus was saying to the man: "Quit believing that you are going to find meaning in your life through your possessions or even through following all the commandments. You need to change the whole direction of your living." You can't just patch something on to your life. Too often we just want to add things onto our present life without leaving behind some of the excess baggage we are carrying around, and it can't be done. So many of us have so many other things already filling our lives that there is no room for anything else. To put God first, means leaving some other things behind or giving them away. Our lives are filled, yet unfilled.

2. Secondly, we need some plan for beginning to put God first in our lives, in addition to leaving some things behind.

Putting God first in our lives does not mean that we are to withdraw from the world and simply live quiet, restful lives removed from the struggles of the world.

It means rather shifting the center of our attention, changing our priorities, changing our way of looking at things. If we make God's kingdom the center of our lives, then everything else will fall into its proper place.

But how does one begin to do this? It means that we take seriously our spiritual life. Most of us in our time pay a lot of attention to our physical life but neglect the spirit. We are concerned about what we are to eat, drink, wear, and where we are to live and all the other facets of our physical existence. My bookshelves are filled with books about taking care of the body, books on diet, exercise, jogging, and more, and these are important.

But for most of us, it's the life of the spirit that needs attention also. The Gospels tell us that Jesus always took time each day, no matter how busy he was, to be alone with God and pray. Jesus lived his busy life from a divine center and that's what gave his life meaning and power, and he calls us to do the same. That's a lot of what it means to follow him.

The center of his life was his loving and obedient relationship to God. Everything else flowed from this center, and he therefore did everything in the spirit of the love of God.

Our lives will begin to really change only when we let the Spirit of God have room within us, and that means taking some time each day specifically to let this happen. Again, it needs to be emphasized that to follow Jesus, to have a deepening spiritual life, does not mean that we love our family or give up or regular job, or maybe even change our way of working. It does not mean that we withdraw from social or political activities, or lose interest in literature and art.

What is new in our lives is that we put God first. What is new is that we then begin to be set free from the compulsions of the world. Then we no longer experience the many things,

people, and events as endless causes for worry, but we begin to experience them as the rich variety of ways in which God makes his presence known to us.

To begin to enrich our spiritual lives requires some effort on our part. Like Jesus, we have to set aside some time regularly to give special attention to our spiritual side. We need to create some free, empty space in our lives.

What I am going to suggest sounds so simple and yet it can be one of the most difficult things we do. If we are going to take seriously following Jesus and putting God first in our lives, and living our lives from this center, it means having a regular time and place for God in our lives and for God alone. It means setting aside some time each day to be quiet and to be alone with God and it also means worshipping regularly with others at least once a week. One reason I stress over and over again the importance of attendance and participation in public worship is that then at least once a week, we do set aside some time specifically for God in our lives.

If we believe not only that God exists, but also that God is actively present in our lives, teaching, guiding, healing, and always with us, then we need to set aside a time and space to give God our undivided attention.

When we begin to do this on a regular basis, then after a time the center of ourselves becomes like a quiet cell where God can dwell wherever we go and whatever we do. The more we train ourselves to spend time with God alone, the more we will discover that God is with us at all times and in all places.

Try it, it will begin to make you a different person and you will then find that all of life begins to take on a new and vital meaning. You will begin to look forward to each new day and the many things that trouble you so much will begin to recede into the background. The eternal dimension will become a part of your everyday life. Amen.