Sunday, September 13, 1981
THREE QUESTIONS
Matthew 16:13-20

We live in a world of questions and answers. Human beings are question asking and answer seeking creatures. Small children ask at an early age — "Who am I? Who are you? What is the world like?" We continue to ask questions and seek answers as we grow and mature. "What is God like?" What is the meaning of life? What vocation should I follow? What is truth? Is there life after death? Is there a heaven? Is there a hell? What must I do to gain eternal life? Do you love me? Does God love me? Religious questions, value questions, scientific questions, history questions — it is because of the questions we continue to ask that we have gained more and more knowledge about the universe. Why does the apple fall from the tree? A question like that led to the formulation of the law of gravity.

Jesus often asked people questions. One day he asked his disciples — "Who do people say that I am?" In other words, "what are people saying about me? What do you hear?" That question was easy enough for the disciples to answer. They simply had to report what they were hearing. But then Jesus asked a more difficult and direct question — "Who do you say that I am?" A very personal question it was.

Many of us live out the answers to questions without realizing it. We choose the values that are most important to us and once that is done, those choices begin to choose us. For example, if a father has decided at the ultimate level that succeeding in his work is the highest of all values, he is not really free on a given Thursday night when a choice arises between going with his little son to a scout meeting or taking an important client out to dinner. What he does at that particular time has already been predetermined by the value judgment he made at a higher level. But if you asked him what is most important to him, you might get a different answer in words.

The same is true for all of us. We all live by values which we have chosen either consciously or unconsciously. Some people have examined the values by which they live, but for most of us they go unexamined and unquestioned. Thus, uncovering some of those values is not an easy matter because we have a tremendous capacity for self-deception. We will say we hold one value, but actually live by another. And this brings us back to the three personal questions. I hope you will ponder these questions throughout the coming weeks.

1. The first question: How do you spend your time and your money? Time and money are the two most basic components of our lives and what we do with the hundred and sixty-eight hours that make up each of our weeks and how we choose to spend our money, tells us more about our values and what we believe is important than any words we might speak.

Now if you're like most people, you will probably begin your answer to this first question by saying that you have little control over how you spend your time and your money. But I would suggest that you have more control over these two items than you give yourself credit for. It may be true that most of your paycheck is already spoken for in terms of monthly payments of one kind or another, but somewhere along the line you made those choices, and you are now making the payments. The same is true of the way much of your time is allocated.

You will also have difficulty answering this first question honestly because you probably think you are doing on thing in both of these areas, and you are in fact doing something quite

different. You may discover that you think your highest values are one thing and found out that the way you spend your time and your money reveal something quite different.

2. The second question: What is your dream? Your goal? What we would like to have in the future helps determine in large measure what we do in the present. What our dream is also tells us much about what we value the most.

In a remarkable book entitled: “AMERICAN DREAMS: LOST AND FOUND,” by Studs Terkel, one can read of the dreams of one hundred people from all walks of life in this country.

In his interviews with all kinds of people, Mr. Terkel reveals a variety of dreams. Some people have become bitter over the years because not even a part of their dream has been realized. Others accomplish their dream and then discover that it is empty. Still others find only a part of their dream and learn to live happily even though their entire dream is never lived out. What a variety of dreams we have! Some want only to own a small piece of land. Others dream of being rich. Another dream is success — still another that of owning and operating, a small-town newspaper. A young woman dreams of becoming Miss America. We all have our personal dreams and goals, and often they change as we grow older. What is your dream at this point in your life?

If you think you have no dream, ask yourself this question: “If one stood before me for whom all things were possible and who was able to make any desire of my heart come true, what single thing would I ask of such a one, and what does that request tell me about the values to which I am committed?”

Sometimes our wished and dreams turn out in ways we had not expected. We do not always realize the implications of what we wish for.

The son of a Welsh mining family had not wanted to go into the mines as had his brothers but instead joined the British Navy and spent many years touring the world. When he came home once from his travels, he showed his father a shriveled-up Monkey’s paw he had gotten in Egypt. The legend was that if one held this pay and made any three wished they would come true. However, the son had also been warned not to use it because everyone who had owned it before had experienced tragedy. He said, “I’ve decided this warning is right and am prepared to throw it into the fire.”

However, the father was intrigued by the story and took hold of the charm and said, “I wish more than anything else in the world that I had a two-hundred-pound note at this moment.” No sooner had the words left his lips than there was a knock on the door and the father went and there stood a representative of the mining company. He said, “Your son has just been killed in an explosion underground and it is company policy to give a two-hundred-pound note to the family of such victims to cover the burial expenses. Here it is, I am sorry.” On hearing this, the father threw the monkey’s paw away and began to weep loudly, “Oh no, oh no! Bring me my son, bring me my son. I did not want the money at his expense.” Again, there was a knock on the door and there stood four miner friends carrying the mutilated corpse of the son who had just been killed. When the father saw them, he said, “Oh, take him away, I cannot bear the sight of my own flesh and blood now dead.” And so, the friends turned away and went to bury him privately. All three of his wishes has come true, you see, yet none of them in the way he wanted.

Our dreams and wishes may come true, but not like we expected. However, the second question is still a valid one. What is your dream or goal in life? If one stood before you and could give you what you desire — what single thing would you ask for, and what does that request tell you about the values to which you are committed?

3. The third question: If you should die today, what kind of epitaph do you think would be written as a summary of your life? How do you think those who knew you best would remember you? What has been the central thrust of your existence? What would the minister be able to say at your funeral? What you might want said of you, might not be that which was said of you.

Some epitaphs are inspiring such as: “In the worst of times, he did the best of things.” Others are amusing such as the epitaph on the tombstone of the hypochondriac which said — "See, I told you I was sick.” I found one epitaph which said, “In memory of Charles Ward, who died May 1770, aged 63 years. A dutiful son, a loving brother and an affectionate husband.” Then a footnote which said, “This stone was not erected by Susan, his wife. She erected a stone to John Salter, her second husband, forgetting the affection of Charles Ward, her first husband.”

How do you want to be remembered after you’re dead? What one statement would sum up your life? I heard about a man who died in a small town in western Nebraska. He was so mean and disreputable that the family could not find a minister in that town to preside at his funeral. They all refused and said it was impossible to find anything good to say about the man. Finally, a minister in a neighboring town agreed to do the funeral service. All he said about the man was, “his brother was worse.” In a similar situation, all the minister could find to say about another man who had died was, “I believe he had the best well of water from which I ever took a drink.” A positive statement but not much of a summation of a person’s life on this earth.

After the death of Jesus, he was remembered with the statement, “He went about doing good.”

So, I ask you to consider again the third question — “If I died today, what would people remember most about me, and what does that say about my basic values?”

Three very personal questions: How do you spend your time and your money? What is your dream or goal in life, that is, what would you ask for if any wish could be granted you? What would you like to have said about you if you died today, that is, how do you want to be remembered?

Ask these questions again and again of yourself this week. Try to find the honest answers. Talk about the questions with your family or your friends. You may not like the answers you give yourself, but if you don’t like the answers, the good news is that you can change. It is never too late for that. We can alter the values that shape our existence. Jesus Christ all the time called on people to change their lives. We can re-allocate what we do with our time and our money. We can change our dreams and our goals. It is never too late to change and grow. God can begin to work in your life with only the tiniest opening. Amen.