Sunday November 1, 1981

"LIVING IN DIFFERENT WORLDS" Matthew 6:25, 31-34

This morning I want us to think and see ourselves as living in at least three different worlds, domains or spheres.

1. First, there is the small world of our individual private lives. This includes the world into which each one of us was born and grew up. It includes our education, and the environment in which we develop habits, both good and bad. This small rather private world is also the one in which we make a living, fall in love, maybe raise a family, or decide to remain single and live alone. It is the world of our everyday life in which we meet obstacles, make day to day decisions, eat, sleep, have fun, love, hate, make friends and enemies and more. It's the world we are most familiar with and where we tend to spend most of our time.

2. Secondly, we all live in the much larger world of public events, politics, public affairs, and national and world issues. Some take a very active part in this second world and others only a tiny part. It's the world in which there are economic recessions, unemployment, inflation, and foreign policy. It's the world in which wars are fought and peace is sought. It's the world of the space shuttle, of new industries being built and old ones falling apart; where new nations are born and empires come and go; where people in high office make decisions which will effect all of us and make mistakes which will affect all of us. It's the world in which taxes are levied, laws are made. We are all affected to some degree with what happens in this second and larger world around us. And many times we feel at the mercy of this larger world, particularly those times when it seems that we have little to say about what happens.

3. But there is yet a third world in which we all live, and this world is more difficult to describe. It's the world, not as it is, but as it is meant to be; ought to be; the world toward which an individual's conscience feels the pull; it's the world of a higher morality--the world of the transcendent, the spiritual, the world of vision, and dreams, and creativity and vitality. This

world oftentimes seems invisible, yet it is often more real than the other two and many times becomes visible in a flash of beauty, a piece of music, an unusual act of goodwill, a time of worship, or a moment of inspiration, or a mystical experience. We sometimes even describe such experiences as "being out of this world."

These three different worlds in which we live are not strung out one after the other so that we go progressively through them as we go through the grades in a school. They are not, in other words, sequential, or stacked one on top of the other. Rather they are worlds within worlds, more like three concentric spheres of different sizes, and all of us live in all three worlds at once. Most of the time, one or two of the three worlds is much more evident and takes more of our time than the others.

For purposes of description and imagery, think of the first world of our everyday routine life being a small sphere. This small sphere is then surrounded by or enclosed by the second world, being a much larger sphere--it's the world of world events, issues, and more--all of which are continually having an effect on our lives. Then the third world is yet a much larger sphere which encloses or surrounds the other two.

We spend a lot of time in our lives in a kind of balancing act--giving more attention to one world and then to another. The key question is for us as Christians, how can we best handle this balancing act?

First, there is the question of priority. Which world comes first, or should come first? To which do we give the most attention which includes our time and our money? In a practical sense, the first world, our own little private world of everyday life is the most immediate and its demands press upon us with the insistence of necessity every single day. We cannot ignore these demands completely. We have to eat, sleep, go to work, deal with the people with whom we come in contact, decide which clothes to put on and make dozens of other routine and not so routine decisions.

The second world in which we live is also urgent and makes its demands. What goes on in it affects us all in many ways. Some people give much of their time trying to work

and make their influence felt in this second world. Each day there is a new picket line or a new demonstration or a new attempt at more subtle lobbying in the legislatures and congress. Christians are not to neglect this world of issues and politics, but neither are we to make it our god.

For the Christian, the third world takes first priority. It is the ultimate, although not necessarily the most immediate, or the most pressing, at least from a superficial point of view--but it is still the ultimate and takes first place. Jesus said, "seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness and all these other things shall be yours as well."

As Christians, we have to spend time in that third world deliberately--it's a matter of choice. That means taking time out regularly for worship, meditation, prayer, inspiration, devotional reading. What I am talking about here is a kind of nourishment and feeding of the spirit which is in each one of us. It is a regular paying attention to this third world which transcends and encompasses all of us and each one of us. Jesus Christ always did this.

There is a story in the New Testament about Jesus healing a man with a withered hand. He did it on the Sabbath and the legalists who were against him from the beginning were outraged. They made plans with one another about how to get rid of him. And what did Jesus do? He went out into a quiet place to pray.

Living in this third world, paying attention to this third world, adds a new perspective to all that we do, and there are so many ways to nourish and feed our spirits. It means more than just reading what we normally describe as "religious" books. It means stretching our minds and our imaginations. I would suggest that you read books like Loren Eisely's "IMMENSE JOURNEY," or the "UNEXPECTED UNIVERSE," or Lewis Thomas's "LIVES OF A CELL," or the essays of E.B.White, or Bronowski's "ASCENT OF MAN." Or read any one of the classics, or history, or philosophy, or some of the marvelous novels that continue to be published.

Such activities stretch our minds and lift us into this third world where we can come to see all things with a

new perspective. We need so often to be pulled out of our small worlds and be made aware of this third world, This is not to deny the importance of the first two worlds at all, but without paying attention to the third world, we tend to become overly cynical and negative and without hope.

It is this third world that gives us a sense of values and a perspective through which to live in the other two worlds. We need to be both attached and detached. G.K. Chesterton once said, "One must somehow find a way of loving the world without trusting it; somehow one must love the world without being too worldly." Paying attention to the third world we have been describing goes a long way in helping us do this.

Now lest we misunderstand, putting this third world first does not mean that we withdraw from the other two. Jesus has never told us that we should not be busy with worldy affairs. He does not try to pull us away from the many events, activities and people that make up our lives. He does not tell us that what we do in these first and second worlds is unimportant, valueless or useless. Nor does he suggest that we withdraw from our involvements and live quiet, restful lives removed from the struggles of the world. Probably most of us have dreamed of doing that at times.

Jesus' response to our living in different worlds is to ask us to shift the point of gravity, to re-locate the center of our attention, to change our priorities, to pay attention to the life of the spirit, to begin to live our lives from a Divine Center--to seek the will of God.

The Christian who spends time in this third world doesn't just stay in it, though in one sense, he or she never leaves it, for it shows in everything one does. If one applies for a job, the first question is not, "how much does it pay," but rather, "how can I be of use in this job," or "is it a meaningful job through which I can make a contribution to the world at large?"

When we give attention to this third world, then when we begin the day, we consult not only the weather and the stock market and our own calendars, but also the will of

God. Those who are aware of this third world of the Spirit and pay attention to it, are not tossed about on the waves of fashion, fancy or fad. We are grounded in something that enables us to be bent, but not broken.

In different periods of history, Christians have related life in the three worlds in varied ways. The first two generations of Christians tended to skip the second world almost completely. They were convinced that the entire world was coming to an end with the return of Christ in their lifetime. Why reform the world?

In the middle ages, Christians had come to the point where they realized that the big middle world was not coming to an end and they simply accepted it as a necessary evil and assumed they could do little or nothing about it. They turned their attention to themselves and put their trust in whatever merits they could accumulate in the third world so that they would finally gain heaven sometime after death. For them it was "pie in the sky, bye and bye," so why worry very much about the present.

In more recent times, Christians have often found a way around the second world--that is, the world of current events and public affairs. Some withdrew from this second world almost completely by joining monastic institutions. A few others managed to withdraw from it by living virtually private lives. And there are always Christians in each generation who have believed that Christ was going to return in their lifetime and thus did nothing except prepare for the judgment day.

Many in our time tend to be more subtle about the relationship of the three worlds in which we live. Some just try to keep the worlds separated from each other. They have a private life, a public life, and a religious life and not any one of the three effects the other. It's compartmental living. Still others are content to save themselves by personally accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, but that personal saviour never affects their other two worlds. And some in our time simply pay little attention to the third world of the spirit at all.

But how about you? How do you relate these three different worlds in which you live? To which do you give priority?

I believe it is the essence of the Christian gospel that we are to live in all three worlds while on this earth and that we are to have a sense of balance among these three worlds. The balance however comes from the third world being put first in priority--the world of the Spirit, of the transcendent--that world ultimately frees us from the first world, our little world of worries and frustrations which can consume so much of our energy and time and at the same time, the power of the Spirit which comes from living in the third world, can enable us to be usefully active in the second world of public affairs.

Then too, we will not be anxious about our lives, and we will be able to let go our worries. Amen.