Sunday, January 31, 1982
A NORMAL CONDITION
Luke 18:9-14

As I mentioned last Sunday, there are a number of false assumptions which are alive and well in our society, and none is more widespread or pernicious than the idea that having problems is somehow an abnormal human condition. Not too long ago, I remember talking to an individual who said of another person — "Oh, don't pay any attention to her, she has a problem." The way in which she said those words made it sound as if this person was in a class by herself — that having a problem meant she was some kind of freak who for that reason did not have to be taken seriously.

This morning I want to meet that false assumption head on. I declare to you that to have problems is not an abnorn1al condition. Having problems is simply part of the human condition. What is life after all, from morning to evening, but problem solving? To be sure the shape and intensity of our problems vary greatly. Sometimes in our lives we have so many serious problems that we wonder if we can handle them and then at other times, we have periods of relative calm. Maybe problems come in bundles?

Everyone has problems. If you don't believe it, read the advice columns in tl1e newspapers — "Dear Abby," and "Dear Ann Landers." A recent letter to Dear Abby went this way — "I am fourteen, and five years ago I was in a car accident. After many operations and much therapy, I was able to walk again — but with a noticeable limp. In that accident we lost my little sister, so my mother, not wanting me to be an'only child,' adopted a little girl who had been deaf since birth.

What I'm getting at is this: You've seen comedians on TV or the stage lisping, stuttering, stumbling, falling, and playing deaf and mute, and they get laughs that bring the house down. I don't see anything funny about this, and it's not that I'm overly sensitive, because I felt the same way before the accident. I have seen handicapped people at the rehabilitation center stumbling and falling and doing the same things the comedians do for laughs and believe me, it is not funny. My little sister spends hours with a speech therapist trying to form words, and when she sees someone on TV who makes the same sounds as she, and the people laughing at it, she runs to her room in tears. She is only five. Please let your readers know they shouldn't laugh at handicapped people. (signed)Not Laughing

Abigail Van Buren is often asked, "What kind of moron writes to a newspaper columnist for advice?" And her standard answer is, "The person who is smart enough to know he or she has a problem and wants to do something about it is no moron."

I remember a wise pastor saying to me years ago as I was beginning my ministry, "Learn to be kind and patient to the folks you serve. Never forget that everyone you meet is struggling under some kind of load. It may not appear on the surface. They may look so utterly successful and totally competent, but don't believe it. Everyone you meet is struggling under some kind of load. Remember that, and try to lift some of it off rather than adding to their burden." That's good advice for all of us. Remember the cards we passed out in a worship service here several years ago. They said, "BE KIND. EVERYONE YOU MEET IS CARRYING A HEAVY BURDEN."

To acknowledge the fact that everyone has problems and that it is a normal condition is a Biblical perspective. There is nothing in the Bible to support the assumption that having problems is an abnormal condition. If the Bible is anything, it is realistic about the kind of creatures we humans are. Even its greatest heroes are not depicted as free of problems. Every day, Jesus met people with problems.

1. So the first step in handling our problems is to accept the fact that it is not an abnormal condition. You are not the exception in trying to deal with the problems in your life; do not be embarrassed to admit that you have problems. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I hope this morning you can leave this worship service saying to yourself, "I'm normal. I'm no different from anyone else simply because I have problems in my life — big ones and little ones."

Ren1ember that our choice is never between problems or no problems, but rather between realistically and creatively facing our problems or attempting to evade and avoid the problems that are ours. As long as we harbor the illusion or false assumption that having problems is somehow an abnormal condition, our tendency will be to deny that we have any problems at all and then we will never solve them.

So, to admit that we have problems is the first important step.

2. Then I hope you will take the second step — namely asking in all honesty, "what can I do about my problems?" rather than sitting around being ashamed or resentful that you have problems. There is help available all around you. Harry Emerson Fosdick in a famous sermon put the question this way — "are we part of the problem or of the answer?"

One of the most unique persons I have ever met is a minister colleague of mine who was born without arms — everything else was normal, except for the empty sockets at his shoulders. Instead of giving way to resentment and self-pity, his parents from little on up found ways to help him compensate for his problem. He learned to eat with his feet, to drive a car, to write, to dress himself completely and he has as an adult traveled all over the world all by himself. He is married and together with his wife has raised a beautiful family. On more than one occasion I have seen him meet people who had not known of his condition before, and he often says matter-of-factly, "I was born without arms. That is my problem. What is yours?"

What an incredible perspective to bring to an overwhelming problem and would it not be wonderful if the church were the place where we did not have to hide but could say — "This is my problem, what's yours?" And the real question would then be: what can we do about our problems rather than sitting around being ashamed or resentful that we have them?

O.K., we know that it is not at all abnormal to have a problem or many problems — it's part of the human condition. And we know secondly that there is help all around us and that we need to be part of the answer rather than part of the problem. This then leads us to the third step — how can we begin solving our problems?

3. To begin solving our problems we need to have the grace to not take a negative but a positive attitude toward them. Problems are after all, often opportunities in disguise. Instead of a positive attitude, too many of us wallow in self-pity about our problems. We ask, "Why me?" Rather we should ask, "Why not me?" Or we ask, "If only I had done this or that?" Rather we should say, "Next time, I'll do differently." That will get us focusing on the part of life where something can be done. There is nothing we can do about the past except learn from it and resolve to make the future different because of it. That is what the words "next time" will do.

They will get us out of the quagmire of remorse and self-pity and get us to dealing with the only creative thing left — the present and the future.

Joseph in the Old Testament stories did not want to be sent to Egypt. Betrayed by his brothers, sold in slavery, lied about by his master's wife, and put in prison — that's having problems. But he turned these problems into opportunities.

As part of this positive attitude toward our problems, we need to throw off a false sense of responsibility. The reason why so many of us worry so much about our problems is that we keep comparing ourselves with others and wishing to be what they are or do what they do. We constantly measure ourselves by other people and assume a responsibility for being as fortunate, or as useful, as successful as they. It is a great day when a person makes up his or her mind that there is only one responsibility and that is not to be like someone else, but to handle one's own problems as best as one can.

Rather than constantly comparing ourselves with others, we need to do the opposite — to see our kinship with others. The way the Pl1arisee in our text this morning responded to other people is always a temptation. He looked out on a bumbling, fumbling human being and said: "I thank the Lord that I am not like other people. I do not do terrible things. I do not have problems. I am superior to them in many ways." How easy it is to respond to other people in this way, particularly if you are under the illusion that having problems is somehow an abnormal condition.

Do not despise your problems. They are your opportunities. God never judges us in mass. God does not compare us to others. God only wants to know what we are doing with what has been given us. If you say, "I am as good as so-and-so," you have missed the point. Maybe so-and-so has more problems than you. Or if you say, "I am a failure," because "so-and-so beat me," again you have missed the point. God may say, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you had a desperately difficult situation and you handled it superbly."

Remember too that no matter how many problems you have or how severe they may be, you are still a valued creature by God. You have the same worth and value as any other human being. Furthermore, no matter how many problems you have, you can still make a contribution to the world.

A friend of mine told me that in all his years at a university, he had never heard such cheering, not even at a football victory, as greeted a crippled young man carried in the arms of his companions across the platform on Commencement Day. Four years before, that young man had answered "present" at the first roll call of his class. "Stand up," said the professor. "I should like to, sir, but I have not been able to stand up since I was four years old." But by being what he was in a difficult situation, that young man made such an impression on the university, that when his companions carried him up for his diploma, the assemblage broke forth into such cheers as that college generation had not heard before.

So, I come back to the basic point of the sermon. There are a number of false assumptions alive and well in our society, but none is more widespread and pernicious than the idea that having problems is somehow an abnormal condition. To have problems is to be human. Life is problem-solving. Our human choice is not between problems or no problems, but rather how we deal with the problems which come our way. The issue is not whether we have problems or not, but what are we going to do with them. Amen.