Sunday, May 29, 1983
CHOOSE THE GOOD PORTION
Luke 10:38-42

In the Bible story read earlier from Luke's gospel, Mary is said by Jesus to have chosen "the good portion," while her sister Martha was distracted with trivial details. As Jesus put it, "She was anxious and troubled about many things, and thereby was missing some of the most important things in life."

What is this good portion that Jesus Christ is talking about?

First of all, choosing the good portion means choosing good religion over bad. In past months, I've come across several surveys which indicate that Americans, in overwhelming numbers, believe in God. Recently, I was at a gathering in which people were talking about these surveys, and someone turned to me and said, "Isn't it wonderful that so many people believe in God?"
I only nodded politely! I wanted to say, "And do you think God is pleased with this endorsement?" More pointedly, I wanted to ask, "What kind of God do you suppose it is in which so many people say they believe?" The fact is that religion, in general, is popular in our time, and many people believe that any religion is better than none. But such is not the case. Not all religion is good, and some religion is very bad.

Religion can be lyrical and lovely and humane and uplifting, but it can also be wicked and damaging to the human spirit.

Too many people today are easily tempted into dividing humans into two groups, the religious and the irreligious, and then supposing that being religious confers a certain superior quality upon them. Yet look at what religion has done, and what some suppose God has endorsed: the Inquisition, the Crusades, the ritual sacrifice of humans, ugly superstitions, barricades built against every advance of science. Just this past week, 350 years later, the Pope finally admitted that the Roman Catholic Church was in error in condemning Galileo.

On the other hand, it was religious groups who built the first hospitals, the great universities, and homes for the poor and the hopeless. And it has been religion that has preserved culture, given meaning to life, comforted the suffering, offered courage to the living and dignity in dying.

It's a matter of choosing the good portion, being able to distinguish good religion from bad religion. That was the problem in Jesus' time. He never dealt with irreligion, but rather with one kind of religion against another kind: a morally sensitive and caring religion set over against a religiousness that really didn't care much about what happened to persons.

Here are some of the marks of good religion: good religion always enlarges the human spirit and does not suppress or confine it. Good religion is open and growing and sensitive and curious. Nothing that suppresses human curiosity, no religion that keeps one from listening to others and learning from them, is worthy of the phrase, "good religion." Good religion is inclusive, not exclusive.

In one of his tall tales, Mark Twain tells how exercised he had become about the considerable amount of discord among God's creatures and how he had decided to take the matter in hand.

So, I built a cage, and in it, I put a dog and a cat. And after a little training, I got the dog and cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds, and a monkey. And, after a few adjustments, they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such successes that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim from Turkestan, and a Buddhist from China, along with a Baptist missionary that I captured on the same trip, and in a very short while there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage.

This story, as we are painfully aware, continues in many places and in many ways to be true. Tragic confrontations and collisions — religious, political, and ideological — persist in destroying human relationships. It's in the news every day. Much of human history seems to be the history of violent conflict. It is one of the terrible ironies of history that religion has been among the primary sources of this conflict. While religious beliefs have been offered as the true basis for true harmony and salvation, both here and in the hereafter, they have served equally well as the basis for alienation, hostility, and destruction. Holy cities become justifications for the most unholy sentiments and atrocities. The gracious word of God becomes a vehicle for dispensing grace to ourselves and damnation to those who disagree with us.

Good religion is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Religion is not for the sake of religion; it is for the sake of helping men and women to love God and one another. Bad religion calls attention to itself; it makes religiousness the goal of its endeavors, and it always ends with a lot of silly little rules and regulations. Good religion points beyond itself, lifts itself above the trivial, and makes itself a servant of God and human need. It remains curious and concerned for the human condition everywhere and tries to do something about it! Choose the good portion, and choosing the good portion means choosing good religion over bad.

Secondly, choosing the good portion means not being afraid of uncertainty and change. In the Bible story, Martha had to be certain of everything all the time, while Mary was not afraid to take time and listen. She knew that she did not know everything, that there is always much more to learn, and that the world would continue to change.
To some degree, the future is always uncertain. That's part of the mystery of life. Who can predict where you will be living ten years from now or what you will be doing or what kind of position you will be filling? The simple fact is that our lives are directed as much by the uncertainties of chance as they are by our own determination to follow a planned path. No matter how careful we are in steering the course of our lives in a predetermined direction or guiding the lives of our children in some desirable way, the uncertainty of the future is bound to intervene. How does one deal with such uncertainty?

Uncertainty is the stuff that makes adventure. Those who treat it as such will seize the unexpected twists and turns in their lives as opportunities to explore new ground and discover unknown talents within themselves. Those who dwell on the negative aspects of the uncertainty principle endanger the normal state of their healthy minds. They live in constant fear of tomorrow or else become a part of movements that promise simple answers to all questions of the future. This is what cults are made of. It is also why certain sectarian movements within the Christian faith have always tried to predict the end of the world to the exact day and hour. Some people can't stand any uncertainty.

One historian helps us put the future into perspective. He said, "Excessive forethought and too great solicitude for the future is often productive of misfortune; for the affairs of the world are subject to so many accidents that seldom do things turn out as the wisest predicted; and whoever refused to take advantage of present good from fear of future danger, provided the

danger not be certain and near, often discovers to his annoyance and disgrace that he has lost opportunities full of profit and glory from dread of dangers which have turned out to be wholly imaginary."

The course of human life is neither determined solely by the acts of the individual, nor is it governed purely by chance over which the individual has no control. One's destiny, thus, is shaped by a combination of chance, which by definition we can do nothing about, and one's own actions, which we can do something about.

I believe the world and our lives are open-ended, filled with infinite possibilities, and we should delight in this fact. Too often we are altogether too complacent, too rigid, too dogmatic about our assumptions and conclusions.

Do not be afraid of uncertainty, of questioning basic assumptions. The lust for certitude keeps one from being open to new knowledge and new experience.

Earlier I mentioned Galileo. It is said that when Galileo showed his telescope to the leading sages of his day, the responses generally fell into three categories. Some people were properly struck by what they saw and were not afraid to begin to see the universe in a new way. They were not afraid of the uncertainty and change which new knowledge brings. They were willing to consider a new point of view. A second group peered around at the other end of the telescope, convinced that Galileo had pasted something on the glass. They were so certain of their present point of view that anything which conflicted with it had to be false. The third group refused even to look through the lens. They didn't want to see anything which might cause them to re-examine the beliefs on which they thought their lives depended. That's how frightened they were of uncertainty and change. Better to stay with their present beliefs. I hope you will always be in the first group — among those who are not afraid to look through the telescope and at least consider another point of view. Every major leap in human progress has come about because of someone having the courage to question and re-examine a basic assumption.

Thirdly, choosing the good portion means not always being overly concerned about trivial details, like Martha in the story, but rather to keep developing your own potential, to keep growing. Each one of us has incredible potential, and like all potentials, unless it is realized, unless we do something about it, it's not going to happen.
Thus, one does not have to be very old to know from personal experience that the coin of uncertainty does have two sides. The one can bring fame, fortune, and even triumph, the other can bring misery, suffering, and even tragedy. The well-educated person may have no trouble dealing with a chance event that leads to an exciting new opportunity, but when chance deals a disappointing setback or a personal tragedy, even the most brilliant mind may be woefully inadequate.

There is no doubt in my mind that what I earlier described as good religion, having a mature faith and an active spiritual life, can help a person deal with the flip side of the coin of uncertainty. This spiritual part of each one of us provides two fundamental ingredients useful in dealing with the adversities of life, and these ingredients can help one turn tragedy into triumph. The two spiritual ingredients to which I refer are faith and hope. Faith is embodied in the belief that as a child of a loving God, a human is not placed on earth to lead a life without purpose; and hope is the strength that this faith provides for dealing with adversity.

We also need to remember that pain and suffering, a little or a lot, are part of the price one pays for achieving victory and recognition, small or great. Who can boast of an achievement of any satisfaction without having endured some anguish, deprivation, or even suffering? Who has not felt the pain of failure when trying something for the first time and then experienced the thrill of success after trying many times over? Or who hasn't suffered anxiety from a lost job, only to have discovered more challenge and satisfaction in a new one? And who has not discovered that the grief over the death of a close friend or relative has made you more reflective on your own life and put your own worries and cares in better perspective?

Choose the good portion! And that includes at least these three things: choose good religion over bad. Do not be afraid of uncertainty or of questioning basic assumptions, and remember that human greatness is never achieved apart from difficulty and conflict. And above all, remember when you choose the good portion, God's love and power are supporting you all along the way. Amen.