Sunday, June 12, 1983
NECESSARY BAGGAGE
Romans 8:28,31,35,37-39

Whenever I take a trip, I find that I have to think through very carefully what to pack for the journey; otherwise, I find that I've taken along things which are not necessary, and I've forgotten some of the most necessary items. Sometimes I take too much and sometimes too little. Perhaps you have the same problem. We each have to decide what is necessary and what is simply extra baggage.

The same is true of our journey through life. Sometimes we carry along a lot of excess baggage, and at the same time do not have what we need the most. For example, some people carry along through life a lot of unnecessary baggage comprised of old fears, old hates, old worries, old grudges, and old resentments. They carry them everywhere they go, and the load is heavy, but they have difficulty letting go of them. They have so much unnecessary and useless baggage with them that they have no room for what's most necessary.

This morning, I want us to look at what some of the necessary baggage is for our life's journey, and then perhaps we can make room for it as we get rid of some of the useless items.

First of all, for our journey through life, a most necessary piece of baggage is a sense of dependence and trust in God: a belief that we are sustained by a power and mercy outside ourselves, as well as being a part of us.
This kind of sustaining faith in a loving God can be described in many ways. For me, more and more God is a loving presence, a transcendent power, a forgiving and healing love which permeates all of creation. I believe that we human beings can never be separated from God. We are an expression of God. There is no place that God is not.

Though God is not a person, God is, at the same time, very personal. We experience God in personal ways, as well as in transcendent ways. We can experience God in an intimate moment of silence and aloneness, and we can experience God when gathered together in a community.

God is not selective. God does not love some people more than others. As Jesus said, "God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." God is with us in our joys and in our sorrows, in our pain and in our high moments. Above all, God can be trusted because God always wants the best for us. At the same time, we have to be very careful in how we speak of God and God's will.

Bill Coffin, who is senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City, talked about this recently as he told of the sudden death of his son, Alexander. He had a terrible auto accident as he was driving near Boston in a terrible storm.

Bill said that he received many letters following his son's death. Some were very helpful, and others were not. One letter carried this wonderful quote from the end of Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms: "The world breaks everyone; then some become strong at the broken places." Coffin said that his own broken heart was mending and that he relearned one lesson: "Love not only begets love; it transmits strength."

Then Bill went on to say that when a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said about God.

“The night after Alex died, I was sitting in the living room of my sister’s house outside of Boston when the front door opened, and in came a nice looking, middle-aged woman carrying about 18 quiches. When she saw me, she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly over her shoulder, ‘I just don’t understand the will of God.’

“Instantly I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. ‘I’ll say you don’t, lady,’ I said. ‘Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had had a couple of” frosties “too many? Do you think it is God’s will that there are no street lights along that stretch of road and no guard rail separating the road and Boston Harbor?’”

Then Coffin went on to say, “For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around this world with His finger on triggers, His fist around knives, His hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. And Christ spent an inordinate amount of time delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, and muteness. Which is not to say that there are no nature-caused deaths, deaths that are untimely and slow and pain-ridden. But violent deaths such as the one Alex died — to understand those is a piece of cake.”

As his younger brother put it simply, standing at the head of the casket at the Boston funeral, “You blew it, buddy. You blew it.” The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, “It is the will of God.” Never do we know enough to say that. And then Bill Coffin went on to say, “My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.”

Hopefully, too, we can learn from mistakes and tragedy and sorrow. A poet put it this way:

I walked a mile with Pleasure;
She chattered all the way,
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow,
And ne’er a word said she,
But, oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me.

A sense of dependence and trust in God is a very important piece of baggage to carry with us; then even when the pain is deep, we know that God is loving and good. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” St. Paul put it this way in his letter to the church in Rome: “We know that in everything God works for good... nothing in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”

A second piece of necessary baggage for life’s journey is to have an understanding of our own limits; that is, a realism about human corruption. “We all sin and fall short of the glory of God,” said St. Paul.

Many times we're too naïve about the human condition. Carl Jung knew this when he said we all have a shadow side. All of us, he said, have our dark sides, our evil sides — parts of our personalities that are different from the sweet little Christian masks we wear.

Karl Menninger knew this, so he wrote a book a few years ago called Whatever Became of Sin? He noted that the very word "sin" seems to have disappeared from our understanding.

Menninger goes on to say in this book, "Congress voted some years ago to require the president to proclaim each year a national day of prayer, and Truman began it in 1952. The following year (1953) President Eisenhower made his first proclamation, and in it he made a reference to sin. He borrowed the words for his proclamation from a call issued in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln, the country's first Republican and more theological president.

"'It is the duty of nations, as well as of men and women, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon.'"

After that, for some reason, none of the president's subsequent calls to prayer mentioned sin again.

Perhaps we like to make believe that we are the exception. Others are subject to sin and evil, but not us. We have a tendency for putting people and things into neat categories, like in the old movies when all villains wore black waxed mustaches and swirling capes, and all good people were tall, robust, and wore light clothes.

And we like to be told how good we are. So, every president since Eisenhower has quoted the well-known line attributed to de Tocqueville: "America is great because she is good. And if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great." (Incidentally, the Library of Congress says the quote can be found nowhere among de Tocqueville's works, yet it continues to be quoted.)

It's good politics, and it's a sure-fire applause getter. But the problem comes when we begin to believe our own press releases and think that only we are good and others are evil.

The president's speech this spring urging the National Association of Evangelicals to oppose the nuclear freeze movement provides a case in point. He said, "We know that living in this world means dealing with... the doctrine of sin. There is sin and evil in the world. And we are enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might."

But then the president went on to say, "The communists are the focus of evil in the modern world, and so U.S. military strength is essential to restrain the aggressive impulses of an evil empire."

Now there is nothing unusual about politicians using church forums to advance their causes, or about religious groups using politicians to advance their causes. It becomes a problem, however, when we define only ourselves as good and others as evil. Our Christian faith tells us that we all sin and fall short of God's glory.

So much in our culture and in our religion can cover up the fact that we have limits, that we are subject to corruption, that our pride can lead us astray. We can easily become like the Pharisee that Jesus described who liked to stand in the temple and pray, "God, I thank you

that I am not like other people," while the publican stood and prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Over and over again Jesus reminds us to deal with the stuff in our eyes before we try to take all those little specks out of our sisters'and brothers'eyes. When we do this, we lose the over-critical spirit and the harshness by which we look at the actions of others. It's a very necessary piece of baggage, this being aware of our own limits and our own temptations, instead of always looking for someone else to blame.

A third piece of necessary baggage we all need to carry with us on our life's journey is a vital sense of the end. Now by the word "end," I do not mean only that we are to keep in mind that our life on this earth as we know it will come to an end, although that's part of it. The Greek word "telos," from which our English word "end" comes, also means "purpose" or achievement, or fulfillment, or completion, or maturity.
To have a vital sense of the end, then, means that we know that God ultimately controls the purposes of history. Or, to put it another way, it is the faith that history is not meaningless. Thus, those who have a vital sense of the end keep growing and maturing throughout their lives. And when we do that, we can also face the end of our life on this earth with confidence and satisfaction. Thus St. Paul could write, as he looked toward the end of his life, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Paul had a sense of what was vital all the way to the end. In a book called, The Denial of Death, the author, Ernest Becker, claims that too many people spend their time denying death, trying to live as if they are going to live forever. He says that too few people have a vital sense of the end.

From the Christian faith's point of view, having a vital sense of the end means that we believe in a meaningful, purposeful universe, a purposeful God, and in a world where our social hopes will not end in utter annihilation. It also means that we believe that personality is sacred and after death has endless possibilities.

If we want it summed up in homely words, recall Thornton Wilder's expression of his faith in his play, Our Town.

"I don't care what they say with their mouths — everybody knows that something is eternal. And it ain't houses, and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even stars — everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for 5,000 years, and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being." Amen.