Book 13

Sunday July 8, 1984

"AFRAID OF THE GOOD" Matthew 9:9-13

One of the stories about Oliver Wendell Holmes tells of the time he couldn't find his ticket after he was aboard a train and it was under way. The conductor watched him fumble through his pockets, almost desperately. "You don't need a ticket, Mr. Holmes," said the conductor. "You'll probably find it later and then it will be O.K. if you mail it to the Pennsylvania Railroad Company with a note of explanation." Holmes scowled and replied, "The problem isn't the ticket, sir. The problem is--where am I going?"

Finding out where we are going; having a sense of direction. That's the problem for many of us in this life.

Recently, I read a story of a man who like many others was seeking to find the direction for his life. He was about 21 years old and was thoroughly confused. He wasn't sure of who or what he was. He wasn't sure of what abilities he had and therefore didn't know if he was wasting his talent or using it. Then one day in the midst of his confusion, this young man came across a story which seemed to focus his problem.

It was the story of a farmer who saw a frightening vision in his barnyard. As he entered the barnyard, he saw the cows peacefully chewing their cuds, the hens clucking to their chicks, a lizard sunning himself without fear. But suddenly there came an incredible transformation. The cows turned into dinosaurs, the chickens to vultures; the lizard became a python; the barnyard a wild and threatening jungle.

This dismaying scene held for a moment, and then it dissolved. Once again the farmer could see his placid cows, the hens and their chicks, the lazy lizard. Ultimately, his terror left him. But never again was he able to look upon the inhabitants of his barnyard in the way he had before. From that moment on, he was always to wonder which was real, the peacful domestic scene or the primitive wildness.

The young man who came upon this story said that it described what he felt about himself in his confusion. He

had been wondering which was the real person in himself--the way he had imagined himself to be or another hidden way which he seldom could see or wanted to see.

He said, "I thought I had known myself. I thought I had plumbed the depths. Now I began to wonder--what if I am something other than I think myself to be. What if I am composed of qualities I both see and despise in others? Could it be that I am selfish, vindictive, crude, lustful, jealous, tyrannical, mean?"

But at the same time," he said, "as I began to accept the possibility of these evil inner threats and feelings, I also came to a discovery that was even more awesome and challenging. I realized that there might be some aspects of my strengths, some good qualities and abilities within me that I had not known before or admitted to myself and others that I had. Maybe I was even more afraid of the good that was hidden within me."

As a result of these inner questionings and searchings, this particular individual suddenly found the strength to admit the possibility that he cared for other people more genuinely than he had previously given himself credit for. He further admitted that in all probability he had both the intellectual and emotional capacity to help those people about whom he cared. If all of these aspects of himself were true, then he was perhaps a much better person, a more talented person, than he had ever imagined himself to be.

For this young man, getting to know himself became an exciting adventure. And in getting to know himself, he was able to accept both the bad and the good in himself. More than that, because he was facing up to the good and the bad in himself, he could put his good abilities to use and he could better control his more evil tendencie-.

But it was not an easy thing to do. Like most of us, he was afraid of what he might discover and so he was also up to this point afraid to take any risk, afraid to try anything new. Matthew must've felt the same way before he met Jesus, according to the story from the gospel read earlier this morning.

1. So, what about us? Note first, that like this young man we are often afraid to know ourselves as fully as possible

because we fear that in looking for something good, we will also find things that are bad.

2. But a second reason we are afraid to know ourselves as fully as we might is because we also fear the good we will find in ourselves. Does that sound strange? We are often afraid of the good, even more than the evil!

But why would we fear the good? Time after time, counselors and others who have worked with and cared for unhappy and unfilled people have discovered that the individuals were not deficient in potential, but had concealed their potential from themselves and others. Instead of developing to full capacity, these people behaved as though they were inferior, stupid or unappealing.

But again, why? Why are we often afraid to discover and then to embrace and develop our virtues? Why are we afraid of our inherent abilities and our positive qualities? Why are we afraid to become open, loving, giving, generous individuals?

I can think of at least three reasons.

1. Perhaps we're afraid that once we start, we'll become too open, too generous, too loving, too forgiving! I see this as people are asked to give money to a project which they firmly believe in. They give $25 or $50 when they could easily give $500 or $1000, or $2000 or more. "Better not to be too generous,"they tell themselves. They are afraid of the good!

2. Secondly, the most basic reason that we are afraid of the good within us is that once we recognize our talents and abilities and begin to use them, then we know this good must continue to be used. The good makes a claim on us. It puts a responsibility on us. It means we must take risks. The goodness must be expressed. So some people convince themselves that they are not good--that they are poor and have little talent and little to give. that way they can escape responsibility.

3. Thirdly, we in the church are afraid of the good, because the church has not done enough to identify the good in us and call it forth. It is significant that Jesus never told

people how bad they were. Rather he showed them now good they could be. He brought out the goodness in them.

In the scripture reading for this morning, Jesus did not say to Matthew--"You are an evil man. You are filled with sin. You are going to spend eternity in hell unless you make me your personal Savior." Jesus had dinner with MAtthew.

Matthew already knew how bad he was--what he didn't know was how good he was. So Jesus said simply, "follow me." Follow me and I will bring out and put to use all the good that is in you and the more you use that good, the more of it there will be. Goodness has a way of multiplying when it is invested.

Too often the church and church people spend their time telling people how sinful they are. Read the bumper stickers. "DON'T BLAME JESUS IF YOU GO TO HELL." "PUT GOD IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE." "READ THE BIBLE, IT WILL SCARE THE HELL OUT OF YOU.

It reminds me of the gangster movies we used to see. A typical plot involved the protection racket. It worked like this. A gangster boss would invade the establishment of some poor, hardworking entrepreneur. Backed by a huge and mean looking bodyguard, he would tell the victim about a series of unfortunate incidents in the neighborhood. A building burns. A store is torn up inside. The front windows are broken. Mischief makers are on the loose.

What the shopkeeper needs is protection and so the gangster boss offers, for a fee of course, to protect the innocent business man from these rascals. The irony, understood by both victim and audience, is that the thugs who are causing the trouble are employed by the ganster boss himself. The so-called savior is the one who created the mess in the first place.

So too, sometimes the church frightens people into seeking refuge from an angry God that the church has created. It tells people over and over how bad they are and how much they need to be saved from this angry God and of course only this particular kind of church can offer the protection needed.

It pays, in fact it pays well and continues to pay as long as one can keep the guilt going. Watch such preachers on television sometime. The crowd frequently applauds as the preacher denounces individual sins.

I believe however that it is the church's mission to call forth the good that is in people and help them to put it to use for the benefit of others and for their own growth. It is our job to help people to become open, loving, joyful, generous, giving people. In this way, Jesus gave people a direction for their living.

As one of the saints of the past put it: "I know well that heaven and earth and all creation are great, generous and beautiful and good. . . .God's goodness fills all God's creatures and all God's blessed works full, and endlessly overflows in them. . . .God is everything which is [redacted] good, as I see it, and the good which everything has, is God."

Life is meant to be a blessing, not a curse. For life to be truly a blessing, we are not to be afraid of the good--but let the good come out of us and be used and multiplied.

We've all heard and no doubt even made the statement--"It's too good to be true." How can anything be too good to be true? Are we saying then that goodness is the opposite of truth?

Jesus knew that if you treat a person as she appears to be, you make her worse than she is. But if you treat a person as if she already were what she potentially could be, you make her what she should be. That's what Jesus did with people like Matthew.

Jesus knew that we are here to expand our gifts, to expand the good that is in us. We are not out of fear to bury the good or hide it or cover it up. "Let your light so shine that people may see your good works and give glory to God."

The good that is in us has no limit. We are as big and as good as we allow ourselves to be. We are of God. The purpose, the direction of life is to continue to grow in our goodness--to continue to become more open, generous, loving, joyful people.

How do we do this?

1. First of all as I have been saying throughout this sermon--DO NOT BE AFRAID OF THE GOOD that is in you and in others. Discover it and then use it.

2. Be forgiving. Forgiveness is the vehicle for changing our perceptions. To not be forgiving is to block the good. Forgiveness is a process of letting go and overlooking whatever we thought other people may have done to us, or whatever we may think we have done to them. When we cherish and hold onto grievances, we allow our mind to be fed by fear and we become imprisoned by these distortions.

Forgiveness corrects the mis-perception that we are separate from each other and allows us to experience a sense of unity and at-one-ment with each other.

Forgiveness as defined here, is different from the way most of us have been trained to understand it. Forgiveness does not mean assuming a position of superiority and putting up with or tolerating behavior in another person that we do not like.

The unforgiving mind, contrasted with the forgiving mind, is confused, afraid. The unforgiving mind is certain of the interpretation it places on its perceptions of others. It is certain of its condemning attitude and anger and the correctness of its condemning judgment. The forgiving mind is just the opposite.

3. Third, remember above all that the good that is in you and which is a part of everyone else as well, is of God. Do not bury it. Put it to good use. That's what it is meant for. Amen.