Sunday, May 5, 1985
PICKING LEAVES
Matthew 13:24-30

There is a lot of talk about stress these days. Books are written on how to deal with stress, speakers travel around the country giving lectures on handling stress, health clubs encourage us to exercise and work out our stress.

Stress can be caused in one's life by almost anything. The other day I read about a dear} little 80-year-old woman who nearly lost her life by turning her gardening and yard work into a stressful situation. She took great pride in keeping a perfect yard, that was her full-time job and she drove herself into impossible extremes. A neighbor found her under a • tree screaming with pain, he called an ambulance, and she was brought to her doctor 1 s office. She was on a stretcher and in severe pain with an obvious broken hip. The doctor asked her what happened.

She was serious, her neighbor confirmed it. She had always tried to pick the leaves from the trees before they had a chance to fall.

I wonder how many of us increase stress or cause stress in our lives when there is no need to. How many of us pick the leaves from the trees? "we get so busy picking the leaves from the trees that we've forgotten how beautiful it is to watch them fall. We're rushing it. If we're not going to let nature take its course, we'll help it. We'll speed it up. We'll do it our way and a lot faster. I saw a sign which read "god give me patience, hurry!!"

Jesus talked about this tendency one day by telling a story. There was a man who sowed good seed in his field. As frequently happens, weed seeds also got into the field so that when the plants began to come up weeds appeared also. Some of the farmer's workers wanted to rush out into the field and tear out the weeds, however, the farmer told them to wait for several reasons: First in the early stages of growth, it is difficult to tell the weeds from the wheat and in 3 tearing it out too soon they might also. Tea r out some of the good crop, and secondly, even where they could tell the difference in the process of pulling out the weeds, they would damage too much of the wheat.

In other words, "Don't rush it" We know the cliche — "haste makes waste." In one's haste to get something done, a lot of damage can be done also. Life has a certain rhythm to it, a certain flow and to try to get ahead of that flow can cause problems we hadn't even anticipated. Some stress can be prevented! "If it isn't broke, don't fix it"

Surely that's what Jesus meant when he said in another place — "do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day,"

What does our Christian faith have to say about dealing with stress?

The first point Jesus makes is that some stress can be prevented! It can be prevented by not "picking leaves" by paying attention to the rhythm of nature and your own rhythm. Don't do things that don't need to be done!

Stress can also be prevented by re-assessing the goals of your life.

A 38-year-old man came into the Doctor's office with chest pains which proved to be angina. He was working two jobs. The physician advised him to quit one of the jobs immediately. But he said that he couldn't. He had his eye on a new red pick-up truck. After he got that, he said. "I'll quit one day of work if you really think I should." Neither the doctor nor the man's wife could convince him to quit. He died of a coronary before he ever got his new red pick-up.

Jesus knew that some stress can be prevented by looking at our values — at the goals for which we are working and re-adjusting them.

Remember the story of the young man who came to Jesus one day and asked — teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life? I think this individual had a life filled with stress and wanted to do something about it. He claimed that he was living a moral life obeying the ten commandments. 5 but that was not enough. His life was. — . empty and lacked meaning and direction.

Jesus said to him you lack one thing. Go sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come follow me. In the story had a sad ending the bible says that when the young man heard what Jesus asked him to do, his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.

The young man had asked the right question, but couldn't accept the answer Jesus was saying to him to quit. Believing that you are going to find meaning in your life through your possessions or even through your strict obedience to religious rules. Change the direction of your living. re-adjust your goals. Reassess your life.

Some stress can be prevented. But there are other situations where it cannot be prevented1 and then it depends on how we cope with stress. Sometimes one's job can add stress to one's life. in a list of forty-three events . . . which cause stress in our lives, eight of the events on the list have to do with one's job or vocation.

The list of stressful situations was 6 compiled and validated by dr. Thomas Holmes and his associates at the University of Washington School of medicine. They developed a means by which they could objectively measure the amount of stress or emotional upset in a person's life. then they designed a scale that assigned numerical values to stressful events, totaling the numerical values of all the stressful events in a person's life could· indicate the amount of stress he or she was undergoing,for example, the most stressful event for most people is the death of a spouse and has a numerical value of 100. Other events with a lot of stress are: divorce 73, marital separation 65, jail term 63, death of a close family member 63, personal injury or illness 53, marriage 50, fired from work 47, retirement 45, business readjustment 39, change to a different line of work 36, change in work responsibilities 29.

The scale also includes some events which we think of as being happy experiences — marriage, pregnancy, marital reconciliation, outstanding personal achievements, Christmas season, vacation. Yet these are all experiences that may require us to change our habits our ways of relating to people or our self-images. They may be a positive ordeal oor introspection and may even cause unresolved emotional conflicts to surface. The key is the need to adapt to change, whether or not that change is in a positive or negative direction. Any change from our usual routine is good or bad and brings a certain amount of stress.

Using these objective measurements of the amount of observable change in people's lives Holmes and his associates were able to predict illness with a level of statistical accuracy.

Forty-nine percent of the people who had accumulated scores of 300 plus within twelve months reported illness during the period of the study while only nine percent of those with scores below 200 reported illness during the same period. Another twelve-months study indicated that people with total point scores in the top third of those who participated in the study reported 90 percent more illness than did people in the bottom third.

Although using this scale makes it possible to predict the probability of illness based on the number of stressful events in a person's life it is not possible to predict of how an individual will react to stressful situations, even in the Holmes study 51 percent of the individuals with scores of 300 or more did not get sick during the period of the study. While stress may predispose to illness the significant factor still seems to be how the individual copes with it. And part of coping with any stressful event depends·on our interpretation of the event. clearly the meaning of an event or a situation — even a stressful one — is interpreted differently from person to person.

A man went to his physician with symptoms of an ulcer and sure enough he had one, the man said it's that blasted job of mine that's causing it. Then the doctor asked him what kind of work he did, "oh I work in the appliance department of a department store," he said. "What exactly do you do in that department?" the doctor asked. "The customers bring the appliances to my window if they're not working or if they are unhappy in any way with them. It's called the customer satisfaction window."

Customer satisfaction window? It didn't sound right. If the customers were satisfied, you wouldn't have a window would you? Wouldn't it be better called the customer dissatisfaction window or complaint department?

The patient grinned and said I suppose so I just never thought of it like that. "The doctor said and you wonder why everyone is unhappy and grouchy? What are they supposed to say when they bring in a toaster they've had for six days that doesn't do as good a job as the 18 year old one they threw away. You really ought to go out each morning and interpret the sign to say -- "complaint department "and expect everyone to be loaded with complaints. It's your job, and remember you aren't the one that made the toaster. You aren't guilty. You can show concern and begin to remedy the situation with a replacement or whatever, but you didn't do it. You aren't the cause, you're part of the solution and that helps.

It wasn't the man's job that caused the ulcer, it was his interpretation of the job, and as soon as this man began to see his job differently, which he did, his ulcer began to heal on its own. It wasn't his job which caused the ulcers it was his interpretation and therefore his approach or the ironic twist to this story is one and one- half years after retiring the same man was back at his doctor's office with stomach complaints. He told the doctor, "it's my job if only I could get it back. I've got to be busy. This retirement business is no good!"

So check your interpretation of whatever you are doing, reassess what you're doing and how you're doing it. It will help you cope with stress.

Another way of coping with stress in life--the kind that cannot be prevented — is to learn the art of relinquishment or renunciation of letting go, when it is necessary to let go, most of what we are taught in life is how to get things) and then how to hold onto things. We are more skillful in acquisition than in letting things go, yet in arithmetic of life in the rhythm of life if you please both processes are at work. We win and we lose. we acquire and we have to let go.

Relinquishment is allowing, letting. go non-attachment, it means relaxing the grasping hands. It means being less possessive. It means not giving eternal value to the things we own, the people or failures we collect. In the long run all things go away, nothing is eternal except God.

There are so many things we have difficulty letting go. I know people who have held onto their hates and their grudges and their resentments and their disappointments for years — their worries, their anxieties, their troubles. it is as if such things are priceless treasures — things they couldn't do without.

In fact some people collect grievances and hurts like others collect stamps or rocks or coins. They go through life looking for people to hurt them and remembering every time they've been hurt or disappointed or neglected, they add new hurts to their collection and delight in telling others how bad off they are--how forgotten, how persecuted, how unloved.
This morning make a list of the things you need to let go of — the excess baggage you've been carrying around for years, lighten your load. As you leave this place leave your hurts and resentments and hates and grievances behind you let them go! you've been feeling sorry for yourself too long!

I think one of the reasons that laughter is so therapeutic is that it is a form of letting go. recently I read of a hospital in Texas where a physician is working with cancer patients whose prospects for recovery had been considered very slight, this doctor doesn't minimize the seriousness of their illness in talking to patients but he puts most his emphasis on the patient's will to live and on a confident approach to treatment, the cancer floor features what is called "the living room." It is a place where people can take leave of their apprehensions, where they can let go where they can generate good spirits, the room has a blue-ribbon collection of video cassettes of comedies. even the nuns are expected to contribute to the upbeat mood a visitor said that he heard one nun tell a patient a story about an event in a nightclub as she told it 1 the headwaiter was astonished to see a man slip off his chair and fall under the table, "Madam," he said "your husband has just slipped under the table." "sir", she said, "My husband has just come through the door."

Although Jesus did not use the word "Stress," He knew that what we today call stress can sometimes be prevented. Ask yourself if you are sometimes "picking leaves?" And for the stress that cannot be prevented) there are ways of coping with it which are less damaging to us and to others. learn to let go and above all put your faith and trust in god! Amen.