Sunday, June 23, 1985
THE PERILS OF EMPTINESS
Matthew 12:43-45

The advice given us these days is. If you are going to go on vacation and leave your house empty while you are gone, it is best to make it seem as if your house is occupied. Be sure to stop the daily delivery of the newspaper and other kinds of deliveries as well. Don´t let there be any evidence to the casual observer that the house is empty. Don't pull all the drapes completely shut and if possible, it's helpful to have an automatic timer which will turn on some of the lights in the evening and then turn them off later. This will help give the impression that the house is occupied. Why go to all this trouble? because an empty house invites all sorts of unwelcome people. It's an invitation to trouble.

It's true! Emptiness can be a perilous condition. and not only with houses. just as an empty house or building of any kind is . . . - an invitation to trouble — so also is an empty institution, and especially the empty life of a human being.

In the Bible passage just read this morning, Jesus tells us about an individual who drove an evil spirit out of his life. He cleaned out his life but left it empty. Not long after, said Jesus, the evil spirit was looking for a place to occupy and, seeing his former residence empty and clean, went and brought seven of his best devil friends to live there with him. And, said Jesus, the last state of that person became worse than the first. Jesus was implying that this kind of thing can happen to any one of us.

So this is much more than a story about devils. It's a story about all of us and about institutions and about nations. It's a story about the perils of emptiness. Let's look at some of the perils or dangers.

First of all, there is a danger in emptiness because evil in the world is very persistent. It doesn't give up easily, and it looks for empty spaces. As soon as it sees a place where it can live, it moves right in.
In this parable and in other places where Jesus talked about evil, he made it clear that evil is much more than just the absence of good. It is a power at work in the world, and seeking always to work in us and in nations and institutions and groups of people. None of us have guaranteed immunity. It is always ready and waiting to move in wherever there is room. And above all, evil is subtle and cunning.

The individual in the parable got rid of what he saw as evil in his life — perhaps a bad habit. He cleaned up his life. He had cleaned out the one thing in his life that he wasn't proud of. And now he settled down to congratulate himself on his action. But the evil returned when he wasn't looking and, worse than that, because there was so much room, it brought seven new devils along.

Evil is persistent! It doesn't give up easily. No doubt that's why bad habits seem easier to form and harder to break than good habits. We can renounce the sins of the flesh only to fall prey to the more subtle sins of the spirit.

It has been said that Alexander the Great was proud of his chastity — proud that contrary to the custom of his times, he refused to violate the wives and daughters of his captives. Yet Alexander's over-vaulting ambition to conquer the world was a much greater and deeper flaw.

Hitler was a model human being in some ways — he was sober and never drank, a vegetarian, and lived a rather spartan life. But seven other devils had moved into that empty house!

Some of the biggest swindlers and cheats in history have had clean personal lives which they prided themselves on. People with a lust for power, with an insensate desire for fame and glory, with a desperate need to manipulate and humiliate and harm others who get in their way, are the ones who cause the most trouble in the world. And they are often the ones who believe they have gotten rid of the evil in their lives and in the emptiness, seven other devils have moved.

I believe that all of us continually underestimate the persistence of evil. Thus we replace one set of sins with another. I met a person who said he was converted from whiskey to Christ. The only problem was that the new convert went around being hyper-critical of everyone he met. Finally, someone said to him, “I wish you’d go back to drinking again, I liked you better then.”

Along the same line, there is a story of the Franciscan monk who was describing the merits of the various Roman Catholic monastic orders. He said, “We Franciscans do not have the scholarly abilities and the intellectual astuteness of the Augustinians; we do not have the practical and artistic abilities of the Benedictines; nor do we have the political skill and sagacity of the Jesuits. But when it comes to humility, we’re tops.”

This parable which Jesus told touches every aspect of our living. It shows, for example, the fallacy of the “devil theory” of history, that theory wants to believe that if we get rid of the one evil leader in a nation, then the house will be clean and all will be well, just kill the one devil.

Whether or not the CIA ever gets directly involved in an assassination plot to kill a leader in another country, we may never know, but the fact that it is discussed or considered shows a naive belief in the so-called “devil theory.” Kill the one evil leader and the house will be clean.

Some years ago, William Colby, who was then director of the CIA, had the wisdom to testify that not only was he opposed to assassinations because they’re wrong, but also because they frequently bring about absolutely uncontrolled and unforeseeable results — usually worse results than by continuing to suffer the problem you’re facing. Remove one devil and seven more, who are even more vicious than the first, may come in to take its place. And worse than that, you become part of the evil itself as you use the tools of evil.

Yet many people, and maybe some of us, still believe that if we could just put the right people before a firing squad and shoot them, the house would be clean and we could all relax. Evil would be taken care of for once and for all. Such reasoning, however, according to Jesus, fails to take into account the persistence of evil. At the very time we are cleaning the house, evil may be moving into our own empty lives.

This leads us to a second reason why emptiness is dangerous. And that’s because emptiness cannot be maintained. It’s impossible. A vacuum is a highly unstable condition. “Nature abhors a vacuum,” we learned in science. Something is always waiting to rush in and fill it and it may be something we do not want.
As far as we human beings are concerned, an empty life, an empty faith are invitations to trouble. It does not greatly help a person only to know what he or she does not believe unless that person also knows what he or she believes.

Sometimes I hear people say, “We’re not going to indoctrinate our children with any religious beliefs, let them grow up and decide for themselves. Leave the mind empty,” but if that is done, then we should not be surprised when some unwelcome beliefs and values fill that empty space.

I believe that a large part of the reason that so many people have become addicts to various fanatical cults is because they have an emptiness that needs to be filled. And if hungry people are not fed good, nourishing, healthy food, they will eat whatever else is available.

Spiritual vacuums are nothing new. Henri Nouwen writes that our lives are filled yet unfilled—"A gnawing sense of being unfulfilled underlies our filled lives.”

He goes on to say that the symptoms of being unfilled, of emptiness, are boredom, resentment, and depression. Boredom is a sentiment of disconnectedness. While we are busy with many things, we wonder if what we do makes any real difference. Life presents itself as a random and unconnected series of activities and events over which we feel we have little or no control.

To be bored, however, does not mean that we have nothing to do, but that we question the value of the things we are so busy doing. So the great paradox of our time is that many people are busy and bored at the same time. And that comes from our emptiness within.

While running from one event to the next, we wonder in our innermost selves if anything is really happening.

This kind of unfilled boredom leads to resentment. When we are busy, yet wondering if our busyness means anything to anyone, we easily feel used, manipulated, and exploited.

Incidentally, many marriages go sour because of emptiness. One of the most critical periods in a marriage is the time when, after maybe 25 years of married life or sooner, a couple looks at each other and finds their marriage empty. They may have stayed together across the years for the sake of the children, but now the children are grown up and gone. A teenage young woman said to me, “My folks say they live for us children. I think that is kind of sad. They should have something else to live for also.” And the emptiness comes. Then all sorts of unwelcome guests move into that empty house — extra-marital affairs, alcohol, drugs, boredom, and many more.

So the parable warns us that it is not enough just to be rid of something, some bad habit, some evil tendency, even something that is not bad but fills our life. Nor is it enough to reach a plateau and think, “Now I’ve got it made. My life is all clean and nice.” It’s just at that point that we are most vulnerable. Into the vacuum, into the emptiness, moves seven more evils and we are worse off than before.

The only way to counteract the perils of emptiness in every part of our living is to be constantly filling our lives with what is good.
It means such things as building good human relationships with people who will bring something positive and constructive to our living. It means having close friends to whom we can turn when we need the love and support of someone else because tragedy or sadness has come into our lives and we are empty.

To counteract the perils of emptiness means taking definite steps to build and strengthen our spiritual lives and not just sitting back waiting for it to happen to us. It means letting God's Spirit and power fill the emptiness that comes to all of us from time to time. It means such simple things as being regular in our participation in worship. Worship is the process of taking time out to pay attention to our spiritual growth and development, and it is engaging in those disciplines which foster such growth.

Now of course none of this sounds very sensational or exciting. However, preventative measures are never as exciting as rescuing someone who is already in deep trouble. Rescue is always more dramatic, but it is short-lived.

You have heard me say from this pulpit time and time again, that God's Spirit and love are always around us and already within us. God desires to fill any and all emptiness that exists within us — but does not force it. We have to invite God's Spirit into those parts of our lives that are empty. God's Spirit is continually saying to us, "Behold I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in." Amen.