Sunday, August 11, 1985
DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENT
Romans 5:1-5, John 6:24-35

John 6:27 “do-not labor for the food which perishes. but for the food which endures eternal life.”

Is there anyone here who has not known disappointment in his or her life? It is one of the oldest human experiences. Each one of us could make a list of our unfulfilled wishes or of outcomes never attained, seeds bearing no fruit. Anyone who hopes and dreams can expect some disappointment. Alexander Pope wrote: “Blessed is the man who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed.”

Disappointment is a problem that transcends economics. We can be well-off financially and still be disappointed with our children, in our marriage, in not reaching whatever goals we have set for ourselves. We can be disappointed because our life lacks meaning and direction.

Disappointment occurs in our lives no matter how young or old we are. A lot of what is today called the “mid-life crisis” is actually the question of how to deal with disappointment in one way or another. A man or woman comes to the realization that he or she is not going to fulfill the dream in the way it was envisioned. Or the dream is fulfilled, but an emptiness remains. And the question comes: “Is that all there is?”

Dealing with disappointment is not an easy matter as we shall see in this sermon, yet there are all kinds of people and institutions peddling techniques which promise to solve our problems with almost no pain.

We’ve all seen the headlines on the magazines which are near the check-out counters in supermarkets — each promises a better personal life through psychological intervention or attitude manipulation. If these mass-produced materials were to be believed, one could learn how to love in a few easy lessons, how to succeed through coercion, and how to live out the wildest of fantasies simply by following the formulas contained in the text. We are told that it is only a matter of acquiring the proper technique.

Assuring us of an easy, quick way to happiness and fulfillment, we are given the false impression that personal change is a simple, painless matter. Yet an old saying reminds us: “There is no gain without pain.”

Unfortunately, these fantasies of effortless personal transformation have, in fact, produced greater disappointment.

This morning we are going to look at this matter of disappointment and how to deal with it in the context of the Christian faith.

To put it in the simplest of terms, disappointment is unmet positive expectation. We expected a certain thing to happen. It did not. We are disappointed.

How then do we deal with disappointment?

First of all, remember that some disappointment is going to be a part of every human being's life. Our Christian faith does not promise us a life free of disappointment. Therefore, do not be surprised when disappointment occurs. It comes to all of us, young and old, rich and poor. Jesus experienced a number of disappointments in his life.
As human beings, God has created us with the capacity to dream and with the wish to build a better world. Having expectations is built into our nature. And when we have expectations, the fact is that all of them will not be fulfilled according to our desires. And so there will be disappointment.

Sometimes other people will disappoint us. Our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers, our relatives, our children, our spouse, or we find out we can't have children. Sometimes events will not come off as planned. Our health may fail us; our jobs can be disappointing; and we can be disappointed with ourselves. Life has an unpredictable quality to it.

Yet imagine a life devoid of expectations, dreams, wishes, and hopes, and there is little disappointment. It would be a dull, bland, boring existence — something like a stew without seasoning of any kind — acceptable perhaps, but unexciting.

Expectation, on the other hand, has the capacity to both enlarge and diminish our experience. It can inspire us to superhuman feats. It can help heal the sick and give heart to the hopeless. But it may just as easily distract our perceptions and dull our awareness.

Expectation is helpful in planning for the future. It projects us into the next day or year, so we are able to foresee what is required and respond accordingly. It provides a mental dress rehearsal of sorts which allows us to prepare for a variety of contingencies.

We relish positive expectation because thinking about events brings them to the present consciousness and gives us a delightful taste of what is to come. Expectation builds excitement. A young child is going to the circus for the first time. Her mind races with thoughts and images she has associated with the big top. She contemplates coming face to face with lions and tigers, clowns, and trapeze artists. She replays these images in her mind until she can barely contain her excitement.

A young woman is preparing for her first year of college. She daydreams about living on her own, the stimulating classes, the formation of new friendships. She experiences herself as very adult and wise.

Yet to have expectations is to also be open to some disappointments. Our expectations are not always realized.

Sam Keen wrote: "Life is not a bowl of Librium, and a good part of the secret of happiness lies in learning to suffer with dignity. Loneliness, loss, disappointment, failure, disease, boredom are inevitable. The price of trying to avoid the unavoidable is illusion or neurosis. Even if you jog, eat health foods, grow, meditate, and go to confession regularly, you will sometimes fall sick."

Secondly, even though disappointment will come to all of us in varying degrees, some disappointments can be avoided or at least modified, and that involves changing or being flexible with our expectations.
Do not set your expectations in concrete so they cannot be moved or changed. No expectations are sacrosanct. Few involve matters of life and death. And none are

irreplaceable. As important as expectations in general may be in helping us to function in this world, no single hoped-for outcome is essential. Remember that expectations are nothing more than wish and anticipation. Don't empower them with royal treatment or see them as permanent fixtures that cannot be removed or changed without great pain.

Thus, a key to reducing disappointment is a willingness to give up what you want when you can't get it. For example, for me to expect to earn my living as a professional golfer is foolish. No matter how hard I might work at it, or how much I dream about it, or wish it to be true — if I have this expectation, you can be sure that I am going to be disappointed. And the more I invest in this expectation, the more I am going to be disappointed. So I need to let go of that expectation.

Too many of us are overly invested in particular expectations. As a result, we hold onto them long after it is advisable, suffering disappointment in the process. We need to reduce and sometimes liquidate our investment. The well-known prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr fits here: "O God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed; courage to change what can and should be changed; and wisdom to distinguish one from the other."

A dancer, who after years of preparing for her career, suffered an injury to her knee that left her unable to continue. Her disappointment was monumental. She saw her whole life as a preparation for a journey that was now impossible to take. Dismayed and despairing, she defended against similar circumstances by not allowing herself any intense expectation of another kind. She became blasé and indifferent, almost frozen in her rigid defense. Only by wanting to risk again was she able to overcome her despair and disappointment. She had to change her expectation.

Remember too that surrendering a particular intense expectation is not the same as surrendering self. We continue to exist long after we give up the desire for a particular outcome.

Thirdly, it helps in dealing with disappointment to trim down the number of our expectations. Beyond the trivia, most people carry around too many expectations. Not only do we have too many expectations and therefore open ourselves to too many disappointments, but we act as if the fulfillment of them is as important as life itself. We make our expectations equal to God.

Fourthly, this leads to the ultimate way of dealing with disappointment, and that is to trust God and God's love.

Jesus put it this way in our scripture reading this morning: "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life." Jesus doesn't want us to experience the ultimate disappointment — to work and work and work and find in the end that it's all for nothing.

There are people who spend all their time and energy laboring for food that perishes. And then they lose either way — if they succeed in getting the food, it perishes anyway, and if they don't get it, they are very disappointed.

What are some kinds of food that perish? The most obvious is our laboring to acquire more and more material things in the expectation that these will satisfy us.

Last week I read one of the saddest books that I've read in a long time — the true story of the Bradshaw family of Salt Lake City, Utah. The patriarch of the family, Franklin Bradshaw, had a desire to achieve that was so consuming that he worked every day of the year, not even making time to attend his three daughters' weddings. In the process, he became one of the richest men in Utah, a multimillionaire — but everything else around him was tragedy. The family became a battleground which extended even to the grandchildren.

One Sunday morning in July 1978, Franklin Bradshaw, then 76, was shot to death by one of his grandsons, and later investigation showed that the murder had been masterminded by one of his daughters — the motive, to get his money sooner. Today, both the daughter and her son are incarcerated at Utah State Prison. Most of the family, in one way or another, labored for food which perishes.

It's no accident that one of the most popular recordings today among young people is a song sung by Madonna entitled "Material Girl." The text goes: "We live in a material world and I am a material girl." The implication is that only material things in this world are important and will satisfy us. It's the exact opposite of what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel of John.

According to Jesus, there is only one food that does not perish — ever. It is the love of God present in Jesus and still living among us. St. Paul put it this way in his letter to the church in Rome: "Hope in God does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."

Jesus went on to say: "I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will not hunger and those who believe in me shall never thirst." The more we become aware of our connection with God and with one another, the more we will overcome and be able to handle the other disappointments in life, because we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

In fact, the normal disappointments in life can even help us. They remind us of our own limits. They remind us that only God can ultimately satisfy us. If we hide from our disappointments, we learn nothing. Disappointment can also shake us out of our narcissistic preoccupation with self. It can lead us to reach out to others and to God. Amen.