Sunday, September 8, 1985
REACH OUT AND LIVE!
Luke 6:27-36, 9:23-25

I've been brooding or reflecting a bit more than usual this summer. Maybe it's my age. But I think there's more to it than that. What concerns me is this — our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their money, their property, and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude, and do harm.

Here in Nebraska, we've heard and read of groups who have armed themselves heavily because of such fears. To me, there seem to be more people who are not only afraid, but angry and mean.

My increased brooding began early last spring. It was triggered by an incident that my wife and I observed as we were driving to Omaha one Sunday afternoon. We were proceeding north on 180 toward Interstate 80. We were in the right lane going about 55 miles per hour.

Alongside of us was another automobile going the same speed in the passing lane. It was driven by an older woman. She neither passed us nor dropped behind. In my rearview mirror, I could see another vehicle approaching — a four-wheel-drive Blazer, and the man driving it was in a hurry. He wanted to pass us, but the passing lane was blocked by the car alongside of us. He blinked his lights several times to try to get the driver's attention. She was daydreaming or her mind was otherwise occupied, for she wouldn't speed up to pass us or slow down to drop behind so that the Blazer could pass.

The driver in the Blazer was getting more and more impatient. All of a sudden, he passed our car by driving on the shoulder of our right side and then he cut over in front of us and on into the lane in front of the woman. As soon as he was directly in front of her, he began to slow down. We continued at our regular speed, but then I could see through my rearview mirror that not only had he slowed down, but he suddenly stopped. This caused the woman behind him to crash into him and damage her car more than his. Both had to pull over onto the shoulder and stop. If the driver of the Blazer was in such a hurry, he was more slowed down than before. At any rate, he had deliberately caused an accident.

Soon after, I read about a similar incident in another state. Joseph Singer, 83, was out for a drive with his wife in their 1976 Chevy. Robert Brigaerts, 37, was behind the Singers in his 1977 Mercury and was displeased with the speed of the Singers. After Brigaerts could not coax more speed out of Singer by honking his horn and tailgating, he pulled around the Singers and slammed on his brakes, forcing the 83-year-old to stop. Brigaerts got out of his car and walked toward the Singers. Frightened, the 83-year-old Singer pointed a starter's pistol at Brigaerts, who then returned to his car. The Singers drove away. Moments later, Brigaerts pulled up to the left side of the Chevy and shot out two windows in the Singer's 76 Chevy with a .38 revolver.

Last winter, the whole country read about the Bernard Goetz case in New York City, as he acted out the frustration and anger of millions of city dwellers by shooting four youths who had accosted him on the subway.

Then I came across another story of an incident in San Francisco. A man named Franklin Levi Clingenpeel was shot to death by Tony C. Thomas, a 68-year-old retired gardener and resident of a Tenderloin transient hotel. Thomas told police that Clingenpeel came face-to-face with him on the street, called him some bad names and added, “Watch where you’re going.” They exchanged some more words which can’t be repeated. Clingenpeel then allegedly shook his fists at Thomas, at which point Thomas drew a .357 Magnum from under his sweater and fired. One witness said Thomas pumped two extra rounds into his victim while he lay on the sidewalk. “He had it coming,” Thomas told police. “I didn’t like the way he was acting.”

Now admittedly these are extreme examples, but the point I want to make is that in our time there seems to be an over-concentration on defending ourselves or our own well-being. People do not pray—“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,” but rather, “My kingdom come, my will be done, and if you get in my way and don’t get out of my way, then watch out!”

Even in religion, there’s an increasing emphasis on self. Because this church is considering reaching out through television, I’ve been watching as many religious programs as possible to see what’s on. Throughout most of these programs, there is an extreme emphasis on personal salvation, on saving oneself, on how to get yourself to heaven. It’s a religious version of “look out for number one.”

Rarely do I hear messages on why and how to reach out and live; on why and how to connect and live in harmony with others; on why and how to build community; on why and how to treat the outcasts of society so as to include them.

Yet Jesus’ life was one of continual reaching out — and his message was the same. He rarely talked of personal salvation. Rather he talked of giving one’s life away, not saving one’s life. Listen to some of his words read earlier from the Gospel of Luke—“Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who abuse you... If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Be merciful, be compassionate, even as God is merciful and compassionate.”

“If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who would save their life will lose it; and those who lose their lives for my sake will save it.”

One finds life and meaning in life by giving oneself away — by reaching out. The meaning of life is to be found in our connections, in our relationships with others and with God, and the two always go together. The Bible reminds us in another place, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother or sister, that person is a liar.” In other words, when we reach out to others, we are reaching out to God. The way we treat people is the way we treat God.

Our Puritan forefathers and mothers knew this. John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in a sermon aboard ship before they landed in this country, described the kind of community they intended to found: “We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together; always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body.”

The Puritans were not uninterested in material prosperity and were prone when it came, unfortunately, to take it as a sign of God’s approval. Yet their fundamental criterion of success was not material wealth, but the creation of a community in which a genuinely ethical and spiritual life could be lived.

During his twelve terms as governor, Winthrop, a relatively rich man for those days, devoted his life to the welfare of the colony, frequently using his own funds for public purposes. Near the end of his life, he had to step down from the governorship because his neglected estate was threatened with bankruptcy.

Our Christian faith reminds us that we live in an interconnected world. Thus Jesus knew that there is no being or becoming without relationship, without reaching out to others. Our very survival depends upon our relationships. In childhood, if we are denied loving encounters with human beings, we wither, fall into psychosis, idiocy, or die.

As adults, we continue to depend upon our interactions in togetherness for our greater joys and our most significant growth. We take this process for granted. When we experience disconnections, times when we are severed from close relationships — either by death, divorce, or physical separations that tear our closeness apart and leave us alone — then we know how much our human connections mean.

Nothing is sadder than a disconnected human being, a forgotten person. I recently read of a young man in his mid-twenties who was found dead in his apartment off the campus of the University of Miami, where he was a student. It was reported that he was last seen prior to Thanksgiving. When they found him, he had been dead for two months. He hadn't even been missed by anyone at Christmas. On his apartment door were two eviction notices, and his television set was still on.

This matter of reaching out to live touches every aspect of our living. Some time ago, in order to learn what error young people starting out on their first jobs should be warned about, a group of vocational teachers wrote to several thousand employers asking them to look up the last three persons dismissed and tell why they had been let go. The teachers expected a long list of reasons. They were amazed that more than two-thirds of the persons losing their jobs had been fired for one reason. It was the same in every sort of business — for workers of all ages and both sexes. It amounted simply to this: they couldn't get along with other people.

It shouldn't surprise us. We've known for a long time that security, joy, and success in life are directly correlated to our ability to relate one with another with some degree of commitment, depth, and love. We have learned, most of us from experience, that our inability to live in harmony with others is responsible for our greatest fears, anxieties, feelings of isolation, and even severe mental illness.

Reach out and live! Begin to give your life away. Jesus tells us that the greatest joys in life come from working in harmony with other human beings in any worthwhile project.

It is when we begin reaching out, giving ourselves away, that God's creative love and energy truly begins to flow through us. As St. Paul said, "Then it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

Last Easter, I told the true story of Belle Cogdell, but I want to tell it again for it illustrates what can happen when we start to reach out and live.

"I'm sorry honey, but you're on your own. I can't take care of you anymore." Tough words for a 14-year-old Black girl to hear, or any of us to hear. For Belle Cogdell, they marked the beginning of a 40-year slide which would find her migrating from Mississippi to New York and

raising eleven foster children only to watch every one of them fall victim to the vices of the street — drugs, prostitution, and hard-core crime. At last the kind, old woman bottomed out when the final child became rebelliously pregnant and broke her heart.

For over a year Belle wept constantly. She locked herself in her Harlem apartment and stayed there, coming out only to get essential supplies. The walls were closing in. As she put it, “I thought I was going down.”

Then the mirror did her a favor. One day, as she stood staring at her wrinkled face, gnarled hands, and deep-set eyes, she started talking to herself. “Old woman, you’ve always been old. You never tried being young. When you were a child, you lived like an old person. Now you’re old, why don’t you try living like a child? Why don’t you try giving yourself away?”

Since then, Belle Cogdell has done just that. Her commitment to others has given her a new lease on life. She also has a new name. They call her, “Senior Health Coordinator and Leader of the SRO Outreach Team for the East Harlem Community Health Center.”

She is a moving church. When Belle walks the Upper West Side of Manhattan, the streets part. They wait for her — the swollen-footed diabetics and the fugitive teen mothers, the discards with rheumy eyes or a whiskey list. Word passes among the wobbly-minded ones emptied out of the state’s huge mental institutions, those who have not yet crawled into a corner to rot. She looks for them and they look for her, the one they call Ma Belle.

We can all reach out in so many little ways. Be nice, polite, courteous to people you meet, to your colleagues at work, to family members. Be courteous in your driving. Reach out and live! Amen.