Sunday, January 26, 1986
MAGIC WANDS AND SIMPLE ANSWERS
Luke 4:1-4, 9:51-56

Last November, a church member brought me a letter which a member of her family had received. The letter was computer typed and therefore addressed to the individual in person. Here's part of what it said and promised:

"In this letter, you will find a small envelope, and in the small envelope, you will find a blessed red 'token string.' Take that blessed red 'token string' in your hand and hold it while you read this letter."

Then the letter continued:

"My eyes are filled with tears of joy as I write this letter to you. I was working and praying for you this morning in the prayer tower, and I felt in my heart that you needed some special prayer work done and some extra help this month. As I prayed, the Holy Spirit led me to see the special things you need. I know that you need better luck. I know you need to be closer to your loved ones. I know you need extra money to help meet your unexpected needs. What about a new car? A better job that pays good money — more money? Or how about a new home? I want you to have all the good you need, and I want you to be lucky and win at everything you do."

"I have prayed over and anointed a special holy blessing package for you, and I am writing your name on it right now because I want to make sure you receive it."

"Here's what I want you to do: Put this special blessed red 'token string' in your window today or tonight. Leave it in the window overnight. Then mail it back to me along with a faith donation. The spirit of the good Lord has spoken that I must put this same blessed red 'token string' in my prayer tower after you have mailed the red 'token string' and donation back to me. And then you will receive new blessings of health, happiness, love, success, prosperity, and more money — according to your faith."

"Do not keep this blessed red 'Token String' in you home longer than overnight. Get it out of your home tomorrow no later than 8:37 p.m. Then believe and expect miracles, good luck, and happiness will come to you if you believe in God's word."

"You must rush this blessed red 'Token String' to me by tomorrow, with a faith donation of $27.00 or more. As soon as I hear from you, I will send you the holy blessing package to work with for all of God's blessings. This holy blessing package will bring you good luck in everything you do."

Then in large type there was a summary f what had to be done to get God's blessing. (1) Puth the blessed red "Token String" in your window overnight. (2) Mail it back with your donation tomorrow, no later than 8:37 p.m. (3) Do not leave this blessed red "Token String" in your home.

According to this letter, the blessed red "Token String" is like a magic wand which if used correctly will bring incredible results. And there are times when each one of us has wished we had such a magic wand or blessed red "Token String" that worked that way. That's why some

people, at least, will respond to this kind of letter and send $27 or even more. If only life were that simple!

However, the Christian faith is not a magic wand, which if waved in a certain way will bring instant worldly success or is it a red “Token String” which if placed in your window, and then mailed with a donation, will change your life.

God’s blessings are not something that can be bought and sold. Jesus rejected such simple solutions to our problems and to the world’s problems. One of the temptations which he faced as he began his ministry was a simple answer to the world’s problems. “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” You can feed the hungry of the world through magic. But Jesus knew that would not solve the hunger problem for very long. It might solve a physical hunger problem temporarily but would not solve the problem of spiritual hunger at all.

Whenever things are not going our way or the way we think they should, or when problems seem too much for us, we are in danger of settling for an answer that is too simple and therefore misleading and false.

Later in his ministry, Jesus had made up his mind to go to Jerusalem. In planning for the trip, he had sent some of his disciples ahead to Samaria to make preparations. However, the disciples reported that the people there would not receive him. They did not want Jesus and his followers to come through their territory or stay overnight among them. Naturally, this made the disciples angry. So they proposed a simple answer to the problem: “Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?” It was another way of saying, “Let’s kill them all, that will solve the problem.” But Jesus would have none of it.

As I mentioned in last Sunday’s sermon, one of the simple solutions that is often proposed, even today, is that of violence. What is the answer to the problem of terrorism? Wave a magic wand and kill all of them, or even one of them. One congressman suggested recently that the solution to terrorism was to go into Libya and kill Gaddafi. What we forget is that the more we kill, the more we give birth to new terrorists, and we become terrorists ourselves in the process.

In Jesus’ time, the Jews and Samaritans had been at odds with each other for centuries. When the Samaritans would not receive Jesus, the disciples proposed a simple solution to a centuries-old problem: bring fire down from heaven and kill as many Samaritans as possible. But Jesus would have none of it.

In the same way, in our time and through the centuries, simplistic moral answers have been proposed to complex social problems. Such simple answers always remind me of a line from the film “Mickey One.” Chased by mobsters, Mickey finally stops a Chicago police car and begs for help. He tells the two officers that his life is in danger because he can’t pay his gambling debt. The police look at one another and then reassure the frightened man: “Gambling is illegal in this state. You don’t have to pay.” Then they drive off. Wave a magic wand. Gambling is illegal. So the problem is solved.

For months now, there has been an ongoing debate in our country about the illness called AIDS. What do we do about it? How do we curtail the spread of it? I don’t know the answer to the problem, but I’m sure there is no one simple answer. I can understand the fear that surrounds the disease. It’s very similar to the fear that people used to have about leprosy in Jesus’ time and afterward.

Some religious leaders have not been much help by simply announcing that AIDS is God's judgment on homosexuals. Again, that's too simple an answer to a complex problem. It's the old technique of trying to find one scapegoat, one group of people to put all the blame on, believing therefore that if we got rid of that one group, the problem would be solved. The disciples had been ready to fall for that simple answer. Get rid of the Samaritans, and then we'll have no serious obstacles in the way of the ministry of Jesus.

In the 1930s, Adolf Hitler used the simple answer — scapegoat principle. He blamed all of Germany's trouble on the Jews and the Treaty of Versailles. And enough people believed him so that an enormous amount of death and tragedy came to much of the world. Accepting a simple answer almost always makes the problem worse because it keeps us from looking for the true answer. It sidetracks us from the more complex task. It can be a cover-up for searching for a more complete answer.

But as Christians, there are things that we can do! In the case of AIDS, for example, I read recently of one group of Christian people who were, I believe, trying to do what Jesus would do more than most of us. At a time when most Americans were panic-stricken over the disease or snickering at snide AIDS jokes, a young woman and her prayer group were visiting terminally ill AIDS patients in a hospital in a large city. None of the patients had families in the area and certainly no visitors. So this prayer group brought them postage stamps, stationery, books, tapes, and cookies. The leader of the group explained why she visited AIDS victims: "They are socially and medically unacceptable because of their disease. They are scared. They are dying. They need to experience the love and care of God."

No magic wands! No blessed red "token string!" No simple answer except the proclamation that God is with us in our suffering — that we are not alone!

But this matter of being with people in their suffering and of trying to help can be frustrating because there is no guarantee of success in the usual definition of that word. Again, there's no magic wand to wave which will instantly change people once and for all, or that will change us once and for all.

A young woman who regularly visits inmates in prison and tries to bring them the love of God told of her disappointments. One man with whom she had been working had been doing well in changing his life, but then had slipped back into his old ways. Another man had gone back on drugs, and yet another had returned to his old violent ways. All these men, she explained, had given their lives to Christ — they were sincere, but still there were problems and failures and struggles. And it was beginning to affect her as well.

"Sometimes," she wrote, "I feel so overwhelmed. I wonder about God's power. Where is the victory that Christ talked about and lived?" This young woman was worried not only about the failures of the men she worked with but about her own inadequacies as well. I know the feeling as do all of you.

Part of our frustration is that too much of our society is measured by the "bottom line," the results. Success is all that counts. We have become an impatient and intolerant people. Everything has to happen fast!

This kind of thinking has entered into our Christian faith so that we tend to believe that Christianity should be an instant fix to all of our pains and struggles. So we begin to think of

our faith as a sparkling magic wand: we wave it and presto, our problems are gone in a puff of magic smoke. But this is not the faith that Jesus taught and lived. Unfortunately, magic wand religion makes Christians incredibly naive in approaching complex problems, and it can shatter the fragile faith of the believer who expects the magic wand to work every time. Complex problems don't disappear that easily.

Ministry in Christ's name is not just a snap of the fingers or placing a blessed red "token string" on your window sill. The Christian faith is a way of life. It's no accident that in the New Testament, Christians were, for a long time, called "followers of the way." Jesus said, "Follow me," and if we follow him, that can lead us to the cross. That can lead us to caring for the victims of AIDS and other dread diseases, and it can lead us into the prisons or wherever people are forgotten.

And hopefully, we learn to work with patience, love, understanding, forgiveness, and perseverance with others and with ourselves. Most lessons always seem to be learned the hard way. In this church and as individuals, we carry on our ministry not to win spiritual prizes or to chalk up our success records — we carry on our ministry because we are trying to follow Jesus, and when we do that, we are led into some unusual places.

And as we follow Jesus, he warns us to beware of magic wands and simple answers. Beware of the person or group who says he or she can solve all of society's problems by doing one simple thing, or passing one law, or who blames all our troubles on one group or one factor.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer who now lives in this country after spending time in prison and being exiled from his homeland, speaks directly to this issue. In his book "Gulag Archipelago," he warns his readers by saying:

"So let the reader who expects this book to be a political expose slam its covers shut right now. If only it were that simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

During the life of any person, this line keeps changing place; and sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil, and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times, he or she is close to being a devil; at times, to sainthood. But his or her name doesn't change, and to that name we ascribe the whole lot — good and evil."

So beware of magic wands and simple answers. Most of them do not include us as part of the problem. Better to follow Jesus as he leads to care for and love others. Amen.