Sunday, February 2, 1986
THE AUCTION AND THE BIDDERS
Mark 8:34-37; I Corinthians 6:19-20

Most of us, I suppose, have attended an auction. As a little boy growing up and then later as a young teenager, I went along with my dad to many sales that were auctions. Usually, in my childhood, such sales were held when a farmer was selling out his livestock, farm machinery, and other assorted items because he was going out of business, or maybe the farmer had died and his heirs were liquidating the personal property. As a child, it was especially exciting to listen to the auctioneer as he called for bids on every conceivable kind of item, from milk cows to pigs, to horse-drawn machinery, tractors, milk cans, pitchforks, shovels, sausage grinders, and rocking chairs. The auctions were all-day affairs and were social events in addition to being an efficient way of disposing of personal property.

My dad, in those days, was kind of an all-around trader, and we never knew what his truck might bring home at the end of a sale — maybe a new milk cow, or three hogs, or a piece of farm machinery. Sometimes a bidder could get quite a bargain at an auction, and sometimes too, what seemed to be a rather common item could bring a price that surprised everyone. It all depended on how much the bidders on an item wanted it and how many bidders for that item there might be.

A few months after my grandfather (my mother's father) died, a sale was held to sell his farm machinery, livestock, and other related items that most small farmers had in those days. I was about 14 years old and was looking forward eagerly to the event. There was one item in particular that I wanted to bid on and hopefully purchase — a surrey. It was not a surrey with a fringe on top, but it had a top and was in good condition. I could visualize myself in that surrey being pulled by our team of horses. I don't think my dad realized how much I wanted that surrey, and so he never expected me to enter the bidding. However, I did become one of the bidders, and when the bidding stopped, I had bought the surrey for $26. The problem was, I didn't have $26, so my dad had to pay on my behalf, and we had a surrey that he didn't want or need. We got it home by hitching it behind our truck, and we used it with a team of horses only a few times during the coming years. As I got to be 16, I was more interested in automobiles than surreys. Finally, we were able to sell it some years later at a loss.

In recent years, I haven't been to very many auctions — maybe I'm afraid that I'll bid on something and then buy it when I really have no use for it. However, I'm still fascinated by auctions, and maybe it's because an auction with its bidders is a good metaphor for what life is all about. Is it not true that we as human beings, time and time again, in effect, sell ourselves to the highest bidder? In that sense, life is like an auction with various people, ideas, and vocations bidding for our attention and allegiance. If a person is offered two jobs, he or she might take the one that paid the most salary. If this happened, the individual would at the same time be selling himself or herself to an idea — in this case, the idea that the salary a job pays might be more important than the job itself.

All through life, there are ideas and people bidding for us—"Come follow me. Sell yourself to me and I will give you what you want." Or the metaphor can be turned around, and we are the bidders in the auction, and like me bidding for that surrey which I had no use for, we bid and buy ideas and things for which we have no use or even which can cause us harm in the long run.

Nothing is more important than to consider the ideas we are bidding on or those that are bidding for our allegiance. Sometimes life is like a “silent auction,” and we are unaware of what is bidding for our loyalty. The fact is that in this auction called life, we all do sell ourselves to or buy certain ideas — the only question then is — are they ideas that are worthy and lead us out of ourselves and help us to grow, or are they ideas that shrink and diminish us and make us less than God meant us to be?

M. Scott Peck in his book, “People of the Lie,” puts it this way:

“Mental health requires that the human will submit itself to something higher than itself. To function decently in this world, we must submit ourselves to some principle that takes precedence over what we might want at any given moment. For the religious, this principle is God, and so they will say, ‘Thy will, not mine, be done.’ But if they are sane, even the non-religious submit themselves, whether they know it or not, to some higher power, be it truth or love, the needs of others or the demands of reality.

The utter failure to submit oneself to reality is called autism. The word comes from the Greek root ‘auto,’ meaning self. The person who is autistic is oblivious to certain essential dimensions of reality. Such people literally live ‘in a world of their own’ in which the self reigns supreme.”

Now, the problem is that some of us submit ourselves to something outside ourselves, but yet something which is not high enough or grand enough. We bid on something that is not worth the price we pay. Or to change the metaphor, we sell ourselves to something that is unworthy of us.

One very popular idea in our time which people bid on and buy is the belief that the sum total of life is the accumulation of more and more creature comforts and that the more things we have, the happier we’ll be. As the saying goes, “When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.”

Jesus told a parable about a man who kept building bigger and bigger buildings so that he would have a place to store all of his goods, and Jesus called this man “a fool.”

Our reasoning goes something like this: “If I can find a job that will make me lots of money so that I can buy lots of things, a big house, at least two cars, one of them a fancy foreign car, a boat, a VCR, then I’ll be happy.”

What then, in the auction of life, is something we can bid on, give our lives to, and be confident that in the process we will continue to grow in “wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and others?”

Or to turn the metaphor around again — what is the highest that is bidding for us, for our attention and allegiance, and that will never fail?

God is the highest bidder for our lives. It helps to remember that God made us, God loves us, and as St. Paul put it in his letter to the church at Corinth, “You are not your own; you were bought with a price! So glorify God in your body.” God not only created us, but when we stray away on our own, God continually bids to get us back.

But how do you give yourself to God?

By giving yourself to others, or as Jesus put it — by giving your life away. “For whoever would save his or her life will lose it, and whoever gives his or her life away will find it.”
After years of devoting his life to healing efforts, Carl Jung made a striking observation about how people are and are not healed. He wrote:

“All the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble. They can never be solved, but only outgrown. This ‘outgrowing’ proved on further investigation to require a new level of consciousness. Some higher or wider interest appeared on the patient’s horizon, and through this broadening of his or her outlook, the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically on its own terms, but faded when confronted with a new and stronger life urge.”

That’s exactly what Jesus Christ was saying almost 2000 years ago — find something higher to give your life to — give your life away. Give it to something greater than yourself and then you will truly find life. Let your life be stretched, pulled, and enlarged rather than narrowed, shriveled, and turned inward.

Secondly, you give your life to God when you begin to see all of creation as God’s good gift. You give your life to God and therefore to the highest when you work with others to make this world better; when you are not afraid to take risks and explore new horizons; when you reach out, then you truly begin to live.
And when we give ourselves to the highest bidder, to God, we also begin to gain a global consciousness. At the same time that we live in families, in local congregations, in cities, counties, states, and this United States of America, we are also citizens of the earth and even larger than that, citizens of the universe, of God’s creation.

What the space program has been teaching us and will continue to teach us more than anything else, is to see the earth as one. Until we got into space and could look back through space to experience the earth as one spinning globe, we knew it, but it had not taken hold of us.

And thirdly, you give yourself to the highest, to God, when you become like a child again, with a sense of mystery, wonder, and awe. In a recent workshop with Matthew Fox, he invited us to “fall in love at least three times a day.” To fall in love with the clouds, with the rain, with sunshine, with the snow, with animals, with a human being, with life itself, and therefore with God. Look for things each day to fall in love with!
The scouting program, with its many types of merit badges, seeks to help young people experience a variety of things and skills and therefore come to appreciate them and fall in love with them.

When you give yourself to God the highest, you also give yourself to the lowest, the simple. One minister recently said in a speech:

“Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandpile at nursery school.”

“These are the things I learned: share everything, play fair, don’t hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don’t take things that aren’t yours. Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies

and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some."

"Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the plastic cup. The roots go down and the plant goes up, and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that."

"Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the plastic cup — they all die. So do we."

"And then remember the book Dick and Jane and the first word you learned, the biggest word of all: LOOK. Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and sane living."
"Think of what a better world it would be if all — the whole world — had cookies and milk about 3:00 o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap. Or if we had a basic policy in our Nation and other nations to always put things back where we found them and cleaned up our own messes. And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together."1

In the auction of life, the highest bidder is God and the good life God offers. You can accept God's bid for your life or reject it — the choice is up to you. Amen.

1. From a speech by Robert Fulghum, Minister Emeritus of The Edmonds Unitarian Church, as quoted in the "Church and Public Education," Vol. XI, No. 4.