Sunday, August 31, 1986
LITE RELIGION?
Matthew 7:13-20, 5:14-16

Some cultural observers are describing the decade of the 1980s as the “Lite Decade.” There is Lite beer, Lite salad dressing, Lite food, and Lite soft drinks usually called “diet.” Added to these are Lite bread, Lite wine, and even Lite whiskey. The one commercial for Lite beer has become a classic—"Everything you always wanted in a beer and less.”

In addition to food and drink, the Lite movement has infiltrated other parts of our culture. Not too long ago, I came across Lite literature. What it is, is highly condensed literature. It used to take so much time — days, maybe weeks to read a classic. “Moby Dick” alone runs 710 pages. Today, thanks to a small publishing house called Workman, it takes a minute. Through abridging, reabridging, and editing “rambling soliloquies,” Workman boasts that it has cut down the literary canon to a lean pistol, producing an audiocassette tape that offers listeners “ten classics in ten minutes.”

The result is “Lite Literature,” the latest demonstration that in the 1980s Lite beer is not the only thing that is less filling. What started out as a way to justify drinking three beers instead of two — the creation of Lite beer with a third fewer calories — has become part of a broader phenomenon in which less is valued above more.

“Lite” is a way of thinking that we’ve come to in the 80s,” says Dr. Robert T. London, a psychiatrist at New York University Medical Center. “It’s an umbrella phenomenon where lightness transforms itself into the cars we drive, the lightness in our room, our diet, as well as lightness in the relationships we have.”

Sociologists say that “Lite,” which started as a marketing term used to denote diet products, has become a metaphor for what Americans are seeking in various parts of their lives. In our relationships, for example, many have turned away from soul-searching and the stress of emotional commitment — better to have a “Lite” relationship. The Lite Decade is a time when men and women can fall in love without paying the price, as a Honda Civic advertisement promises.

There is even Lite politics (candidates who run on image, not issues), Lite responsibility (the lowest voter participation rates of any democracy), and Lite music (Lite rock where the heavy bass line has been removed so that the sound does not jar or stir listeners).

And of course — Lite food and drink, already mentioned. There is Jello-Light, Cornitos Light corn chips, Heinz Lite Ketchup, and Glace Lite, which its manufacturer says “gives you all the rich, delicious pleasures of 300-calorie premium ice cream at 100 calories a scoop.”

And add to all this in the 1980s “Lite Religion,” although it is not usually called that. “Everything you always wanted in a religion, and less!” Thus, there are Lite sermons — those which kind of make you feel good on the surface, but which have no depth — those which do not challenge the listener in any way, or call for any kind of change in a person’s life.

There are Lite prayers — Jesus talked about that. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said, “When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites: for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others... And in praying do not

heap up empty phrases as some do, for they think they will be heard for their many words. God knows what you need before you ask."

Prayer is not for the purpose of changing God, but for changing you! Lite prayer is prayer on the surface, where no real change is expected. And there is "Lite giving," people give a little of their leftovers to the church after all else is taken care of.

People who want "Lite Religion" are those who want a little religion for comfort when needed, but nothing too demanding, and certainly not too much. Don't let it interfere with the way you lead your life, or with changing your basic values, or the way you live, or the way you spend your money, or your time.

Some want the taste of religion, the flavor of it, but not much more. It's like the beer commercial, "Everything you always wanted in a religion and less." Another definition of Lite religion is—"A religion for people who want a little God in their life and a place to go on Sunday before brunch!"

Actually, the desire for Lite religion has always been with us, although that term has not been used. It's not just a product of the 80s. Jesus, of course, didn't use the term, but he encountered people who wanted only a surface religion, a religion for show. That's why he said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them... Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

What then is the opposite of Lite religion? For some, it is heavy religion — one that puts a heavy burden on your life so that you feel weighed down by it. There are some very heavy versions of the Christian faith.

Jesus, however, leads us another way. To follow him is not Lite religion and not heavy religion. Jesus leads us to a religion of Light — L-I-G-H-T. The Christian faith should light up your life, illumine your living, give direction for your life's journey. It then will give you a new understanding of who you are, of who God is, and who your neighbors are.

The religion of Light is a faith that reaches into every fiber of your being; it is the light of God which illumines every part of you, even those dark parts you want to keep hidden because you are ashamed of them. The religion of Light overcomes the darkness in each one of us and in the world at large. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

Here's a true story of what the religion of Light or the Light of the World came to mean to one person, and his story is my story and yours. His name is John Claypool, and he is a minister.

As far back as he could remember, he said that he did not like the way he was. He imagined himself as an emptiness, a big fat zero, one who somehow did not measure up as he was. Have you felt that way? Most of the time he felt like Charlie Brown in the Peanuts cartoon. In one of the episodes, Charlie was lamenting to his friend Linus about his chronic lifelong sense of insecurity. He said it goes all the way back to the beginning. "The moment I was born and stepped on the stage of history, they took one look at me and said, 'Not right for the part!'"

Claypool said that he was at a loss to trace out all the causes of this despising, but he did remember that again and again in his early days he was told, "If you are ever going to amount

to anything, you have to make something of yourself." Those who said it meant it to be a source of motivation. They wanted to inspire him to make the most of what he had been given. Instead, he took these words as an assessment of his condition, rather than as a challenge to his potential. He took it to mean, "John Claypool, as you are just now, you do not amount to anything, and if there is ever going to be any significance to your life, you are going to have to go somewhere else and import it and become something other than what you are right now."

So a mood of dissatisfaction settled over his whole existence and became the vantage point from which he interpreted everything. The other effect was what this negative self-image prompted him to do at the behavioral level. Once he came to the conclusion that he did not amount to anything, the question arose: "What can I do about it?" How does a nobody become a somebody? How does this kind of emptiness get filled?

In another culture, he might have come up with a different answer, but since his context was the United States and he was white, middle class, and male, the answer to that inquiry was not hard to find. It was summed up in one word, "Compete!" The command was "Achieve!" Go out there and pit yourself against other people and do what you must to come out ahead! The name of the game was king of the mountain. The thing to do is to climb over everybody's back until at last you get up to the top.

Claypool said that this way of thinking and living affected him at every level. People used to ask him what he wanted to be when he grew up, and he was shrewd enough to fashion his answer according to what he thought they wanted to hear. For some, it was a police officer, for others a lawyer or physician or preacher.

Even in his early grades in school, he learned how to maneuver his way into becoming the teacher's pet — the one who got to wash the blackboards during recess and take notes to the principal's office while others sat in reading circles. Later on, those heroic figures called safety patrolmen caught his eye. These were the 6th grade boys who wore white belts across their chests and got to stand in high visibility at street corners and say to others, "Go," and they would go, or "Stop," and they would stop. Getting to that level of power was his next challenge, and he was successful, only to discover what was to become a recurring pattern; namely, that as soon as you achieve one goal, you find another looming up before you.

There turned out to be an elite among the elite, a captain and a lieutenant among the ordinary heroes. Unfortunately, another boy's mother had a better "in" with the principal than his mother, so the best he could do was to make lieutenant.

By the time Claypool had become a senior in high school, he was to become a seasoned veteran in the competitive wars of the human race.

His religious faith all through these years was not able to penetrate this pattern, whereby he had come to equate doing with being — that there is nothing to a person except what he or she was able to achieve. And worst of all, even though he was a high achiever, he continued to image himself as a nobody who had to continue to compete and out-achieve all others in order to become a somebody.

Then one day he discovered the religion of Light which changed his way of looking at himself and the world and changed his life. He had joined a small group of pastors who met regularly to be ministers to one another. At first, he was afraid to become part of the group because

most of the other ministers who were going to be a part of it were individuals with whom he felt a great deal of competition.

And one morning after the group had been meeting for some time, he confessed to his colleagues the deep sense he had of being a nobody and he told about how hard he had tried to make a name for himself and how weary and lonely and frustrated he had become. He did not realize himself how much pain there was inside until he began to spill it out.

When he had pretty much emptied himself, the man in the group for whom he felt the least natural affinity was the first to speak. He said, “I hear you John, and I know exactly what you are talking about because I am walking that road myself.” Then he said, “Do you know what we need — not what you need, but what we need — all of us. We need to hear the gospel down deep within ourselves. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, ‘You are the light of the world.’ He does not say, ‘You have got to be number one in order to get light,’ or ‘You must out-achieve everyone else in order to earn light.’ He says simply, ‘You are light.’ If we could experience that and believe it, then we could do what Jesus said. We could let our light shine and people could see the good in us and give glory not to us, but to God.”

From that moment on, Claypool’s life began to change. All of a sudden it dawned on him that he had been mistaken from the earliest moment of self-definition. The truth was — he did have worth in him from the beginning, and it was worth that resulted not from what he had to make of himself, but rather from what God had made of him when God called him out of nothing into being.

And that’s true for all of us. The Christian faith, the message of Jesus, the religion of Light proclaims to us that there has been worth in us each one from the beginning of our creation. We do not achieve that worth. We do not earn it in any way. All we can do is accept the fact that we are worthy. We can accept the fact that we are light — that God’s light shines in us and shines through us. The secret of life is not getting something outside inside by achieving and competing. It is, rather, getting what is already inside outside by acceptance and self-giving. Let your light shine!

Jesus went on to say— “Nobody lights a candle and puts it under a bushel, but rather on a candlestick, so that it illumines all that is around it.”

So let your light shine, says Jesus, that people may see the good thing that God has created and give glory to God in heaven.

I see so many people trying to achieve, trying to earn worth today, and they are still empty even after achieving a great deal. Some try Lite and some try heavy religion to fill the emptiness, but to no avail. Simply accept the fact that you are the Light! You are worthy because God has created you. Then let that light that is in you begin to shine. The light that is in us needs to be acknowledged as a gift and then made a good present for someone else by being allowed to shine in all its uniqueness.

Lite food may satisfy you, but Lite religion will not fill your emptiness. Try instead the religion of Light. You are the light of the world. It’s a gift. Accept it and let it change you. Amen.