Sunday, May 24, 1987
I'M NO GOOD - I'M NUMBER ONE (No. 3 in a Series: Lies We Tell Ourselves)
Matthew 5:13-20

One of the most difficult tasks we have in dealing with ourselves, with God, and with others is self-assessment. How do you see yourself? Do you think of yourself as being not much good, or do you have a high opinion of yourself? The way you think of yourself and the way others think of you are often two different images.

Many individuals have a very low opinion of themselves. The popular way of saying it is that someone has low self-esteem. You put yourself down. You are convinced that you are no good, that you have little value. Many people, even if they are successful by all outward appearances, feel deep down inside that they are fakes. You might, for example, think to yourself, "I don't deserve my success. I haven't really earned it. I've been fooling other people into thinking I'm a lot smarter and more talented than I really am."

"I'm no good" is a lie that many people tell themselves, and maybe you are one of those people. You might use other language to describe yourself. Maybe you say, "I'm not okay. I can never do anything right. I don't like myself very much."

Many people, in a world that seems to worship superstars and so-called beautiful people, look in the mirror for signs of self-approval and are not happy with what they see. So widespread is this lie that one counselor said that in all troubled families she has worked with, she found a lack of self-esteem and self-worth.

Part of the problem in our time is that our culture places a great premium on success that is defined by the amount of money one makes or has and whether or not one holds a high position. Many people feel driven to attain success defined in these terms, believing that if they attain it, they will also attain self-esteem. They have grown up believing that failure in this regard is shameful, that anything short of absolute success is unacceptable.

To put it another way, many people tell themselves the lie that they evaluate their worth by the wrong standards. Human worth is defined by the accumulation of outward trappings, by what one owns or possesses or is able to buy. In addition, such people define human worth as being connected with physical beauty — the more beautiful or handsome a person is, the more value they have.

Yet the strange thing is that there are many people who seem to have it all — money, position, beauty, intelligence — and they still have a lack of self-esteem. They are sure they are no good.

On the other hand, there are those among us who tell themselves the opposite lie—"I'm number one! I'm the greatest! I'm better than other people." Sometimes, when people give this opinion of themselves to others, what they are trying to cover up is a lack of self-worth. However, there are those who actually tell themselves and others and believe it — they are number one.

The religious form of this lie is when individuals tell themselves that God loves them more than others, that they are God's chosen ones, God's favorites. They are a legend in their own minds! They make themselves and what they do into an object of worship. They always put

themselves first because they are the most important thing in their own lives. They believe that the most important goal in life is to look out for themselves.

In recent years, a number of books have appeared on the theme of looking out for number one. These books suggest that it is a brutal, competitive world out there, and the only way to get ahead is to ruthlessly take advantage of other people's weaknesses.

Harold Kushner, in his latest book, When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough, says that his objection to these books is not only that he disagrees with their morality — that is evident. However, another objection is that looking out for number one, in the final analysis, does not work. If you take advantage of other people, use people, and are suspicious of everyone, you may come out ahead of everyone else, but you will also find yourself looking down on other people with scorn. And then where will you be? You will be all alone.

If you continually tell yourself the lie that you are number one, then you will also find that you always have to win. That's the way you continue to prove your number one status. Soon this can turn into a goal of winning at any price. To see the goal of life then as always having to win forces you to see all other people as competitors, as threats to your own happiness. If you are to continue winning, then other people have to continue losing. Someone else's failure becomes one of the necessary ingredients of your own success.

This begins to make for a rather lonely life. If you begin to think of yourself as always being number one, this tends to separate you from others. You cannot have a close and loving relationship with others if you always think you are better than they are. True love can only be generated and experienced between people who see themselves as equals — between people who can be mutually fulfilling to each other. If you believe yourself to be always better than others, then there's nothing you need from them. Instead of seeing yourself as being connected with other people, you see yourself as being separated.

Somewhat of the same problem of separation exists for those who tell themselves the lie, "I'm no good." They come to believe that they are not good enough for anyone to love, that they do not have enough value to make them important to anyone. So they too have trouble with mutually fulfilling relationships. They are always trying to prove their worth. They are always seeking compliments, pats on the back, and other evidence that they are indeed okay. Such people believe that love has to be earned, and so they try very hard to earn it and thereby attain some self-worth.

The lies, "I'm no good," and "I'm number one," are actually two sides of the same coin. Both lies are the same in that they provide a false assessment of one's human worth. Both lies disconnect us from others. Both hinder mutually satisfying relationships.

How then can we come to an honest and truthful assessment of our human worth? What does our Christian faith have to say about these lies?

First of all, our Christian faith tells us that as human beings created by God and in the image of God, we do have worth. We have value because God made us. We have worth because God continually loves us. This love is freely given to all people everywhere. It cannot be earned. All one has to do is to accept that love. Now that's good news!

This means, secondly, that we are all number one as far as God is concerned. There is no second or third or fourth place. With God, there are no winners or losers. In God's view, we are not separated from each other but are all connected to each other and to God.

As individuals, we may feel separated from God and from others, or we can do things which cause a state of separation. To be in a condition or state of separation from others and from God is what the Christian faith understands as sin. So when you tell yourself the lie and believe it—"I'm number one"—implies that other people are number two, three, or ninety-nine. That brings separation from others and is what our faith calls sin. Or if you believe the lie that you are no good, you separate yourself from others and from God. Something can be called sinful if it causes separation, disharmony, if it is divisive.

On our own, we can never overcome the separation we cause between ourselves and others and God. However, God overcomes the separation for us. That's what the coming of Jesus Christ into this world and into our lives is all about. The love of God came among us in a human being, in Jesus Christ, to help us overcome all separation. That's what we mean when we talk about the grace of God. Grace is the harmony of life provided freely by God. Grace is that quality in God which seeks to have all things living harmoniously together in unity. That's also why we say that the overall purpose of the church, with God's help, is the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor. We are working as the church and as individual Christians to bring about an increase of harmony in God's creation.

Separation is so much a fact of life that in the Bible, when the Kingdom of God is pictured as being fully realized, the image that is used is that of the complete harmony of all living things. Isaiah in the Old Testament put it this way:

"The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den."

Here is a picture of complete harmony among all living things.

Telling lies to ourselves and others always creates disharmony, separation. Lies break down trust among people. That's why in the Bible, the devil is called the "Father of Lies."

Jesus Christ came among us to bring us the truth. Jesus had a lot to say about truth. He said, among other things, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." In another place, he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

So the next time you tell yourself the lie: "I'm no good," remember the truth which Jesus brings us: "You are created in God's image; you are the light of the world, the salt of the earth."

Or the next time you tell yourself the lie: "I'm number one," remember that from God's point of view, each human being is number one. By accepting God's acceptance of you, you can be the good person that God meant you to be. Amen.