Sunday, May 31, 1987
I'LL START TOMORROW (No. 4 in a Series: Lies We Tell Ourselves)
Luke 9:57-62

Most, if not all, of us as human beings have a tendency to put things off — to procrastinate. "I'll do it tomorrow" is a lie we tell ourselves. Then tomorrow comes, and we put off whatever action we were going to take until the next day. And then we make up all kinds of excuses as to why we can't start today, and tomorrow comes, and we make up more excuses.

A friend of mine tells the story of putting on a suit that he hadn't worn for a year or more, and in the suit coat pocket, he found a claim stub for a pair of shoes he had left at a shoe repair shop over two years ago. He had completely forgotten about the shoes. Later that day, he took the claim check to the shoe repair shop and gave it to the repairman. The shoe repairman walked to the back of the shop and returned. Without blinking, he said, "Your shoes will be ready in two weeks."

Those among us who want to change our habits know how often we tell ourselves the lie, "I'll start tomorrow." Maybe you've decided to begin a long-needed regular program of physical exercise, and you tell yourself, "I'll begin tomorrow." Or perhaps you've made the decision to go on a much-needed diet to lose weight, and you say to yourself, "I'll start tomorrow," or "I'll start after the holidays," or "I'll start next week," or "I'll start when school is over." We make all kinds of promises to ourselves that we do not keep.

Some years ago, I had a funeral for an individual who had died of lung cancer and had been a heavy smoker. One of his close friends, who was about the same age — about 50 or so — told me after the funeral service that he was certainly now going to quit smoking. I saw him several months later, and he had not done so. I asked him about it, and he replied that he was going to quit next week. He's still going to quit next week.

"I'll start tomorrow" is the statement most heard when individuals are asked to begin giving money for the support of the church or are asked to consider increasing their giving. The individual will usually reply, "Right now, I've got too many other obligations that need to be taken care of, but when they are finished, then I'll begin giving more generously to the church." But by the time those obligations have been taken care of, some new ones have already taken their place, and giving to the church is put off again.

Jesus knew about the lie, "I'll start tomorrow," or "I'll do it tomorrow." In the story read earlier this morning from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus encounters several individuals who are going to follow him and become his disciples. One man said that he very much wanted to follow him, but first, he had to stay home with his parents, and then after his parents are dead, he would follow Jesus. Another person said that he too would follow Jesus, but he had to first return home and take care of some matters — in other words, "I'll start tomorrow." Jesus knew that in each of these cases, tomorrow would never come.

What is it that keeps us from making the changes in our lives that we know are going to be good for us? What keeps us from doing things today and putting them off until tomorrow and then next week and the week after, so that we never do what we know needs to be done?

First of all, we put things off and tell ourselves that we will start tomorrow because starting anything new involves change, and any kind of basic change in our way of living is difficult for

us. Or, to put it another way, deep down within us, most of us are afraid of any basic change in our lives. Change, by its very nature, involves loss and gain. We like to hang on to the old habits we have, even though we know they are bad for us. It's hard to give up something that we've had around for a long time. There's a certain security in trying to keep things as they are.

When Jesus asked people to follow him, that involved change — very basic change in their lives. It meant leaving some things behind, and that some people were not willing to do. So they put off the decision. They said they would follow him later. The likelihood is that those who said this never did get around to following Jesus.

Secondly, there's always the risk of failure when we make a basic change and try something new. And most of us are afraid of failure. Alcoholics who want to quit drinking have told me that they'll start sobriety tomorrow, and they put it off for another day because they are afraid of failure. However, the Christian faith reminds us that all things in life that are worthwhile involve an element of risk, sacrifice, and trust. That's why Jesus cautioned those who said they were ready to follow him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." In other words, there's a risk you have to take in following me, but it's worth the risk.

Some people, instead of being willing to make a change and take the risks that go with it, stand around waiting for that big break that will come to them automatically and give them instant fame, fortune, happiness, and all the things they want from life. They are always dreaming and wishing for someone else's success, achievement, ability, position, or talent. There are people standing around waiting for their ship to come in. The problem is they haven't sent one out. Their ship never left port; it is still anchored, motionless, going nowhere. They are always going to send the ship out tomorrow, and tomorrow comes, and they wait and tell themselves that they are going to wait until the next day, and the ship never leaves port.

We also tell ourselves the lie, "I'll start tomorrow," because starting anything new is difficult. It's easy to dream and fantasize about doing something, but then to actually do it — that's another story. We are able to dream magnificently and bring to pass only a shabby imitation of that conception.

William Muehl, who was one of my preaching professors at Yale Divinity School, tells a story about when he first moved to Connecticut, and he was given the opportunity to visit an old colonial house not far from New Haven. He said, "My wife and I made a tour of the whole place. Every room breathed into air something of the atmosphere of the time in which the structure had been built, and the house was occupied by the last surviving descendant of the original owner, a frail old woman in her seventies."

"As we stood in the main room talking, I noticed an old rifle hanging over the fireplace. I was struck by its beauty and wanted to take it down and examine it more closely, but as I reached out, the old woman quickly caught my arm and said, 'Please don't touch it. It's loaded and might go off!'"

"When I raised an inquiring eyebrow, she went on to say, 'My great, great, great grandfather loaded that gun and put it there against the day when he might strike a blow for the freedom of the American colonies.' I drew what I still feel was the logical inference from the situation and asked, 'But the old gentleman died before the Revolution?'"

"No," my hostess responded, "he lived to a ripe old age and died in 1817. But (and here she smiled wryly), he just never seemed able to generate much enthusiasm for General Washington's rebellion."

We can easily imagine what the old man who put that gun there must have felt. He may have spent many a winter evening in front of the fire and many a summer afternoon under an apple tree dreaming of the day when he would strike a blow for freedom. With the passage of time, more and more details probably filled in the outlines of the dream, until at last it turned into a full-length standard version of what was to come and included a touching scene in which a troop of well-drilled militia would march up to the front door and say, “Benjamin...lead us to victory on the field of honor.” There must have been tears in his eyes as Benjamin anticipated such a moment and composed a speech with which to respond to the invitation. But then, one April day, a group of his less affluent neighbors came by, and one of them said, “Ben, get your gun, and let’s go.”

This is not what Ben had imagined. He could see no connection between his concept of revolution and a grubby gang of ruffians setting out to fight somewhere in Massachusetts. He preferred to wait until history fulfilled itself in more appropriate terms.

And so those individuals whom Jesus invited to follow him said also, “I’ll do it later.” They could not imagine that this rather common individual with a group of undistinguished disciples might be the Savior of the world.

There are many ways and in a variety of circumstances that we tell ourselves the lie—"I’ll start tomorrow. The time’s not exactly right just now.” In so doing, we may be missing some of the most exciting opportunities in our lives.

This story from Luke’s Gospel gives us one other piece of advice. Jesus said, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.”

Once you have made a decision to make a basic change in your life that you are convinced is for the better, then do not look back on what you are leaving behind with regret. There are many things in our past that we cannot now change in the present. What’s done is done. Leave it behind. You cannot go forward very well while you are looking backward. I meet so many people who are always unhappy because they keep saying to themselves and others, “What if I had done it differently in the past? What if I had not changed jobs 20 years ago? What if I had gone to a different university? What if I had not decided to become an engineer?” There are no adequate answers to such questions.

The good news is that Jesus Christ teaches us that when we begin to look beyond ourselves and our own problems and begin to give our lives away, then we also begin to find new meaning in our lives.

But we will not find this new meaning in our lives if we keep telling ourselves the lie, “I’ll start tomorrow.” Why not start today this process of following Jesus and giving yourself away? Happy are those who dream dreams and are willing to pay the price to make them come true. Amen.