Sunday, November 15, 1987
THE PROPER ALIGNMENT
Luke 10:25-28

Recently, I came across an old newspaper story in my files that I had forgotten. It was about an Episcopal minister named John Albrecht who entered the Guinness Book of World Records by delivering the shortest sermon on record. He stood before his congregation in Lake Orion, Michigan, and after a brief silence, uttered one word: "LOVE." Then he sat down. That was it. No more. One of his members said it was his best sermon. Certainly, it must have taken some time to prepare. I have frequently been told that "church would be nicer if sermons were conciser."

Actually, I'm a bit envious of John Albrecht's innovative spirit. I've been trying to figure out how to come up with a one-word sermon to tie his record. Some possibilities that I've considered are: Care; Give; Help; Forgive; God. If you were to give a one-word sermon, what would it be?

I remember another news story about a minister who entered the Guinness Book of World Records for preaching the world's longest sermon — 60 hours and 31 minutes. Someone reported that when he was near the end of that long sermon, a person in the audience shouted, "At least make the point."

The more I've thought about it, perhaps "LOVE" is the only one-word sermon that's possible for a Christian. I'm aware that the word love has its problems because it is used and over-used in so many ways. Julian Huxley had this to say about it: "Of all the worn, smudged, dog-eared words in our vocabulary, surely love is the grubbiest, smelliest, slimiest. Bawled from a million pulpits, it becomes an outrage to good feeling and decent taste, an obscenity that one hates to pronounce."

The word "LOVE" is abused, and perhaps more in our time than in others. Ads tell us that love is running together through a meadow, lighting two cigarettes in the dark, or applying a deodorant daily.

But I am not ready to give up on love or the word merely because it is abused. Love, in the Christian context, is one of the most important words — if not the most important word — in Christian theology.

A few examples from the Bible: "God so loved the world." (John 3:16). And in the scripture reading for this morning, when someone asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus asked him, "What is written in the law?" and the man correctly summed up all of God's law by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Again, the key word here is love.

And we all know that famous passage from Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth, which begins: "If I speak in the tongues of human beings and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." And we are told later on that love never ends… "so faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love."

Later on in the New Testament, in the first letter of John, we are reminded, "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God and those who love are born of God and know God. Those

who do not love do not know God; for God is love… If we love one another, God abides in us and God's love is perfected in us."

The passage continues: "We love because God first loved us." And then there is the warning: "If anyone says that he or she loves God and hates another human being, that person is a liar. For those who do not love their brothers and sisters in the human race whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen."

Now let's relate this central concept of love to the title and theme of this sermon: "The Proper Alignment." And to do that, I am going to use three illustrations.

Ansel Adams is a photographer who has made an impact on many, many people through his artistry of black and white photographs. However, few people know that Adams' first love was not photography, but music. He learned to play the piano during grade school and kept playing the rest of his life. The keyboard was his therapist. On those rare occasions when his natural serenity was invaded by the tensions of politics, business, or health, he would sit at the piano and play his way to peace of mind.

One evening at a black-tie dinner party, Adams' hostess prevailed upon him to play for the other guests. He resisted. She persisted. At last, he sat down to play, choosing Chopin's F Major Nocturne. Then it happened. Here's how Adams described it in his own words: "In some strange way, my right hand started off in F-sharp major while my left hand behaved well in F-major. I could not bring them together. I went through the entire nocturne with the hands separated by a half-step. The next day, a fellow guest complimented me on my performance. With a haughty glance, he observed: 'You never missed a wrong note.'"

As I read Ansel Adams' words, I knew that his problem was beginning without the proper alignment. Once we start something off course, it's sometimes difficult to get ourselves back on course. Alignment is the issue. Check your alignment.

The second illustration: I've read a number of books on golf in an attempt to improve my game. Such books are filled with an almost endless number of suggestions. However, the best advice I've come across from all of these experts is that of Jack Nicklaus. If you ask him about the secret to good golfing, he does not say strength, or practice, or equipment, or grip, or concentration — even though all of these are important. He begins with "alignment." In his book, Golf My Way, Nicklaus explains that 90 percent of a good golf shot is a matter of alignment… how you set up… how you start… how you choose to begin. Before you do anything else, check your alignment.

The third illustration: A man walked into an auto repair shop and saw a mechanic looking intently at a car that was lopsided. When he asked what was the matter with it, the mechanic said, "It's all out of alignment, that is, it won't track. The front wheels will go up the middle of the road and the rear wheels do not follow in the same line." Laughingly, the man remarked, "What difference does that make except that the car will look a little funny as it's going down the highway?" The mechanic replied, "It makes all the difference in the world as far as power is concerned. If the car is out of alignment, everything in it will be pulling against everything else. There will be a tug of war inside, and the power will be cut in half. Furthermore, being out of alignment adds stress and strain to the entire car so that it will wear out more quickly. The tires will also wear unevenly and not last as long."

The proper alignment! It's an apt metaphor for our lives. I see people all the time whose lives are out of alignment so that one part of their life is pulling or working against another part of their life, adding tension and wear and tear on the person.

Check your alignment. For example, maybe you are working toward two opposing goals in life and do not realize it. I knew a man who said to me, "I have two goals in life: (1) to make as much money as possible, and (2) to spend a lot of time with my family." What he didn't realize was that his goals were out of alignment, and they pulled his whole life all out of shape. Check the alignment of your personal goals in life. Do they fit? Are they in line with each other? Are your goals in line with what you consider God's purpose to be for your life?

I think many of the people who came to Jesus were those who knew that their lives were somehow out of alignment. In this morning's story from Luke's Gospel, the individual asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He was asking — what must I do to get my life in line, in balance, in harmony? Jesus then asked him, "What does your religious faith tell you to do? What is the proper alignment?" And the man answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said, "You have answered right, do this and you will live." In other words, do this, and your life will be in the proper alignment.

Too many of us today travel along with our minds, bodies, and souls out of alignment.

Now let's further connect this metaphor of alignment with that basic Christian word… LOVE.

It is no accident that our Christian faith tells us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. If you only love God or another person with one part of yourself, that's when you begin to get out of alignment. Some people, for example, tend to only love with their bodies, that is, they only or mostly love physically, and then their lives are out of alignment. Or here's another person who only loves God or someone else with his or her mind, but not with their strength, or their heart, or their soul.

Or if you claim you love God, but hate someone else, then your life is out of alignment. Or if you love others but do not properly love yourself, then again, your life is out of alignment.

Check your alignment. If you cannot forgive someone, or if you are harboring resentment toward someone, then your life is out of alignment. If you find it difficult to be a giving person, then your life, according to Jesus, is out of alignment. Our lives cannot be in harmony with God if they are out of harmony with another person. That's why Jesus said in another place, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that someone has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar… and go; first, be reconciled to that person and then come and offer your gift."

When we love God and others with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, then love is the active power that enables us to break through walls that separate us from others. It is the doorway through which the human spirit moves from solitude to society, from selfishness to service. Love, in its fullness, permits us to overcome our isolation and separateness and yet permits us to be ourselves.

Jesus knew that for one's life to be in alignment, it needs first of all to be in the proper alignment with God's central purpose for all creation, and that is to love God and to love our

neighbors as ourselves. That's why St. Paul could say, "All things work together for good for those who love God." Then everything is in the proper alignment. Amen.