SUNDAY, JUNE 12, 1988

"FINDING GOD WITHIN YOURSELF"
(No. 1 in a Series: "Finding God in Everyday Life")

Acts 17:24-28
Luke 17:20-21

Once upon a time, there lived in Cracow, Poland, a Rabbi named Eisik, who dreamed three times that there was a treasure buried beneath a particular bridge in the City of Prague.

After the third dream, Eisik finally walked the long distance to Prague. When he found the bridge, the captain of the soldiers who were guarding the bridge asked him why he had come. Eisik told him of his three dreams. The captain replied that if he had had faith in dreams he would have gone to Cracow a long time ago when he dreamed that there was a treasure buried in the ground under the stove of a Jew named Eisik.

When Rabbi Eisik heard this, he left immediately, walked the long journey home, and dug up the treasure underneath his kitchen stove.

This story from the Hasidic Jewish tradition which dates back to the 18th century, is about all of us. We tend to think the treasure we've been looking for is somewhere else, when all the time it is under the kitchen stove at home.

The greatest treasure we can find in life is God, and people look all over the world in exotic places and strange religious movements, but at the same time frequently miss God at home in their everyday lives and ordinary common-place experiences. Remember Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you or within you and among you." The treasure is there but we often miss it.

The Apostle Paul said, "God is not far from anyone of us, for in God we live and move and have our being."

That's the theme of this sermon series--"Finding God in Everyday Life."

Today in this first sermon in the series the subject is: "Finding God Within Yourself." Other sermons in this series will deal with: "Finding God in Others," and "Finding God in Things."

One of the barriers to finding God in any of these places in everyday life is that we have the attitude that God is found only or

mainly in places, actions and words which are labeled, "Religious." We like to distinguish between the sacred and the secular. But God makes no such distinctions.

As we shall see in this sermon series, God is not in a separate compartment, walled off from the rest of life.

A second barrier to finding God in everyday life is the attitude that we turn to God only when we feel a serious need or we are in the midst of a crisis. I often hear people say that they only turn to God when they have a problem. Some time ago, I heard a minister say that grace only comes through suffering. If this is true, (and it is not), then we would all try to suffer as much as possible. (There are those who do try to suffer as much as possible.) This is religious masochism. The fact is, as we shall see in more detail, God is to be found not only in suffering, but in good times as well. We can have a deep experience of God when we are happy, excited and content, as well as when we are in a crisis.

But now let's turn to the more specific subject of this first sermon in the series--"Finding God Within Yourself."

Sydney Harris, the newspaper columnist, wrote some years ago that the human being is

not like an apple to be polished, but more like a banana that has to be peeled.

According to Harris, most people spend their lives polishing, by shining the surface, that is worrying about their appearance, their image, wearing the right clothes, a house in the right neighborhood, the right kind of automobile and more. The result of too much polishing and too little peeling is that people remain distant from one another and never communicate or interact in any real way.

Furthermore, when polishing becomes an ever-present concern, as it seems to be with many people, the real person never comes to life. The person never discovers or reveals the inner self, and thus never knows the inner-self. The false surface person dominates and a lifetime is wasted.

One woman put it this way: "I had some shine and sparkle on the surface, but inside I was empty: a self-deluding, frightened, successful, charming pathetic fraud. I had to find the real me. I began the search for the person within me that I hoped would still be there. It took some years to find me, but when I did, I also found God."

She discovered that a lifetime spent in

polishing instead of peeling becomes an obstacle to finding God within yourself. The fact is that you come to know God as you come to know yourself.

In his study of Thomas Merton's spirituality, James Finley describes the spiritual life in these terms: "The long and often arduous journey on which we slowly become detached from our false, illusory self--a self that is little more than the collective evaluations and affirmations of our surroundings--and are opened up to receive a new self that is participation in the life of God." Our true self is already in communion with God. That is why finding the true self is finding God. This bears repeating. Our true self is already and always in communion with God. That is why finding our true self is finding God. Of course there's more to God than what we discover in our true self. In fact there's more to God than we can ever experience in any way or in any time or place.

And God is not only there at the end of this life-long process of peeling, but God is present all the way along in the process itself.

What does it mean more specifically to be on the way to finding your true self and therefore finding God? How does it happen? Here are some hints. But remember, how the

process will work will vary from individual to individual.

For some of you, it might mean getting in touch with what is truly going on inside of you. For example, the person who feels and acknowledges for the first time that hurt she has denied and repressed for a long time.

Or in another case it could mean uncovering your real motivations. Maybe you have been kidding yourself about what is behind a lot of what you do. Perhaps you had always thought that you quickly came to the help of others because of your deep concern to be of help to those in need. But now in being honest with yourself, you discover there's more to it than that--your need to help others is primary to satisfy something in yourself.

Or maybe you discover within yourself an unwillingness to change and thus you've resisted choices that would've led to your personal growth, but now you understand that fear and you are willing to take a risk. Here is a person, for example who decides after so many years in a certain job that he is not happy in that position and now wants to do work which is more satisfying personally to him--and work which more fully utilizes

his gifts.

Or maybe for the first time you are willing to open yourself more fully to another person. Here is a woman who finally tells her friend how much she likes and appreciates her friendship. Or here is a husband who is finally able to tell his wife that he has loved her all these years and still loves her, but he has always had difficulty in saying it.

Or you are willing to become more vulnerable in the presence of others. Here is an individual who up to this point has been preoccupied with what other people think of him and with what impression he is making, but now comes to realize that he simply needs to be himself. He can relax, let go of his defenses and enjoy others, and let them enjoy him as he is.

Or you find yourself willing to become "unstuck" from a position that you have absolutized. (The person who for the first time begins to realize that there are other valid interpretations of a particular issue and their interpretation is not the only one.)

Such realizations and acts are the basic stuff of the peeling process which happens to us under many different guises. Sometimes

they can be dramatic, but most of the time they are not. They usually happen gradually and not all at once. They usually happen in the hustle and bustle or the calm and quiet of everyday life.

One of the things that made Jesus so unique is that when people met him, he helped them in this peeling process. He was able to assist them in uncovering their true selves and thus in finding God within them.

Although Jesus was able to do this and still is able through the church, the fact is that the church has never had a monopoly on this inward transformation or peeling process. People come to discover their true inward selves and thus are more open to finding God within themselves and therefore in everyday life in a variety of ways.

Here are a few examples. We've all noticed a growing interest in health and wellness. Many people are starting to take care of their bodies by eating more nutritious foods and getting regular exercise. For some, this amounts to a re-discovery of their bodies and is connected closely to the growth of the whole person. It's another way to be more present to oneself.

Or look at the "Women's Movement." Women all over the world are discovering their own

identity and are being able to affirm themselves in positive ways and thus are peeling off many cultural layers that have been put on them by others. They are discovering their true selves and in so doing are finding God within themselves.

Every true liberation movement is one of new self-awareness for those being liberated and they frequently discover God within them in the process.

As we have seen earlier, such peeling doesn't happen only in social movements. It also happens in and through the ordinary processes of life: Human relationship; marriage; reflection; becoming parents; growing older; and many times so gradually that we are almost not aware of it until afterwards.

It is the good news of the Christian faith that God is present in each one of us. In God we live and move and have our being. God is in you, as the ocean is in the wave. God is a part of every minute of your everyday life. There is no place where God is not. God is not selective. God is not exclusive. God is inclusive. God is there when anyone opens his or her mind to accept God. And even if the mind is closed, God is there anyway. We are simply not aware of it and we are the poorer for it.

If you have not yet found God within yourself, maybe it's because you are doing too much polishing and not enough peeling. AMEN.