Sunday, June 19, 1988
FINDING GOD THROUGH THINGS (No. 2 in a Series: Finding God in Everyday Life)
Mark 4:26-34; Luke 24:30

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens,
Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens,
Brown paper packages wrapped up in strings,
These are a few of my favorite things.

Cream colored ponies and crisp apple strudels,
Doorbells and sleighbells and schnitzel with noodles,
Wild geese that f1y with the moon on their wings,
These are a few of my favorite things.

Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes,
Snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes,
Silver white winters that melt into springs,
These are a few of my favorite things.

When the dog bites, when the bee stings,
When I'm feeling sad,
I simply remember my favorite things,
And then I don't feel so bad.

This song from the "Sound of Music" is telling us that favorite things can minister to us, can take some of the terror out of life. And we know it's true. They are silent messengers from God. It is said that the 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich looked at a little thing, a hazel nut, and through viewing it attentively, realized aspects of God.

Hasidic Jews believed that in creating the world, God shattered and scattered the splendor of God in hidden sparks present in everything and every possibility.

God can be found and experienced in everyday life. God is not in a separate compartment, walled off from the rest of life. From God's point of view, there is no distinction between sacred and secular. That's the message of the Christian faith and the theme of this sermon series. Last week, in the first sermon of this series, the topic was "Finding God in Yourself." This morning, our specific subject is: "Finding God Through Things."

Sometimes we have been taught that there is something tainted about the material world. We've been told that we should think of ourselves as people who live above and beyond the physical realm. But that's not the Biblical or Christian point of view. We are told in the book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, that God made everything and saw that it was good. All things, therefore, are sacred. Or as one young person put it, "God didn't make no junk."

We surround ourselves with all sorts of things: gadgets, furniture, dishes, pots and pans, books and records, plants, pictures, toys, tools, computers, calculators, stereos, telephones, automobiles, and more. We have garages, attics, basements, drawers, and closets all filled with things. There are some things we say we are going to get rid of, yet we find it difficult to do so.

Things are like that. They become a part of us. Many hobbies have something to do with collecting things, whether it be stamps, baseball cards, or matchbook covers.

What are some of your favorite things? What would you want to save in your home if it were burning down? How do some of your favorite things minister to you? In what ways do they help you experience God?

Here are a few of my favorite things: This old Bible is especially important to me. It was given to me as a gift by a woman in the first church I served. She wrote a lovely inscription on the inside page. Thus, besides being a Bible, and therefore a very important tool for my everyday work and guidance, it is also filled with other meanings.

This black notebook is another one of my favorite things. I like the way it feels in my hands. It is also an important tool for my work, as it carries my sermon notes, the wedding service, funeral service, and other related materials for my ministry. It, too, has been with me for a long time.

I like this wristwatch. It was given to me as a very special gift from my wife. It, too, has been with me for a long time. I also have this old pocket watch which my Dad gave me years ago. It had been a gift to him from his Dad, my Grandfather. Someday I'll pass it on to one of our children. It's a symbol of our connection.

I'm sure that each one of you has his or her favorite things. They can and do minister to you in all kinds of ways.

Jesus had a deep appreciation for the things of this world. For most of his life, he was a village craftsman. This means, among other things, that he worked with things: wood and tools. Who knows what lessons Jesus learned from these things? He must have noticed things well and been present to them because frequently in his public ministry, Jesus asked his listeners to let the ordinary things and events of their everyday lives become the means for understanding and accepting the activity of God.

Take the parables of Jesus as an example. Frequently they deal with things: the fig tree, salt, coins, grains of seed, oil lamps, money, and more.

Jesus knew that the way we use things and take care of things can have an effect on us. Consider how you are something of a different creature with a screwdriver in your hand than you are with a ballpoint pen. Or think of what a different person you are behind the wheel of a car than when you are a pedestrian.

What are some specific ways in which we can find God through things?

First, we need to have a sense of the proper use of things. We are not to worship things, nor are we to waste things. We are to treat them as gifts from God. With the proper use and respect for things, we can raise our spirits and inspire our thoughts.

Secondly, if we mostly buy and collect things because we want them to add to our stature, then that's the wrong use of things. Perhaps the largest single trouble with the abundance of possessions is that so many of them are owned not because of what they are or because we truly care for or appreciate them — but because we think they confer something on us.

A person, for example, might purchase the most expensive stereo made, but not because he enjoys music or appreciates the quality of sound that is reproduced or the technology and skill that went into the making of the set, but rather because he imagines that to own such a set confers some kind of status on him. That is a shallow kind of caring.

Another manifestation of the same problem is that instead of possessing things, sometimes things possess us. Our houses and apartments are cluttered with things that we do not use or appreciate. Our shopping centers are filled with people who are buying things not because they need or appreciate them, but because they are feeling sorry for themselves or because they are bored.

If we are to find God through things, it means we are to use the things of the world in a sacramental way, and then they can minister to us and others. To use things in a sacramental way is to care for them and appreciate them, much like a young person who lovingly polishes, waxes, and keeps his or her car in tip-top condition, even though it is an old one. Or it is like the person who keeps the machinery he or she works with in the best of shape, the carpenter who keeps his tools sharp and sees that they don't rust.

Thirdly, we can find God through things because things can connect us with the universe. Take, for example, the bread we will use this morning in Holy Communion.
As you take it in your hands from the tray later on, look at it and be present with it. It is more than just a piece of bread. It is a reminder of a meal together of Jesus and his closest followers. It is a reminder that for almost 2000 years, Christians have been gathering together and as a part of their common worship, used bread and wine. Through this bread, you are connected with the Christian community over these thousands of years.

Samuel Miller put it this way: "When you take a piece of broken bread in Communion, you don't take just a piece of bread. You take something in which the sun, moon, and stars have given part of their life. You take with this bread the mystery of rain falling on the earth; the mystery of its darkness; of grain growing; that strange mystery of how human beings ever discovered that these grains of wheat could be ground into flour and people could at last learn how to bake bread over a fire. You take in this bread all the cosmos, everything of nature — all the mysteries of human existence."

This bread speaks of that long, patient climb of human beings out of the dark of the past. You take with this bread not only those things we remember in and around the New Testament and the life of Christ, but you take all of human history in this bread, and with it, you take a part of God.

Furthermore, this bread feeds your body, and out of your body, your thoughts come into your mind. And from your mind and body come all those spiritual attitudes by which you characterize your life and your freedom.

At another level, of course, this bread is made up of molecules and atoms and electrons and protons and neutrons and all kinds of other smaller charges of energy which modern physics can tell you all about, and all things in creation are made up of the same kinds of charges of energy only in differing arrangements.

And so, at the deepest level of existence, you are connected with this bread and with all of creation, and through this bread and creation, you are connected with God.

And so it is that the common things around us, when we see them with precision and clarity, can become an epiphany or manifestation of God. Amen.