Sunday, June 25, 1989
TRANSCENDING OUR DESIRES
Mark 8:27-33

The other day, I heard a man summarize his basic beliefs about life in this world. He said, "Although I don't know much about religion, philosophy, or ethics, I've always tried to follow the rule: 'To thine own self be true... and you cannot be false to anyone.'"

I asked the individual if he knew where that statement came from, and he said he thought it was somewhere in the Bible. Actually, the words were written by Shakespeare, and he shrewdly puts them in the mouth of one of his most windy, vapid, and self-seeking characters, a man named Polonius. The quotation in full is: "To thine own self be true, and it follows as night follows the day that thou canst not be false to any man."

Although there may be some truth in this quotation, it is my contention that the statement, "To thine own self be true," can be a very misleading and even dangerous philosophy of life, and that it runs directly counter to the teachings of Jesus.

Why do I say that? What does it mean to be true to one's own self? In the Old Testament, a man named Esau, one of the sons of Isaac, was true to himself and his personal desires and appetites, and it was his downfall. He sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. Adolph Hitler was fanatically true to himself. Jesse James, as a reckless adventurer, was gloriously true to himself.

In our own time and in our own country, there have been many politicians and leaders who have been true to themselves, but not true to the Constitution, or to any higher, transcending purpose. They have made themselves and their personal desires and goals the measure of all things. "To thine own self be true," means that if I believe it's good for me, and especially if it feels good, and if it satisfies my desires, then it's okay to do. I meet people every day who are being true to themselves but in so doing have no regard at all for what their actions are doing to others.

The disciple Peter was being true to himself in the story read earlier from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus had been telling his disciples that he would be rejected by the leading people of his time and would eventually be killed. Peter, however, being true to himself, tried to talk Jesus out of it.

The point is that our inner selves, our basic desires, feelings, and appetites, if we are true to them, can often mislead us and others. As human beings, we have both private desires and public responsibilities. And while it may be important that we satisfy some of our private and personal appetites, it is equally important that we carry out our larger responsibilities and take into consideration what effect satisfying our desires is going to have on others.

In each one of us, there is the self that whispers, "Satisfy your desire; you deserve it," and there is the other self that urges us to "transcend our desires and take into consideration what effect our actions are going to have on others." There is the self that says, "You only live once," and the opposite self which says, "You made a promise, you gave your word that you would fulfill your responsibility."

So you see, the problem with the statement of Polonius—"To thine own self be true," is that we are made up of many selves, and to which self are we going to be true? There is our "mean" self, our "selfish" self, our "jealous" self, our "rational" self, our "responsible" self, our "feeling" self, and many more. In the theory of transactional analysis, we are told that there is the self which is the child in us, the self that is the parent in us, and the self that is the adult in us.

Each one of us tends to be, not a single self, but a whole committee of selves. There is the civic self, the parental self, the financial self, the religious self, the society self, the professional self, the literary self, and more. And each one of these selves is, in turn, rank individualists, not always cooperative with the other selves, but each shouting out its vote loudly when the voting time comes. So, to which self are you going to be true?

The people we revere, the true heroes and heroines, the saints in our history, are those who trained themselves to be true to ideals and principles which were greater than and outside themselves. They were the people who were able to rise above their basic selfish desires and selves. They subdued greed or lust for power or envy or retribution and were willing to live and die for an ideal which might never be realized in their own time.

These are the people who found a deep center of living, a frame of reference outside themselves, which in turn brought the many selves within them into harmony.

The point is, according to our Christian faith, we human beings are not and cannot be our own frame of reference. This is what Jesus was trying to make the disciple Peter understand in the story read earlier from Mark's Gospel. Jesus was, in effect, saying, "You've got to think of more than yourself. If you're only true to your own desires, you may be false to all kinds of people — worse still, you may be false to God." Our true frame of reference has to be outside of ourselves. We need to be true to something greater than ourselves — something that draws us out of ourselves even when it goes against the grain of some of our basic desires, appetites, and feelings.

Harry Emerson Fosdick tells this revealing story, which I've used many times before. One day, as his father was leaving for work (he was a high school teacher), he turned as he was walking down the front sidewalk and said to his wife, also so that his son Harry could hear him, "Tell Harry to mow the yard today after school if he feels like it." He took a few more steps and turned again and added, "Tell Harry, he had better feel like it." Fosdick, years later, called this the best advice ever given to him: "Tell Harry he had better feel like it." He said that as an adult, when some days he didn't feel like carrying through with his responsibilities, that phrase would come back to him: "Tell Harry he had better feel like it." There are some things we cannot trust to our own feelings. We need a larger frame of reference.

But how do we rise above our feelings, our desires, and what happens when we do? Let's look at the disciple Peter again as an example.

By no stretch of the imagination can Peter be considered an extraordinary person. If you read the gospel accounts, it is easy to see that he was far from a saint. He was at first reluctant to follow Jesus and then unable to understand some of Jesus' teachings, so much so that he often got on the wrong side of issues. As we heard in the story of Mark's Gospel earlier, at one point, Jesus had to say to him, "Get thee behind me, Satan, for you are on the side of man and not of God."

Yet something extraordinary happened to Peter. He belonged to that little group of persons who led us human beings around one of the most crucial corners in history. And if he himself were to explain how this almost incredible thing happened, I do not imagine that he would say it was because he was true to himself, but that he gave himself to something greater than himself.

This is the explanation of some of the most memorable names in history. They were ordinary people who gave themselves to be used by extraordinary ideas. They were true to something greater than themselves. They were used by a great idea and usually an idea that transcended their own personal selfish desires. Think of what's been happening in Communist China these past weeks. Those young people gave themselves over to the powerful idea of a more participative democratic form of government, and in so doing laid their lives on the line.

That's what happened in this country in the 1950s and 1960s, in the non-violent civil rights movement. Here were ordinary people who gave themselves to the idea that all human beings deserve equal treatment under the law, and that people should not be discriminated against because of the color of their skin. That's what's happening right now also in South Africa by those who oppose apartheid.

In fact, if we look at the matter closely, we can see that all the time we are being used by ideas of various kinds. Unfortunately, some are wrong ideas. For example, there are people who are still being used by the idea that people of one skin color are better than another, and some are still being used by the idea that women are inferior and are to be ruled by men. Sometimes the lust for power and fame takes us over. Or at other times, the idea of being true only to our selfish desires takes charge of us.

In the past several years, I've become personally acquainted with Jeb Magruder, one of the key individuals in the Watergate Affair some years ago. Jeb is now a United Church of Christ minister in one of our large churches in Columbus, Ohio. You will remember that he served some time in a federal prison for his part in the Watergate scandal. I've heard Jeb say a number of times in talking about Watergate that very few of the people who were guilty in the affair, including himself, had any sense of understanding or appreciation of democratic ideals or principles. They were being true only to themselves, and that was to win the election at any cost. They had not given themselves over to any greater idea. They never really rose above their personal desires. Their basic loyalties were too narrow. And these people, himself included, he likes to remind us, were products of upper-middle-class respectability, educated in the best colleges and law schools.

We are all the time being used by ideas and our desires. What we have to do is choose which ones shall use us; which ones are worthy; which ones are in agreement with the life and teachings of Jesus. That's the only way we can transcend our own selfish desires and narrow loyalties.

The disciple Peter, with the help of Jesus, was able to transcend his desires. He gave himself over to a greater idea — that of following God's will as experienced in Jesus rather than his own will. He gave himself over to the idea that there is more to life than satisfying small personal desires and appetites; there is more to life than getting all you can get and trying to hang onto it; that there is more to life than the lust for power and money.

People often say, "It doesn't matter what you do as long as you have faith." But faith in what or in whom? A person could have all the faith in the world in a bright red umbrella — so much

faith as to go to the top of the Empire State Building in New York City, open the umbrella, and jump. But that person's tremendous faith in that bright red umbrella would not save him or her from being killed when hitting the ground. It is not always how much faith we have, but in whom we have our faith.

The greatest moment in a person's life is when he or she, like the disciple Peter, turns the corner and, by giving oneself over to a worthy and powerful idea, begins to transcend one's own self-centered desires.

Frequently, the sign that a child has passed from his or her childish stage and is on the way to becoming a mature adult is when that individual discovers some important frame of reference outside himself or herself and can say, "I belong to that," or "That is my goal; I'm going to work for that!" In fact, the turning point in our lives is not when we say, "That belongs to me," but when we are able to say, "I belong to that," and it is a worthwhile group or cause that benefits our human life together.

And then something else usually begins to happen. For while it is true that one does not need to be much in himself or herself to be gripped by a great idea or cause, the remarkable thing is that no person can be used by a great idea without also becoming a greater person. That's what happened to each one of the followers of Jesus, and it can happen to you.

To what have you given yourself? What are you being true to? If it's only to yourself and your personal desires and appetites, then be careful, for it's not enough. Ultimately, only God and God's love will suffice. Amen.