Sunday, October 22, 1989
THE DANGER OF EMPTINESS
Matthew 12:43-45

Emptiness can be a dangerous condition. We are periodically warned about empty refrigerators that have been discarded. A child gets into one to play, and either that child or someone else closes the door, and the child inside is suffocated. An empty steamer trunk in an attic can be equally as inviting and dangerous.

Empty houses tend to invite unwelcome guests. If you are going on vacation or leaving your house empty for some other reason while you are away, it is best to make it seem as if your house is occupied. That's the advice we are all given these days. We are reminded to stop the daily delivery of the newspaper. Don't let there be any evidence to the casual observer that the house is empty. Don't pull all the drapes completely shut, and if possible, it's helpful to have an automatic timer that will turn on some of the lights in the evening and then turn them off later. This will help give the impression that the house is occupied.

Emptiness can be a dangerous condition, and not only with houses or discarded refrigerators. An empty life and empty institutions are also invitations to unwelcome guests and, therefore, to trouble.

In the Bible story read earlier, Jesus describes an individual who got rid of an evil spirit in his life. He cleaned up his life but left it empty. Not long after, said Jesus, the evil spirit was looking again for a place to live, and seeing his former residence empty and clean, went back there to live and brought seven of his best devil friends to live there with him. Thus, said Jesus, the last state of that person became worse than the first. Jesus was implying that this can happen to any one of us.

So this is much more than a story about devils. It's a story about all of us, about the institutions we create, and about the nations we live in. It's a story about the dangers of emptiness. What are some of the ways in which emptiness is dangerous?

First of all, there is a danger in emptiness because evil in the world is very persistent, and evil loves a vacuum. It doesn't give up easily, and it looks for clean, empty spaces in which to grow and thrive. None of us have guaranteed immunity. Evil is always ready and waiting to move in wherever there is room. And above all, evil is subtle and cunning, as this parable indicates. The individual in the parable got rid of what he saw as evil in his life — perhaps a bad habit or maybe an addiction. He cleaned up his life. He cleared out the one thing in his life that he wasn't proud of. And now he settled down to congratulate himself on his action. But he didn't fill the emptiness with something good. So the evil returned when he wasn't looking, and more than that, it brought seven new devils along.

Evil is persistent, and it loves clean, empty spaces where it can go to work. Perhaps that's why bad habits are easier to form and grow more rapidly than good habits. We can renounce the sins of the flesh only to fall prey to the more subtle sins of the spirit.

F. Forrester Church has recently written a new book entitled The Seven Deadly Virtues. In his book, he points out that the so-called seven cardinal virtues can quietly and quickly become sins without our being aware of it, and because we pride ourselves on our virtues, they can therefore be more deadly than the so-called seven deadly sins. Incidentally, the seven cardinal

virtues, which can become deadly, are these according to tradition: prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, faith, hope, and love.

Sometimes, too, we are so proud of some of our virtues that they hide our more deadly sins. It has been said, for example, that Alexander the Great was so proud of his chastity — proud that, contrary to the custom of his times, he refused to violate the wives and daughters of his captives. Yet Alexander's over-vaulting ambition to conquer the world was a much greater and deeper flaw.

Adolf Hitler was a model human being in some ways. He prided himself on the fact that he was sober and never drank, was a vegetarian, and lived a rather spartan life. But seven other devils had moved into that empty house.

Some of the biggest swindlers and cheats in history have had clean personal lives that they prided themselves on. People with a lust for power, with an insensate desire for fame and glory, with a desperate need to manipulate and humiliate and harm others who get in their way are the ones who cause the most trouble in the world. And they are frequently the ones who believe they have gotten rid of the evil in their lives, and into the emptiness, seven other devils have moved.

I think most of us continually underestimate the power and persistence of evil. Many years ago, a popular book by J. B. Phillips was entitled Your God Is Too Small. Someday I'm going to do a sermon with the title, Your Devil Is Too Small.

This parable, which we are considering today, is more about the persistence of evil than the power of evil. Jesus is reminding us that often we get rid of one set of sins and, without our being aware of it, replace them with some new sins. For example, a person is converted to Christ, makes a number of positive changes in his or her life, and then, without knowing it, becomes self-righteous and judgmental of other people.

A Franciscan monk was describing the merits of the various Roman Catholic monastic orders. He said, "We Franciscans do not have the scholarly abilities and the intellectual astuteness of the Augustinians; we do not have the practical and artistic abilities of the Benedictines; nor do we have the political skill and the sagacity of the Jesuits. But when it comes to humility, we're tops."

This parable touches every aspect of our living. The empty and unoccupied spirit or soul of an individual is always exposed to danger.

Take the matter of personal health. There are always unwholesome influences ready to move into any life that is devoid of wholesome interests, sound motives, and good intentions. A retired businessman went in one day to see his doctor and confessed, "I feel like a broken-down bedspring." The physician's physical examination showed no organic disorder whatsoever. He was referred to a psychiatrist, whose diagnosis was that this man's life was as bare as an unfurnished room. His mind was devoid of ideas; his body had nothing with which to occupy itself; and his soul had no command or engaging interests. So the psychiatrist confronted him and said, "You have a bad case of spiritual emptiness, which is being translated into dull pains radiating from your ears down to your toes." His prescription was that he needed huge doses of good reading, regular prayer, and large amounts of volunteer work in his church and community.

Later, the psychiatrist reported with a measure of satisfaction, “When this man filled up his life with regular prayer, constructive thought, new ideas, and got involved in helping others, there was no room for pain and meaninglessness to rattle around.”

We have already been talking about a second reason why emptiness is dangerous in addition to the persistence of evil, and that’s because emptiness cannot be maintained. It’s not possible. A vacuum is a highly unstable condition. “Nature abhors a vacuum,” we learned in general science. Something is always waiting to rush in and fill it.
As far as we human beings are concerned, an empty life, an empty faith, are invitations to trouble. It does not greatly help a person only to know what he or she does not believe unless one also knows what he or she does believe.

Sometimes I hear people say, “We’re not going to expose our children to any religious beliefs or the doctrines of any particular branch of Christianity or any church. Let them grow up and decide for themselves.” That can leave individuals in a spiritual vacuum. And if that is done, then we would not be surprised when some unwelcome beliefs and values fill that empty space.

I believe that a large part of the reason that some people become members of various fanatical cults is because they have an emptiness that needs to be filled. If spiritually hungry people are not fed good spiritual food, they will eat whatever else is available.

Spiritual vacuums are nothing new. Henri Nouwen wrote in one of his books that our lives are filled, yet unfilled. “A gnawing sense of being unfulfilled underlies our filled lives.”

He goes on to say that the symptoms of being empty or unfilled are boredom, resentment, and depression. Boredom is a sentiment of disconnectedness. While we are busy with many things, we wonder if what we do makes any real difference. To the spiritually empty person, life presents itself as a random and unconnected series of activities and events over which we feel we have little or no control. And life makes no sense.

This does not mean that we have nothing to do, but that we question the value of the things we are so busy doing. So the great paradox of our time is that many people are busy and bored at the same time. And that comes from an inner emptiness, a spiritual vacuum. While running from one event to another, we wonder in our innermost selves if anything is really happening.

This kind of unfilled boredom leads to resentment. When we are busy, yet wondering if our busyness means anything to anyone, we feel easily used, manipulated, and exploited, and we tend to blame all sorts of outside sources when it’s really a problem of spiritual emptiness that we have been trying to fill with all sorts of busyness.

Many marriages go sour because of emptiness, and things outside the marriage rush in to fill that emptiness. One of the most critical periods in a marriage is the time when, after maybe twenty-five years of married life or sooner, a couple look at each other and admit that their marriage is empty. They may have stayed together across the years for the sake of the children, but now the children are grown and gone. A teenage young woman said to me, “My folks say they live for us children. I think that is kind of sad. They should have something else to live for also.” And the emptiness comes. Then all sorts of unwelcome guests move into that empty house — extra-marital affairs, alcohol, drugs, boredom, and more.

So the parable warns us about the danger of emptiness. It is not enough to be rid of some bad habits or some evil tendency, or to one day find that something good in our life is no longer with us in the same way, such as when our children grow up and leave home, or a close good friend dies. And then we are also empty.

Nor is it enough to reach a plateau and think, “Now I’ve got it made. My life is all nice and clean.” It’s precisely at that point that we are most vulnerable. Into the vacuum, into the emptiness, move seven more devils, and we are worse off than before.

The only way to counteract the danger of emptiness in every part of our living is to be constantly filling our lives with what is good.
It means such things as continually building good human relationships with people who will bring something positive and constructive to our living. It means having close friends to whom we can turn when we need the love and support of someone else because tragedy or illness has come into our lives and we are empty.

To counteract the perils of emptiness means taking definite steps to build and strengthen our spiritual lives and not just sitting back waiting for it to happen to us. It means letting God’s spirit and power fill the emptiness that comes to all of us from time to time. It means such simple things as being regular in our participation in worship. Among other things, worship is the process of taking time out to pay attention to our spiritual growth and development. It is taking time out to let God’s spirit fill us.

To some people, this may not sound very sensational or exciting. However, preventative measures are never as exciting as rescuing someone who is already in deep trouble. Rescue is always more dramatic, but it is short-lived.

You have heard me say from this pulpit time and time again that God’s spirit and love are always around us and within us. God desires to fill any and all emptiness that exists within us, but God does not force it. We have to be open to letting God’s spirit into those parts of our lives that are empty. Remember the words of Jesus, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.” Amen.