Sunday, February 11, 1990
DON'T CALL IT JUNK
Matthew 5:17-26

Moving to another home is hard work, and it's not one of my favorite things to do. In the 35 years that my wife and I have been married, we have lived in eight different places. Each move means that decisions have to be made — what to keep and move to the new place, and what to leave behind, either to sell or give away.

People who are good at moving are those who are able to do a sound job not only in packing but also in sorting things out and neatly labeling each carton with its contents — dishes, bedding, books, bathroom supplies, and more. Those who have moved a number of times also know it is helpful to write on the outside of each carton what room it is destined for in the new home — kitchen, children's bedroom, master bedroom, living room, dining room, garage, or basement.

In one of our moves, when the children were young, my wife and I were trying to get things in order and decide what to pack where. Rowena was neatly putting things in boxes and carefully writing on the outside of the cartons what was inside. I was packing a box of our daughter's toys, games, puzzles, and a variety of other things she had collected in her childhood. Not quite knowing what to label the box, I simply wrote on the outside, "Krista's Junk." Being the nice person that she is, Rowena politely suggested it would be better to label it "Miscellaneous" instead of "Junk."

The more I thought about it, the more I began to realize that she had a valid point. Because it is a word of several syllables that comes from the Latin, "miscellaneous" seems to imply a certain respect for the objects so labeled, whereas things designated as junk are objects of contempt.

And then I remembered that I frequently referred to a drawer full of all sorts of things in our home as the "junk drawer." You probably have one in your home as well. It's filled with a variety of objects that you have not separated and classified. Do you call it a "junk drawer" or a "miscellaneous drawer?"

I was thinking about this again the other day when I was working in my office here at the church. Because I have to write a new sermon each week, I collect and accumulate a large number of illustrations, stories, and other ideas from a variety of sources — newspaper stories, magazine articles, religious journals, and books. Most of these items are difficult to classify or to put into some order. I tend to save them all for future use. However, putting them into some kind of easy, usable filing system so that I can find what I want when I need it is quite a task.

On this particular day, I was trying to sort out a whole batch of such material that I had collected and stored in an empty desk drawer. For a while, the sorting process went very well as I put stories and illustrations into different categories by subject matter and placed them in appropriately labeled manila file folders. The pile of materials had been considerably reduced when the job began to drag. Finally, I'd had enough. I grabbed the remaining papers, stuffed them into one large folder, and boldly marked it "Miscellaneous." I had a great feeling of relief. I was also proud of myself that I hadn't labeled it "Junk."

There was that word again, “Miscellaneous.” As I poured myself a cup of coffee, I thought of the millions of different objects that must be stored across the country in boxes and folders labeled “Miscellaneous.” What a powerful word to mean so many different things to so many different people.

Miscellaneous comes from the Latin verb “miscere,” meaning “to mix.” It describes things that cannot be easily classified or put into a definite order. Some things seem to resist ordering or classification. There’s an opposite force at work. Have you noticed that a lot of things in this world tend toward disorder?

Years ago, when I was studying physics in college, we learned about something called the Second Law of Thermodynamics. As I remember it, in simple terms, the Second Law states that the disorder of the universe constantly increases. Things corrode, fall apart, break down, wear out, or are scattered. When the grandchildren come to our house, I understand this law in a very real way. We do our best to counteract the advance of disorder, and it takes a lot of energy to bring things back into some kind of order.

It has been said that we human beings have a built-in tendency to want to bring some order into life. We are ordering creatures. Maybe that’s because we are aware that if we do not work at bringing some order into the world, most things tend toward disorder. They do not remain static. One astute observer of human nature put it this way: “As I see it, we are all somewhat territorial. Early in life, we stake out a little patch of the universe that we consider our own. Much of life is spent trying to put order in our patch by arranging things into patterns that are useful or pleasing to us.”

There are theologians who see our human propensity for bringing some order into our own lives and into the world around us as a sign of transcendence, or in other words, a signal that God is at work in and through us.

The stories of creation in the Book of Genesis in the Bible describe God’s creating as bringing order out of chaos. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” The creation story tells how God brings things into order.

Later on, in the Old Testament stories, Moses delivered the Ten Commandments and a number of other laws to his people. Human beings cannot live very long in a state of anarchy. Any historical society is an order, a protective structure of meaning, erected in the face of chaos. That’s what laws do — bring some order into society by a majority of us agreeing that there are some rules we all need to follow if we are to live peacefully with one another.

Throughout most of human history, human beings have believed that the created order of society, in one way or another, corresponds to an underlying order of the universe, a divine order that supports and justifies all human attempts at ordering.

The problem comes when we either overemphasize order or no longer worry at all about disorder and let things go completely to pieces. There’s always a tension between order and disorder.

As I read the New Testament stories of Jesus, one of his biggest disagreements with the very religious people of his time was their demand for complete order, for exact classification in

every detail, for trying to make rules for every situation, and their insistence on following all the rules to the letter of the law without allowing for any exceptions.

They even classified people into strict categories. In their eyes, you were either an unrighteous sinner and therefore an outcast (and they couldn't associate with you), or you were a righteous human being, one of God's elect. There was no in-between. In so rigidly classifying people and not making room for miscellaneous, these very religious people became rigid and self-righteous. There was no room in their lives for experiencing or understanding God's grace toward them or toward others. God's grace makes room for both order and disorder.

Jesus did not advocate doing away with the law or with order, but going beyond the law. For Jesus, paying attention to the spirit of the law was more important than paying attention to the letter of the law.

Listen again to what Jesus said in that portion of the Sermon on the Mount which is our text for this sermon:

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them." Then he went on to say that we are not to relax the commandments, but to go beyond them.

And he gave some examples: "You have heard that it was said to the people of old, 'You shall not kill,' and whoever kills 'shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother or sister shall be liable to judgment."

To emphasize the point of going beyond the law, Jesus said, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

We all know people whose quest for order and classification becomes pathological. Everything — and worse still, every person — is put into some kind of category. There is no room for "miscellaneous." A label is applied to each individual.

To such people, an individual is either Black or white, a sinner or saved, a hippie or a square, a nerd or not a nerd, shy or outgoing. Those who label others will say, "He's a grouch," "She's a reactionary," "He's uptight," "She's a radical." With one label, we can squeeze the humanity out of the other person and turn off our own humanity at the same time. Most labels are limiting. There are very few labels that can adequately describe an individual. I can think of only two— "Child of God" and "Human Being."

Some years back, an unusual event took place in a Broadway theater in New York. It was Friday night, and the theater was packed for a performance of Tennessee Williams' play The Night of the Iguana, starring Dorothy McGuire. Just before the curtain was about to rise, a woman in the audience — an overweight, middle-aged woman in a blue-print dress — startled the audience by suddenly shouting, "Start the show! I want to see Dorothy McGuire!" The people sitting next to her quickly moved out of their seats, not wanting to be associated with this mad woman.

Ushers and the theater manager tried to reason with the woman. They tried to pull her out of her seat, but she pulled back and continued to shout, "I want to see Dorothy McGuire! Start the show."

After a moment of shocked silence, the people in the audience decided they had a maniac in their midst and began to get ugly, booing the woman, laughing derisively, and calling her names. The woman turned to the shouters and again said, “All I want to see is Dorothy McGuire. Then I will leave.” There was more name-calling, and things were edging toward chaos.

And then... then from behind the curtain, Miss McGuire herself appeared. She crossed the stage over to the place where the woman was sitting, and with remarkable poise, grace, and kindness, extended her hand to her. Quietly, willingly, the woman took her hand, and Miss McGuire led her gently toward the exit. When they reached the edge of the auditorium, Miss McGuire paused, turned toward the audience, and said, “I’d like to introduce you to another fellow human being.”

The audience was stilled, their name-calling and taunts silenced by Miss McGuire’s compassion.

The grace of God means that God does not put us into rigid categories. God does not put labels on us except “Child of God” and “Human Being.” Nor does God have a “junk drawer.” None of us are junk as far as God is concerned. Miscellaneous, yes; different and diverse, yes. But junk, no! God accepts us in our diversity.

That’s what I like about the word “miscellaneous.” It affirms diversity! It’s inclusive!

Have you ever wondered what there is in human beings that drives many of us toward conformity? What is it that makes us suspicious and even afraid of people who are different from us? Is it fear of the unknown?

I read somewhere that in the Middle Ages, an individual person, on average, would only come into contact with maybe 150 different people in his or her lifetime. And almost all of the people that one met or came to know were from the same village and were very much alike — same skin color, same language, similar in size, same values, same outlook on life. Such people had no experience of diversity, so if by chance one were to meet someone of a different skin color or different language, fear was the natural result.

Now we know that God’s creation is made up of a diversity of people. So when Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” I think he meant that we are to be more inclusive and less judgmental than the scribes and Pharisees of his time.

We are to celebrate diversity, and we do not need to be afraid of a little disorder in the world around us. Everything in our lives does not have to be put in perfect order, labeled, or assigned a category. To experience God’s grace and for the sake of sanity, it’s helpful for us to tolerate a little disorder in our lives and in the lives of others.

Having a “miscellaneous box” can be an immense help. Amen.