Sunday, May 20, 1990
THE CHOICE IS YOURS
Micah 6:8; I Peter 2:1-3; Galatians 4:22-23

Our lives are filled with choices. Every day we make choices. Some of them will have a major effect on our lives and on the lives of others, and some of our choices will have little effect on anyone. When you got up this morning, you made a choice as to what clothes you were going to wear. You also made a choice as to whether or not you were going to church. And you made countless other choices, many of them almost without thinking.

When we were babies, our parents made all our choices for us, but as we grow and mature, we are called upon to make an increasing number of choices for ourselves.

We also live in a world where more and more choices are possible. Some of them are very difficult. For example, when does one choose to disconnect life-support equipment from a person who is near death? And not all choices are between an obvious right or wrong.

Not only are there many choices, and some very difficult ones, but sooner or later we come to grips with the reality that we are accountable for our choices. Still, there are some persons who try to go through life without making choices. But that is impossible. They are only fooling themselves. When you decide not to make a choice, that is, in itself, a choice. Thus, each one of us will be making choices all through our lives, whether we want to or not.

Not too many weeks ago, some of the young people present here today made a choice to become members of this congregation and, in so doing, made a conscious decision to follow the teachings and example of Jesus. It may not, at the time, have seemed like a big choice — however, you will discover that it was one of the most sacred and important choices you will ever be called upon to make.

However, it's not a once-for-all-time decision. Every day, in countless smaller decisions and some larger ones, and in your encounters with the people you meet, you are and will be choosing whether or not to follow the example and teachings of Jesus.

Each day, each one of us makes a choice as to what kind of person we are going to be. What kind of person are you going to be — inside yourself and with other people?

I want to suggest one word that describes the kind of person God wants you to be. One word! That word has only four letters. The word is "kind." Each day, you have that choice to make — whether to be kind to yourself and others — or to be unkind, mean-spirited, offensive, unpleasant, rude, nasty, cruel, spiteful, malicious, or greedy. There's so much of all of that in this world.

And so often, we are unkind without being aware of it. It can have disastrous results.

Here's a story I read from the Journal of the National Education Association that I've never forgotten. It was written by a public school teacher:

"It started with tragedy on a biting cold February morning. I was driving behind the bus as I did on most snowy mornings on my way to school. The bus veered and stopped short at the hotel,

which it had no business doing, and I was annoyed as I had to come to an unexpected stop. A boy lurched out of the bus, stumbled, and collapsed on the snowbank at the curb. The bus driver and I reached him at the same moment. His thin, hollow face was white even against the snow.

'He's dead,' the driver whispered. It didn't register for a minute. I glanced quickly at the scared young faces staring down at us from the school bus. 'Get a doctor, quick,' I said. 'No use, I tell you, he's dead,' said the driver. 'He never even said he felt bad,' the driver muttered, 'Just tapped me on the shoulder and said, real quiet, "I'm sorry. I have to get off at the hotel." That's all. Polite and apologizing-like.'

At school, the giggling, shuffling morning noise quieted as the news went down the halls. I passed a huddle of girls. 'Who was it? Who dropped dead on the way to school?' I heard one of them half-whisper. 'Don't know his name. Some kid from the edge of town,' was the reply.

It was like that in the faculty room and the principal's office. 'I'd appreciate your going out to tell the parents,' the principal told me. 'They haven't got a phone, and anyway, somebody from the school should go out there in person. I'll cover your classes.' 'Why me,' I asked. 'Wouldn't it be better if you did it?' 'I didn't know the boy,' the principal admitted. 'And in last year's sophomore personalities column, I note that you are listed as his favorite teacher.'

I drove through the snow and cold down the bad canyon road to the place and thought about the boy, Cliff Evans. His favorite teacher, I thought. He hasn't spoken two words to me in two years. I could see him in my mind's eye all right, sitting back there in the last seat in my afternoon literature class. He came into the room by himself and left by himself. Cliff Evans, I muttered to myself, a boy who never talked. I thought for a moment. A boy who never smiled.

I never saw him smile once.

The big ranch kitchen was clean and warm. I blurted out my news somehow. Mrs. Evans reached blindly toward a chair. 'He never said anything about bein'ailing,' she said. His stepfather snorted, 'He ain't said nothing about anything since I moved in here.'

After school, I sat in my office and stared blankly at the records spread out before me. I was to close the file and write the obituary for the school paper. The almost bare sheets mocked the effort. Cliff Evans, white, never legally adopted by his stepfather, five younger half-brothers and sisters. These meager strands of information and the list of grades were all the records had to offer.

Cliff Evans had silently come in the school door in the mornings and gone out the school door in the evening, and that was all. He had never belonged to a club. He had never played on a team. He had never held an office. As far as I could tell, he had never done one happy, noisy, kid thing. He had never been anybody at all.

How do you go about making a child into a zero? The elementary school records showed me. The first and second-grade teacher's annotations read'sweet, shy child: timid but eager.' Then the third-grade note had opened the attack. Some teacher had written in a good, firm hand, 'Cliff won't talk. Uncooperative. Slow learner.' The other academic sheets had followed with'dull; slow-witted; low IQ.' The comments became correct. The boy's IQ score in the 9th grade was listed at 83. But his IQ in the third grade had been 106. The score didn't go under

100 until the 7th grade. Even shy, timid, sweet children have resilience. It takes time to break them.

I wrote a brief, savage report pointing out what education had done to Cliff Evans. I slapped a copy on the principal's desk and another in the sad, dog-eared file. I banged the typewriter and slammed the file drawer, but I didn't feel much better. A little boy kept walking after me, a little boy with a peaked, pale face; a skinny body in faded jeans; and big eyes that had looked and searched for a long time and then became veiled.

I could guess how many times he had been chosen last to play sides in a game, how many whispered child conversations had excluded him, how many times he hadn't been asked. I could see and hear the faces and voices that said over and over again, 'You're dumb. You're dumb. You're a nothin'Cliff Evans.'

A child is a believing creature. Cliff undoubtedly believed them. Suddenly it seemed clear to me. When finally there was nothing left at all for Cliff Evans, he collapsed in a snowbank and went away. The death certificate might list heart failure as the cause of death, but a broken heart would be more accurate.

We couldn't find ten students in the school who had known Cliff well enough to attend the funeral as his friends. So the student body officers and a committee from the junior class went as a group to the church, politely sad. I attended the service with them and sat through it with a lump of cold lead in my chest and a big resolve growing through me.

I've never forgotten Cliff Evans or that resolve. He has been my challenge year after year, class after class. I look up and down the rows carefully each September at the unfamiliar faces. I look for veiled eyes, or bodies scrunched into a seat in an alien world. 'Look kids,' I say to myself silently, 'I may not do anything else for you this year, but not one of you is going to come out of here a nobody. I'll work or fight to the bitter end, doing battle with society or the school board or anybody else, but I won't have one of you coming out of here thinking himself or herself to be a zero.'"

Kindness, simple human kindness. It can do so much for others and for ourselves, and when we forget to be kind, it can have such devastating effects.

But what is it that makes some people kind and caring, and what makes others the opposite?

Samuel Oliner has spent the last ten years studying human kindness. His book has recently been published with the title, The Compassionate Beast: What Science is Discovering About the Humane Side of Humankind.

As a child, Mr. Oliner came face to face with evil, hate, and the worst forms of unkindness. Nearly fifty years ago, Oliner's family and friends were slaughtered by Nazi soldiers in death camps because they were Jews. He escaped at age twelve and found his way to the home of the only Christian he felt he could trust: a peasant woman who had bought cows from his father. She gave him shelter until he could find a job in another place.

When the war was over, he was sent as a refugee to England and was educated there. He finally found his way to this country. He served in the U.S. Army in Korea, and afterward went

to college and, twenty years later, earned a Ph.D. and began teaching at Humboldt State University.

Despite his ascent and happy family life, Oliner maintained a bleak view of humanity. Then one day he decided to study why some people were kind and others uncaring. He began reading about people who had rescued Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. As a social scientist, he wanted to understand what had created the altruistic nature of these people.

For the next five years, Oliner gathered six hundred detailed stories from aging rescuers from Poland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, as well as Germany. He interviewed two hundred people, and his staff also interviewed others from the same areas and of the same age, class, and background who had done nothing to save the Jews. Then they analyzed the difference between the two groups. Here is a brief summary of what they discovered.

People who rescued Jews and who went out of their way to be kind were not particularly adventurous or self-confident, but they were more empathetic, more caring, and had a much greater sense of responsibility for others. How did the rescuers become compassionate? In part, by having lived among people who were not of their own faith and background, they had learned to see others who were different from them as human beings.

The most important influences were parental. How the rescuers had been disciplined as children was crucial. The bystanders were more likely to have been beaten and abused by their parents. The rescuers' parents, on the other hand, used reason to discipline, thereby instilling values as well as compassion.

Parents' behavior toward others was a major influence. Kind, caring parents were the model for kind, caring children.

Oliner discovered that five hundred thousand Christians had risked their lives to save a million Jews from death. He found the spark of decency in human beings.

He also rediscovered what the Old Testament and Jesus taught all along — that all human beings, no matter what their color, race, or religion, are created in God's image, and that as such, we are connected to each other and to God. When we begin to pay attention to the God-image in ourselves and in others, then we become kind and caring. The way you treat people is the way you treat God.

That's why the Bible reminds us in many different ways — be kind to one another. Let kindness be a part of your nature day in and day out, in the little events of life as well as the big. Be kind not only to those of your own tribe or family, or race or nation or religion, but also be kind to the stranger within your gates.

Kindness is one of the strongest and most beautiful qualities any life can have. Life becomes so bitter, so narrow, so small when there is no kindness.

What are you going to be today, tomorrow, and the day after — kind to yourself and others, or unkind? The choice is yours. Amen.