Sunday, September 15, 1991
PROACTIVE NOT REACTIVE (No. 3 in a Series: Living from the Inside Out)
Mark 8:27-38

More than 20 years ago, Sydney J. Harris, a newspaper columnist, told a story in one of his columns that I've never forgotten.

He wrote: "I walked with my friend, a Quaker, to the news stand the other night, and he bought a paper and thanked the newsman politely. The newsman didn't even acknowledge it. 'A sullen fellow, isn't he,' I commented. 'Oh, he's that way every night,' shrugged my friend. 'Then why do you continue being so polite to him?' I asked. 'Why not,' inquired my friend. 'Why should I let him decide how I'm going to act?'"

Harris said that as he thought more about this incident, it occurred to him that the key operating word was "act." This Quaker Christian "acts" toward people; most of us "react." He has a sense of inner balance, a sense of security and self-worth, which is often lacking in many people. He knows who he is, what he stands for, and how he should behave. His actions are not dependent on what happens to him but come from an inner spirit and motive. Thus, no sullen or impolite character is going to disturb the equilibrium of his nature. He simply refuses to return insult for insult because then he would no longer be in command of his own conduct but would be a mere responder, a reflector.

This man lives and behaves toward others and toward life from the inside out, rather than from the outside in.

This modern-day parable reminds me of the way in which many of the followers of Jesus in the New Testament remembered him. They recalled that when Jesus was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten. Rather, his basic trust was based on the strength of his own inner character and in the power of God who judges justly. He lived from the inside out.

Are you proactive or reactive? Isn't it true that most of us react, and no one is unhappier than the perpetual reactor? For then, we are not free. Our spiritual temperature is always being raised or lowered by the social climate around us, and we become mere creatures at the mercy of these elements.

Think about it! Don't we tend to be reactive instead of proactive? If we are reactive, then praise gives us an over-inflated feeling of elation, which can be false because it does not last and it does not come from inside self-approval. On the other hand, criticism can depress us more than it should because it confirms our own secret shaky opinion of ourselves. Thus, snubs hurt us, and the merest suspicion of unpopularity in any quarter rouses us to bitterness, aggressiveness, or querulousness.

We've all had this experience. Maybe only a saint never reacts, but I don't think so. I believe it's possible for each one of us to be proactive instead of reactive. But it takes spiritual depth, an inner core of basic principles that give us the foundation for being proactive. However, if we lack this spiritual depth and do not have a basic inner core of principles, then we let others determine whether we shall be rude or gracious, elated or depressed. We become "other-directed people," basing our behavior primarily on what we think others will think of us, or merely reacting to the way they treat us. We are then no longer free but are more like a

bouncing ball that someone else is bouncing. That is living from the outside in rather than from the inside out.

Reactive people are often affected by their physical environment. If the weather is good, they feel good. If it isn't, it affects their attitude and their performance. Proactive people carry their own weather with them. Whether it rains or shines, makes no difference to them. They are driven by deep and abiding principles.

As I mentioned earlier, reactive people are also affected by their social environment, by the "social weather." When people treat them well, they feel well; when people don't they become defensive or protective. Reactive people build their emotional lives around the behavior of others, empowering the weaknesses of other people to control them. Reactive people try to build their lives on the emotional weaknesses of others.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "No one can hurt you without your consent." Steve Covey tells this story. Once when he was speaking on the subject of being proactive, a woman in the audience stood up in the middle of the presentation and started talking excitedly. After his talk was finished, Covey asked her to explain. "You can't imagine what's happened to me," she said. "I'm a full-time nurse to the most miserable, ungrateful man you can possibly imagine. Nothing I do is good enough for him. He never expresses appreciation; he hardly even acknowledges me. He constantly harps at me and finds fault with everything I do. This man has made my life miserable, and I often take my frustration out on my family. The other nurses feel the same way. We almost pray for his demise."

"And for you to have the gall to stand up there and suggest that nothing can hurt me, that no one can hurt me without my consent, and that I have chosen my emotional life of being tniserable — well, there was just no way I could buy into that. But I kept thinking about it. I really went inside myself and began to ask, 'Do I have the power to choose my own response?' When I finally realized that I do have that power, when I swallowed that bitter pill and realized that I had chosen to be miserable, I also realized that I could choose not to be miserable. At that moment I stood up. I felt as though I was being let out of San Quentin. I wanted to yell to the whole world, 'I am free! I am let out of prison! No longer am I going to be controlled by the treatment of some person.'"

Look at the word "responsibility." It's really two words joined together — response — ability. We all have the ability to choose our response. Highly proactive people and Jesus is only one example, recognize response -ability. They do not blame circumstances, conditions, or conditioning for their behavior. Their behavior is a product of their own conscious choice, based on principles, inner strength, and spiritual power, rather than a product of their conditions, based on feeling.

Now let's look at some more of the ways in which we are frequently reactive instead of proactive. Some of us have a sort of pulley system of evaluating people including ourselves. On this. pulley system, we go'up when someone else goes down, and we go down when sotneone else goes up. Our emotional position keeps shifting in relation to the outside world. . Let me be personal as an illustration. If I meet or hear of an individual who preaches better than I do, this does not diminish my own talents. I still have exactly what I had before, no more and no less. That person's gifts do not devalue mine, nor mine devalue someone else's.

Yet many of us, because we live from the outside in rather than the inside out judge ourselves and others on this false basis. If we meet someone richer, we feel poorer; someone

handsomer, we feel ugly; someone more fluent; we feel tongue-tied; if they are up, we are down.

Conversely, many of us cannot feel comfortable unless we are pulling others down. We rise only by their lowliness. We win only by their losing. If he is uglier, I am handsomer; he is failing, then I am doing better; if he is poorer, then I am richer.

A farmer was moodily regarding the ravages of a flood. “Hiram,” yelled a neighbor, “your pigs were all washed down the creek.” “How about Thompson’s pigs?” Hiram asked. “They’re gone too.” “And Larsen’s?” “Lost also.” “Hmmn,” said the farmer, cheering up, “Tain’t as bad as I thought.”

Our human society is not a pulley system. God has not made us or the world so that we improve only at the expense of others going down, or vice versa. In real life, we don’t win only by others losing. The truth is, we each have our own value, our own distinctive gifts and limitations. We each have the ability and the freedom to be proactive instead of reactive. Our basic nature is to act and not be acted upon. That’s the way God has created us.

Consider another way in which we as individuals are reactive instead of proactive. A person I know, whom I had always considered to be a calm and stable personality, told me that he is regarded in some quarters as a wild-eyed radical and in other circles as a stony conservative — when actually he is neither. “It’s an irresistible urge I have when I get together with extremists,” he said. “I promptly swing over to the other extreme, just because I am so irritated with their one-sided view.”

Have you noticed that reactive tendency in yourself? When we confront an extremist, we become a passionate defender of the opposite view. We want to show them how one-sided their position is, although we never succeed. What we do is become one-sided ourselves. This is being reactive instead of proactive. Our position does not come from our own inner convictions but is determined by the point of view of others.

This is similar to another kind of reaction found in many young people. I am referring to that kind of reaction best described as rebellion. If our parents are devout, we react and become irreligious. If our parents are conservative, we are dogmatically radical. We define our position by being against something else. We think we have burst the bonds of our enslavement and are free. But we have traded one form of bondage for another.

Freedom from parental domination does not necessarily mean to defy them or despise them, but to accept them for what they are and to make life’s decisions that are based on an inner core of basic principles instead of blind rebellion. And I want to say to the young people here as well as others, if you find that sometimes your ideas and principles agree with those of your parents, that’s nothing to be ashamed of.

But if you are reactive instead of proactive, you are indirectly allowing your decisions to be made by someone else. You are not acting from your own inner convictions and faith.

What does being proactive and not reactive have to do with our Christian faith?

First of all, God is a God of action not reaction. God’s love for us and for all people is proactive and not reactive. It is unconditional. It is not dependent on our behavior. It cannot be earned.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, which Jesus told, if the father had only reacted, he would have told the returning son, “You are not welcome here. You left home, squandered your part of my estate, and after all I’ve done for you.” Instead, the father ran to meet his son when he saw him coming from a distance and welcomed him with a big celebration.

In another place, Jesus said, “If you merely love those who love you (and this kind of love is mostly reactive), what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? But love your enemies, and do good to those who persecute you. Be merciful.” That’s proactive.

One day, when Jesus began to tell his disciples that he would undergo great suffering, be rejected, and eventually be killed, they reacted, especially Peter. It was then that Jesus went on to say to them and others, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.”

Jesus was inviting them and us to become proactive people, those who live from the inside out instead of the outside in. God has created us so that our basic nature is to act, not be acted upon. This not only enables us to choose our response to external circumstances but also empowers us to create circumstances.

Taking initiative does not mean being pushy, obnoxious, or aggressive. It means recognizing our responsibility to make things happen.

Ultimately, the power to live a proactive life instead of a reactive one comes to us as a gift from God. And God’s power begins to work within us when we begin to be proactive instead of reactive. It is then that God begins to work in us from the inside out.

And what dividends we can receive! There comes, in being a proactive person rather than a reactive one, a freedom, a way of victorious living that we cannot otherwise experience. There is an expansion of one’s life, of one’s joy, satisfaction, and excitement that can be found in no other way.

Beginning today, in your relationships, at home and where you work, when you meet new situations, old problems, and new challenges, ask yourself in each case: Am I being proactive or reactive? Your life, too, can be directed by the power of God within you, instead of simply reacting to forces outside of you. Amen.