Sunday, June 28, 1992
SIMPLE ANSWERS
Luke 9:51-56

Whenever things are not going the way we think they should, or when problems seem too overwhelming, we are in danger of settling for a simple answer or a quick solution that, in the long run, may be no solution at all and might even make the problem worse.

Moreover, our attention is often focused on solving short-term problems with short-term solutions, or worse still, trying to address long-term problems with short-term fixes. In Alice Hoffman's novel Turtle Moon, there's a character named Lucy, a young divorced mother distressed over the behavior of her teenage son. Reflecting on the physical complaints she hears from other mothers about their children, she thinks, "There is, after all, strong brown soap for poison ivy, iodine for cuts and bruises, mud for bee stings, honey for sore throats, chalky white casts for broken bones. But where is the cure for meanness of spirit?" That's a long-term problem for which there is no short-term solution or simple answer.

There's a story in Luke's gospel about this issue. Jesus had made up his mind to go to Jerusalem. The best way to get there was to go through Samaria. But for Jews, like Jesus and his disciples, that meant going through enemy territory.

There was a lot of meanness of spirit between the Samaritans and Jews. It was a long-term problem with lots of history behind it. To avoid an embarrassing situation, Jesus sent several of his disciples ahead to try to get room reservations for an overnight stay. They reported back to Jesus that no one would allow them to reserve the necessary rooms. So the disciples proposed a simple answer to the lack of hospitality on the part of the Samaritans: "Teacher, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" In other words, they suggested destroying all the Samaritans in that village to teach them a lesson. They reasoned that the best way to combat meanness of spirit was with a larger dose of meanness of spirit. However, Jesus would have none of it. Instead, they traveled to Jerusalem by an alternate route.

It wasn't the first time the disciples had been tempted by a simple answer, nor was it the last. More importantly, we still succumb to the same temptation today — the temptation to propose or accept a simple answer to a complex problem. There are several categories of simple answers.

The Use of Force: One type of simple answer that is still around is the kind the disciples proposed, namely that force, raw power, and complete destruction will solve the problem. That kind of simple answer and short-term solution has never lost its appeal.
When it is reported to us that crime is on the increase and that the "war on drugs" is not being won, simple answers are proposed — build more jails and prisons, sentence convicted criminals to longer terms, and increase the use of the death penalty.

A few months ago, The New Yorker magazine printed some startling statistics. The United States has now become the world leader in incarcerating people. We passed South Africa and the former Soviet Union sometime in the 1980s, a decade in which the number of inmates in U.S. prisons doubled.

We now have more than a million people in prison, and we're spending more than 20 billion dollars a year to lock people up. This figure is expected to continue rising rapidly. Prison officials estimate that by 1995, the number of inmates will increase by another thirty percent — by another three hundred and thirty thousand prisoners.

The primary cause of the dizzying increase in our prison population is our country's ill-named "war on drugs." In 1980, there were four hundred and seventy-one thousand drug arrests nationwide; in 1989, there were one million two hundred and forty-seven thousand. Over half the inmates in the federal prison system today are drug offenders, and that figure is expected to be nearly seventy percent by 1995.

Because of new sentencing laws, non-violent first-time drug offenders often end up serving more time than prisoners with long criminal records in violent crimes. The average sentence served for murder today is six and a half years; for possession of seven hundred marijuana plants, the federal mandatory minimum is eight years, with no possibility of parole. In Michigan, for example, conviction for possession of less than a pound and a half of cocaine results — even for a nonviolent first offender — in a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment without parole. Violent criminals are having to be let out of prison early to make room for nonviolent offenders.

Unfortunately, increased incarceration rates have been found to have only a negligible effect on crime rates, especially the drug problem. In fact, there is no evidence at all that the government's war on drugs is reducing drug use or drug trafficking in the poor black communities where both activities are so concentrated. And there is evidence that alternatives to imprisonment, which include fines, community service, and various levels of probation and restriction, are at least as effective as imprisonment in reducing crime. They are also far cheaper.

And there's another problem. What kind of society are we hoping to create by this policy of wholesale incarceration? What will these millions of people — most of them unskilled, uneducated, and brutalized by imprisonment — be prepared to do when they emerge after ten or fifteen or twenty years in prison?

I mention all of this only to illustrate that simple answers are not always the best solutions to complex problems. They may satisfy our need for revenge, but the deeper problems remain.

Parenthetically, it seems to me that the metaphor "war on drugs" or even "war on poverty," or "war on anything," is an unfortunate one. The use of the word "war" implies violent action and the idea that if enough force or power is applied, the "war" will be won quickly and the problem solved.

Scapegoating: A second type of simple answer, in addition to the belief that applying enough force will solve the problem, is to find a convenient scapegoat on which to blame the problem, believing that if we got rid of that one thing or person or group, the problem would be solved. Human history is filled with examples. Adolf Hitler in the 1930s used the simple-answer-scapegoat principle to a large extent in Nazi Germany. He blamed almost all the troubles that Germany had on the Jews. Exterminate this group of people, and everything will be all right. And enough people believed him that an enormous amount of tragedy and death came to much of the world, in addition to the killing of six million Jews.
The fact is that every radical leader of the left or the right is a simplifier. He or she cuts the world down to fit his or her own shrunken self and proposes deceptively simple answers to

solve all of our complex problems. A scapegoat is found who is the primary cause of all of our troubles. The scapegoat may be killed or gotten rid of in some other way, but the problems remain.

Regularly in our time, reports of events and descriptions of the people involved imply that somewhere, somebody has done something bad, regrettable, and that he or she or that group is the cause of all of our problems. Then we are led to believe that if we can find him or her or that group, punish them, fire them, throw them out, or destroy them, our problems will be solved. Isn't this the basis of most political assassinations?

We like to use the scapegoat-simple-answer because it satisfies our own emotional need to explain a distressing state of affairs without implicating ourselves. Then we are never part of the problem. It's always someone else. Congress blames the President, and the President blames Congress, and both blame the Supreme Court. We blame our political leaders for offering simple answers and forget that we want to hear that there are simple answers to our most distressing problems.

The desire for a simple answer is at least part of the reason we see a mounting emphasis on pills or quick remedies for anything and everything that ails us.

We all would like to believe that out there somewhere is the scapegoat, the scoundrel who is the one cause of all of our problems, but part of that cause is never in me or us.

Not very long ago, it was fashionable in the "scapegoat" method to blame everything on the Communists, implying that if communism were not around, most of the world's problems would be gone. Now that we have seen the collapse of a great part of communism, most of our problems still remain.

There is no one scapegoat, no one group, no one "ism" or person responsible for all or most of our problems. There is no one simple answer that is sufficient.

We who profess to be Christians are not immune from seeking simple answers and proposing them. Not very many years ago, devout Christian people were suggesting that an amendment to the U.S. Constitution permitting regular prayer in public schools would solve most of our society's problems. It was seriously suggested that our country is plagued by bribery, alcoholism, rape, drugs, pornography, sexual permissiveness, and much more because of the Supreme Court decision that public schools could not require students to participate in prayer.

Becoming a committed follower of the way of Jesus is not as simple as it might seem, although sometimes the Christian faith is packaged as if it is very simple as we try to screen out doubt, paradox, ambiguity, the dark night of the soul, limits, and setbacks. Accept Jesus as your personal savior, and all your problems will be solved. But it's not quite that simple.

Although being "born again" as a Christian may take only as long as a 15-second sound bite or spot, staying "born again" is not that easy. It is many times a struggle against constant temptation, which means being born again and again and again. All the followers of the way of Jesus, beginning with his first disciples, have discovered that putting their faith to work is going to cost them something, and they, and we, often resist doing that. We're not always willing to pay the price.

Gary Player was, for years, a great competitor in national and international golf tournaments. People would constantly come up to him and make the same remark: “I’d give anything if I could hit a golf ball like you.” Player, on one occasion, lost his patience when a spectator made that comment and replied: “No, you wouldn’t. You’d do anything to hit a golf ball like me if it were simple and easy. Do you know what you have to do to hit a golf ball like me? You’ve got to get up at 5:00 every morning, go out to the golf course, and hit a thousand golf balls. Your hands start bleeding, and you walk to the clubhouse and wash the blood off your hands, slap a bandage on it, and go out and hit another thousand golf balls. That’s what it takes to hit a golf ball like me!” There are no shortcuts in the worthwhile things in this life. You can’t become a good golfer or good pianist in 10 easy lessons.

Jesus taught his first followers and teaches us to beware of simple answers. Beware of the person who says he or she can solve all of society’s problems or your problems by doing one simple thing. Beware of yourself when you are tempted to settle for a short-term, shortcut solution to a long-term problem.

The real danger of the simple answer temptation is not only that it misleads us and covers up or glosses over many of the root causes of the problem, and therefore frequently makes the problem worse rather than better in the long run, but it also keeps us from seeing ourselves as part of the problem. It excuses us from any responsibility. Amen.