Sunday, August 2, 1992
HOW TO LEAD A BALANCED LIFE
Colossians 3:1-4; Luke 12:13-21

I still remember the first time I saw this magnificent church building. It was 21 years ago. The Search Committee had brought me to Lincoln for an interview. They wanted to meet me, and I wanted to meet them. They also wanted me to see this building, meet the staff, and get acquainted with the city.

One of the first things I do when I visit any church building is to try to see it from several different perspectives. In this building, I first sat down in one of the pews near the center. Then I walked up into the chancel and into the pulpit. How did it feel from this perspective? The next view was from the balcony, and that gave me a totally different perspective. I also wanted to see how I felt when I entered the building through the main front doors. That would be the perspective of a person coming to this church for the first time. I was impressed. When my minister friends from around the country stop by to see me and this building, they too want to experience this building from as many different perspectives as possible.

Do you remember your first flight in an airplane? I vividly remember mine. It was 37 years ago. That gives one a different perspective from which to view this earth. When you look out the window of an airplane, you begin to see how things fit together, how the hills and valleys interlock, how the fields form a mosaic, and how the towns and cities have some shape and definition. And think of the astronauts. All of them have commented on what a life-changing experience it is to view the planet earth from far out in space.

When you view things from a different perspective, especially from above, you see things you didn't notice before.

Perspective not only comes from seeing things from different vantage points but from other life experiences. One of the gifts of longer living can be a new perspective. One cannot have much perspective at age 16 or 20 simply because one has not lived long enough or experienced enough. For example, when we're young and most of our life is ahead of us, the fact that we will one day die is rarely taken into account. Our perspective on life and its meaning usually changes as we grow older, but it doesn't automatically change for the better. I know people who were stingy and greedy when they were young, and the longer they lived, the more stingy and greedy they became. Being in prison can change your perspective.

According to a recent news report, fallen televangelist Jim Bakker has asked his followers to forgive him for "preaching a gospel emphasizing earthly prosperity." In a remorseful letter written from the Minnesota prison where he has been confined since 1990, Bakker said he spent months reading the words of Jesus in the Bible and arrived at the conclusion: "There is no way, if you take the whole counsel of God's Word, that you can equate riches or material things as a sign of God's blessing."

Severe illness can change your perspective. When your physician tells you that you have but a year or less to live because of heart disease or cancer, your whole perspective on life and what's important, your priorities — everything — is seen from a different perspective. We all know that one day we are going to die, but sometimes it takes somebody or something to remind us and hopefully straighten out our perspective.

Jesus told a story about a rich farmer who had a very limited perspective on what life is all about. This farmer was prosperous and patted himself on the back for his skill in making himself rich. He then decided that the only thing to do was to make more money and build bigger barns to store all of his wealth.

Bigger barns remind me of bigger houses, bigger cars, and bigger bank accounts. There's nothing intrinsically bad about bigger — but Jesus makes the point that bigger is not necessarily better.

In the story, God calls this man a fool. He is a successful fool for two reasons: first, because he took all the credit for himself for being so rich, and second, because he was so stingy and thought that he deserved it all and could keep it all for himself. He forgot what it says in the Old Testament: "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me all this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth."

He also didn't take into account that one day he would die. According to the story, God said to this rich, successful man, "Fool, tonight you are going to die, and then who is going to get all your wealth?" He didn't have time to get an adequate perspective on life and death.

I said in last week's sermon that the central message of Jesus is that life is transitional. Yet we human beings are powerfully tempted to see this life as all there is. We become "this-worldly" and place our highest priority on accumulating things like the "rich fool." When we do this, our perspective, like that of the rich fool, is faulty. Or to put it another way, our life is out of balance. Some church people make the opposite mistake and are "other-worldly." They believe that life in this world is unimportant, so they don't worry about people starving or living in poverty as long as it doesn't personally affect them. That too is a limited perspective. Their understanding of life as God would have us live it is out of balance.

In the letter to the Colossians in the New Testament, we are told to live a life that is in balance, in harmony. The writer says, "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." In other words, as followers of Jesus, we are to have a fresh perspective, we are to see the world from God's point of view, knowing that there's more to life than only this life. This doesn't mean that we forget about this world and life here and now. Rather, we are told to "clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

A balanced life, in other words, takes into account that life is transitional and that our soul may be required of us at any time.

But how does one go about living a balanced life? Here are three guidelines from our Christian faith which, if followed, will help you put your life in balance. I call them the three "R's" of life.

The first "R" stands for rhythm. From the beginning of time, we human beings have been aware of a rhythm in all of creation. To be in rhythm is to be in the flow of life. It is to pace oneself as a long-distance runner paces himself or herself — not to go too slow or too fast. To have rhythm in life is to know when to work and when to rest, when to sleep and when to wake; it is to have some order, some pattern, a sense of flow.
Life itself has a rhythmical quality. There are seasons of the year, and there is the motion of the planets and stars. Rhythms insinuate themselves into every organ of the body and even

into all of its cells. Some illnesses can be described as part of our body and spirit being out of rhythm, the body not functioning in harmony within itself.

Of all human rhythms, the most basic are the rhythms of breathing and the beating heart. Heart muscle is perhaps the most remarkable kind of living tissue that exists. Somewhere within the structure of each individual fiber, independent of any impulses arising from elsewhere, is contained a mysterious power to contract and relax in a self-generated rhythm.

Our Christian faith reminds us that all of life is to have a certain rhythm. The fourth commandment of the ten puts the need for rhythm in life in religious terms: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the 7th is the Sabbath to the Lord your God.” Take time to be holy. Set aside a regular time for worship. Take time to rest and do it on a regular basis. That’s part of the rhythm of life. When one’s life is in balance, there’s a rhythmic quality to it. The rich fool in the parable Jesus told had no rhythm to his life. It was all work, work, work. Once he had enough wealth accumulated, then he told himself he would take time off.

The second of the three “R’s” of living a balanced life is “relinquishment” or “renunciation.” It is the art of “letting go” when it is necessary to let go. Most of what we are taught in life is how to get things, how to make friends and influence people, and how to hold onto things. Thus most of us are much better, more skillful in acquisition than we are in letting things go or giving things away. We’ve all noticed how much easier it is to gain weight than to lose weight. Jesus said that if one wants to find his or her life, we also have to lose it, let it go, relinquish it, give it away.

Another part of relinquishment, which our Christian faith teaches, is that in the long run, all things go away. So relinquishment is practicing the art of non-attachment. It means relaxing the grasping hand. It means being less possessive. It means not holding on too tight. If you are on the beach and try to see how much sand you can hold in your hand, the tighter you hold on, the less you have. If you keep your hand open, much more sand will remain in it. So it is with much of life — the tighter we try to hold on, the less we have.

Relinquishment, letting go, also means not giving eternal value to the things we own, the people we know, the plans we have, and the successes or failures we collect. All things go away. Nothing is eternal except God. That’s why Jesus said, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Relinquishment is the taking into account that one day each one of us will die. We will have to leave this world behind. We brought nothing into this world, and we will take nothing with us. As the Bible says, “The Lord gives, the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Being able to let go also means being able to give freely and with no strings attached. Too much of our giving is with strings attached, which means we really haven’t let go of what we have given. We want to hang onto it and have some control over it.

The rich fool could not imagine that he would ever have to let anything go. He knew nothing about relinquishment.

The third “R” of living a balanced life is “reassessment.” It means simply this — all through life, we need to be reassessing our values, what we are working for, our goals, where we are headed. It means enlarging our perspective. It means checking to see whether or not your life is out of balance. The rich fool Jesus talked about took no time for reassessing his life. The only discovery he made was that he would need bigger barns to store his wealth.
There has been a lot of research and writing in recent years on how to relax, how to reduce stress and tension. Most of these books deal primarily with various techniques. However, to live a balanced life takes more than the right technique.

It means reassessing our lives so that we can see more clearly what things, habits, goals, to let go, relinquish.

The three “R’s” of a balanced life — rhythm, relinquishment, and reassessment — are basic to our Christian faith and to all of life. They lead to living a balanced and joyful life. Amen.