Sunday, October 25, 1992
OVERCOMING THE BIG LIE (No. 2 in a Series: Recovering our Spiritual Heritage)
Romans 12:1-8

Last week, in the first sermon of this series, I noted that, especially in our time, many people are searching for their spiritual heritage. Deep down within themselves, they sense there's something more to life in this world than eating, drinking, acquiring things, struggling, working, growing older, and dying. The search for a spiritual foundation is the search for one's true purpose in life. Like Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom in Updike's novel, Rabbit at Rest, many people feel incomplete and intuitively know that "somewhere behind all this, there's something that wants me to find it."

Our Christian faith, with its Hebrew roots, tells us that deep within each one of us is a spiritual center, a spiritual energy that is as real as our physical bodies. "In God, we live and move and have our being." When we pay attention and listen to this spiritual center with its energy, we begin to enter an entirely new realm of human experience where all things are possible.

We are born into this world with this spiritual center, with the Spirit of God as part of us, and when we die, it does not die. In fact, it is the loving Spirit of God that causes us to be born in the first place. This energy of God is the invisible life force that is present in all of us.

But as I pointed out in the first sermon in this series, there are so many things in this life that get us sidetracked, that cause us to ignore or forget our spiritual center. Then our lives get bent out of shape or out of alignment.

How, then, do we begin to recover our spiritual heritage? As I also mentioned in last week's sermon, the first way to begin to get in touch with our spiritual self is to discover God's grand purpose for us and then to live one's life in accordance with that purpose. I made some suggestions about how to begin to do that. It's what's called "living in alignment." Spend some time each day in awe, in total complete awe. Look around you and see with fresh amazement this creation, including yourself and others. Then be thankful. Second, begin each day by affirming, "I know that the Spirit of God is within me and that when I live out the purpose for which God has created me, my life will be one of fulfillment and joy."

Now let's move on. In addition to living a life of purpose, another very important step in recovering our spiritual heritage is to overcome what I call the "big lie." What do I mean? Most of us grow up believing in so many personal limitations that, after a while, our lives actually begin to demonstrate those limitations. We hear ourselves saying things that we accept as truth, when in fact they are not true at all. By hanging on to these misbeliefs and convincing ourselves and others that they represent the "truth," we inhibit the work of God's Spirit in our lives. The "big lie" is actually spread abroad in a number of different versions.

The first of these is, "I can't help the way I am; I've always been this way." You've heard people say that, and perhaps you've said it yourself. If you find yourself believing that you must always be the way you have always been, you are arguing against growth. Whatever the state of your personality — be it shy, aggressive, fearful, introverted, or extroverted — you must shed the illusion that you cannot help the way you are. Since God's Spirit is truly a part of you and since God created you, you are a miracle. And once you begin to pay attention to your spiritual center, you can begin to become a new person.

A second version I often hear from people goes like this: “It’s my nature; I inherited who I am, and it can’t be changed.” Have you heard parents say to their children, “You’re just like your father; he was uncoordinated, and so are you.” “You got that tone deafness from your grandfather on your mother’s side. He couldn’t carry a tune either.” “Your brothers and sisters are all weak in mathematics; it runs in the family.”

These are some of the sentiments that help perpetuate the big lie. Growth in the spirit, in fact, growth of almost any kind, is impossible because you have come to believe that you have inherited your limitations and it is impossible to overcome genetics.

If you are going to live a life of purpose and recover your spiritual heritage, you have to suspend such thoughts and remember that you are a spiritual being first, a being who has no limitations in the inner domain where limitations are non-existent. Here, you can begin to imagine and visualize the kind of person you want to be, and if you pay attention to God’s Spirit, which is always in you, you will become the kind of person God wants you to be.

A third version of the big lie goes like this: “My personality is controlled by my chemistry and metabolism.” This is a lie we hear over and over again, and it is repeated in some distinguished circles, which makes it more difficult to overcome. You might be saying to yourself, “How can I change and become what I truly want to be when my body chemistry controls who I am?”
While there is certainly some truth about our body chemistry and how it affects us, we now also know that our body chemistry is affected by our thoughts, by the amount of stress in our lives, and many other factors. We know, for example, that prayer and meditation can have an enormous effect on our body chemistry.

A fourth version of the big lie is, “My family is responsible for my personality.” People say, “I could never escape from the clutches of my family.” “My mother was overbearing, and my father abandoned us when I was a child.” “All of the boys in my family are this way. We can’t help it.” These and hundreds of similar excuses are part of the big lie, and they can inhibit you from discovering your spiritual heritage. They become blocks that need to be removed. They become excuses for making necessary changes in your life, and you begin to believe that you are an unfortunate victim of circumstances beyond your control.
As long as you are convinced, even in a small way, that your family is responsible for the kind of person you are today, you are trapped in that cycle. You must know within you that you not only have a choice today, but you have always had a choice concerning how you react to the influences of your family.

Although you cannot eliminate the influences that were very much a part of your childhood, you and you alone can decide whether they will persist or whether you are going to transcend them. There are times when you may need the help of a counselor or a support group in order to free yourself from this version of the big lie. But again, it is you who must decide whether or not you are going to seek help so that you can begin to gain control over your life and get in touch with your spiritual center.

A fifth version of the big lie is very similar to the ones already mentioned: “I can’t escape my culture and my times.” This is the lie that encourages you to believe that your habits and customs are completely the result of that mysterious “culture” that is always shading and

shaping your life. You can let yourself be conformed to the culture and societal influences around you, or you can transcend them.
There are so many people who let themselves be formed by the culture in which they live. They give in to the belief that “society lays down the rules, and they are the victims of those practices.” If you are going to follow your bliss and make a difference in the world, you will soon learn that you cannot follow the herd. Using culture or society or peer pressure as excuses will only hold you back from making miraculous changes in your life. St. Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Rome, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

In her book, The Measure of Our Success, which includes 25 lessons for life, one of the lessons that Marian Wright Edelman commends to her children is this one, lesson number 22:

She writes: “You are in charge of your own attitude — whatever others do or circumstances you face. The only person you can control is yourself.” Then she quotes Gandhi, who said: “As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world — that is the myth of the atomic age — as in being able to remake ourselves.”

Remember, everything can be taken from a human being but one thing: the last of the human freedoms, to determine one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way.

Marian Wright Edelman goes on to say to her children: “Don’t make excuses. Whether you are poor or rich, don’t think children of privilege don’t have to fight for meaning in their lives too... never use physical poverty, or family, or status and wealth as an excuse for spiritual poverty. Don’t think if you just had enough money it would solve your problems or empty feelings.”

It boils down to this: if you believe that the culture determines who you are and what kind of person you will turn out to be, then that will be your reality. On the other hand, everyone who has ever made a positive difference in the world has been an innovator. He or she has gone beyond the bounds of their culture’s limitations. An innovator does not look at the cultural norms and say, “This is all that I can do.” Instead, the innovator looks within.

Today is Reformation Sunday, the time when we remember Martin Luther and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther was an innovator. He went beyond the cultural boundaries of his time in his efforts to renew and reform the church. Once again, it comes down to personal responsibility and a willingness to consult your own spiritual awareness, the Spirit of God that flows through you and is within you. Nothing out there can control what is in there.

Why have I spent so much time talking about the big lie and its many versions? Because if we allow the big lie in any of its forms to limit or control us, it can keep us from recovering our spiritual heritage. It can keep us from becoming what God intends us to be.

That’s what St. Paul meant when he wrote: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable, and perfect.” He also said in another place, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Amen.