Sunday, June 13, 1993
EMPTINESS CAN BE DANGEROUS
Matthew 12:43-45

A major story in newspapers across the country a few weeks ago, reported by Associated Press journalist David Briggs, carried the headline: “Study Shows Why Children Keep or Lose Parents’ Faith.”

According to the results of a large research project, “Parents who want their children to keep the faith would do well to lead by example, attending church as a family and living up to religious principles in their lives.”

In addition to not attending church regularly with their parents, the study also found that “hypocrisy among church members” (mostly parents) was the most important source of doubt reported by people who left their childhood faith.

Students interviewed in universities reported perceiving hypocrisy in parents who attend church only on certain holidays, when it is convenient for them, or on occasions such as weddings and funerals. In other words, the young people interviewed noticed a lack of discipline and commitment in their parents’ lives as far as their religious faith was concerned. They saw their parents as viewing their religious faith as a kind of leisure time activity in competition with other leisure time choices. In this competition, regular and sustained participation in church life often came in second, third, or fourth. It was something to do when there was nothing else to do.

I’ve said it before, but I think I need to say it again and again. What worries me the most about our church life in this congregation — what keeps me awake at night — is the sporadic attendance of many of our members in worship. This, of course, results in the same kind of irregular participation of children and young people in our Sunday church school and youth activities.

As I read and thought about this news story and its implications for First-Plymouth Church, it reminded me of a parable that Jesus told as reported in the Gospel of Matthew. “There was this individual,” said Jesus, “who drove an evil spirit out of his life, something like a bad habit perhaps, but this same individual left her life empty in the same way as one cleans out a house and leaves it empty, and she was pleased with the emptiness. Not long after, this same evil spirit was looking for a place to live and, seeing his former residence empty and clean, he went and brought seven of his best devil friends to live there with him. And,” said Jesus, “the last state of that person became worse than the first.”

This, of course, can and does happen to many of us. It’s a story that reminds us that emptiness can be dangerous.

Sometimes, as in the case of the study of why many children and young people do not follow in the footsteps of the faith of their parents, emptiness is caused in our children’s lives by our apathy or lack of commitment — by our poor example. And there are other times when emptiness takes place because of our conscious decisions. Over and over again, I’ve heard parents with good intentions say: “We’re not going to indoctrinate our children with any religious beliefs. Let them grow up and decide for themselves.” In other words, leave that part

of their life empty. But emptiness can be dangerous. If that is done, the parents should not be surprised when some unwelcome beliefs and values fill that empty space.

I'm convinced that a large part of the reason that young people become addicts to various fanatical cults is that they have a spiritual emptiness that is just waiting to be filled. If hungry people are not fed good, nourishing, healthy food, they will eat whatever else is available.

Emptiness can be dangerous. Here's a principle taught by Jesus that applies to all parts of our living. On a very practical level, we are reminded time and time again that if we are going to go on vacation and leave our house empty while we are gone, it is best to make it seem as if our house is occupied. Remember to stop the daily delivery of the newspaper and other kinds of deliveries as well. Don't let there be any evidence, even to the casual observer, that the house is empty. Don't pull all the drapes completely shut, and it's helpful to have an automatic timer that will turn on some of the lights in the evening to give the impression that the house is occupied. Why go to all this trouble? Because an empty house, like an empty life, invites all sorts of unwelcome people. It's an invitation to trouble. Emptiness can be dangerous.

Why is this?

First of all, there is a danger in emptiness because evil is persistent. It doesn't give up easily, and it looks for empty places to occupy.
In this parable and in other places where Jesus talked about the power of evil, he made it clear that evil is much more than the absence of good. It is a mysterious power at work in the world, always seeking to work in us, in nations, in institutions, and in groups of people. None of us have guaranteed immunity. Evil is always ready and waiting to move in wherever there is room. And above all, evil is subtle and cunning.

The individual in the parable got rid of one evil, which he recognized as being detrimental to his life. He cleaned it out and then settled down to congratulate himself on his action. But the evil returned when he wasn't looking, and worse than that, because there was so much room, it brought seven new devils along.

Evil is persistent, it multiplies in empty spaces, and it doesn't give up easily. Have you noticed that bad habits are easier to form and harder to break than good habits? Also, have you noticed that we can renounce the sins of the flesh only to fall prey to the more subtle sins of the spirit?

Adolph Hitler was a model human being in some ways — he refused to drink alcoholic beverages, he was a vegetarian, and he lived a rather spartan life. But seven other devils had moved into that empty house.

Some of the biggest swindlers and cheats in history have had clean personal lives on which they prided themselves. People with a lust for power, with an insatiable desire for fame and glory, with a desperate need to manipulate, humiliate, and harm others who get in their way, are the ones who cause the most trouble in the world, and at the same time, are the ones who believe they have gotten rid of the evil in their lives, and in the emptiness, seven other devils have sneaked in.

Evil is persistent. If we get rid of one evil leader among us, that does not mean we are safe from all other evil. Remove one devil, and if something good is not put in its place, seven other devils will move in. Yet many people still want to believe that if we could only put the evil

people we know about before a firing squad and shoot them, the house would be clean and we could all relax. But, as Jesus reminds us, the very moment we are cleaning the house, new and unrecognized evil can be moving into our own empty lives.

This leads us to a second reason why emptiness is dangerous. Not only is evil persistent, but in addition, emptiness cannot be maintained. A vacuum is a highly unstable condition. “Nature abhors a vacuum,” we learned in Junior High General Science. Something is always waiting to rush in and fill it, and it may be something we do not want and which is bad for us.
An empty life, an empty faith, and a spiritual vacuum are all invitations to trouble. It is not enough to know what a person does not believe unless that individual also knows what he or she does believe. We need to have solid basic principles that govern our lives.

Three years ago, I did a series of sermons on the theme, “Endangered Character Qualities.” The character qualities which I mentioned, and which I still believe are endangered in our time, are integrity, courage, discipline, vision, endurance, and gratitude.

We live in a time in which too many people have a spiritual vacuum. Spiritual vacuums are nothing new. Henri Nouwen writes that many people’s lives are filled yet unfilled — a gnawing sense of being unfulfilled underlies our filled lives.

The symptoms of being unfilled, of emptiness, are boredom, resentment, and depression. While we are busy with many things, we wonder if what we do makes any real difference. Boredom does not mean that we have nothing to do, but that we question the value of the things we are so busy doing. So the great paradox of our time is that many people are busy and bored at the same time. And that comes from our emptiness within.

This kind of unfilled boredom leads to resentment. When we are busy, yet wondering if all of our busyness means anything, we easily feel used, manipulated, and exploited.

Many marriages turn sour because of emptiness at the center. One of the many critical times in a marriage is when, after maybe ten, or sixteen, or twenty-five years of married life, a couple looks at each other and finds their marriage empty. And into this emptiness, all sorts of unwelcome guests move — extra-marital affairs, alcohol, drugs, and many more.

And this leads to our third point. The only way to counteract the dangers of spiritual emptiness is to be constantly filling our lives with that which is good and which is eternal.
It means such things as building good human relationships with people who will bring positive and constructive things into our lives. It means having close friends to whom we can turn when we need the love and support of someone else because tragedy or sadness has come into our lives and we feel empty. It means being a member of a church community that is loving and forgiving.

To counteract the dangers of emptiness means taking definite steps to build and strengthen our spiritual lives and not just sitting back and waiting for it to happen. It means letting God’s Spirit and power fill the emptiness that comes to all of us from time to time. As I said earlier in this sermon, it means such simple, basic things as being regular in our participation in worship. Worship is the process of taking time out to pay attention to our spiritual growth and development.

Such suggestions may not sound very sensational or exciting. However, preventative measures never seem as exciting as rescuing someone who is already in deep trouble. Rescue is always more dramatic, but it is short-lived.

Remember, God's love and power are always around us and within us. God is ready to fill any and all emptiness that we have, but God does not force it. We need to invite God's Spirit into those parts of our lives that are empty. God's loving spirit is continually saying to us, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in."

Amen.