Sunday, August 1, 1993
HOW TO CANCEL YOUR MEMBERSHIP IN THE "IF ONLY" CLUB
Luke 9:57-62

Isn't it true that, in one way or another, we are all members of the "If Only Club?" Some of us are more active in our membership than others. There are those who join the club and keep their membership going through regret, while others join and maintain their membership through envy. Still, others keep their membership alive through a combination of both envy and regret.

Listen to the comments we frequently make: "If only I had sold my house when that good offer was made, I would not have taken a loss." "If only I had kept those shares of stock a little longer and then sold them, I would have more money." "If only I had chosen a different career." "If only I had married someone else." "If only I had quit smoking when the doctor warned me." "If only I had not built our house in the floodplain." "If only I had listened to the advice of my parents." Or conversely, "If only I had not listened to the advice of my parents." "If only I had spent more time with my children when they were young."

All of these people and more have joined the "If Only Club" through their regrets.

"If only I had Bill's leadership ability, then I would be further ahead in my job." "If only I had inherited all the money that Beth did, then I too would be happy." "If only I could sing like Mary, or play golf like Alice." "If only I had the good looks and personality of Marie." "If only I had the sales ability of Henry." "If only my salary was as large as my neighbor's."

All of these people and others have become members in good standing of the "If Only Club" through the deadly force of envy.

Members of the "If Only Club" spend a lot of time regretting what they did or did not do in the past or being envious of the fact that they do not have the same talent, ability, luck, or wealth as someone else. They spend too much time looking backward instead of living in the present and planning for the future, and too much time in envious comparison of themselves with others.

In addition, because of the excessive regret and envy, most members of the "If Only Club" are afraid to take any risks or try any change. They are like the 92-year-old man who had lived in the same town all his life. One day a visitor said to him, "I'll bet you've seen a lot of changes around here." And he replied, "Yes sir, and I've been dead set against every one of them."

Another dominant characteristic found in members of the "If Only Club" is that they usually stand around waiting for that big break that will automatically give them instant fame, fortune, happiness, and all the things they want from life. They are always dreaming and wishing for someone else's success, achievement, ability, position, or talent. They are the people who claim they are waiting for their ship to come in. The problem is they haven't sent one out. Their ship has never left port. It is still anchored, motionless, afraid to leave the shore.

They are not like the merchant who went in search of fine pearls that Jim talked about last Saturday and Sunday; they expect the pearls to come to them. Furthermore, they might not even recognize a treasure or a fine pearl if they found one. They are too busy regretting or

being envious, too busy concentrating on what they do not have rather than being grateful for what they do have.

When one studies the life and teachings of Jesus, one discovers that Jesus was aware that what hinders many of us from fulfilling our full potential, which is connected to our discovery of the Kingdom of God, is our membership in the “If Only Club.”

Jesus said, “No one who puts his or her hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.” Jesus also said, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well.”

“I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.”

So if you think you might possibly be a member in good standing of the “If Only Club,” it’s time for you to cancel your membership. Then you will begin to experience the joy and the abundance that God wants you to have in your life.

Here, then, are some suggestions to follow so that you can begin to resign your membership in the “If Only Club.”

First, to cancel your membership in the “If Only Club,” be aware of the excessive use of the word “only.” It’s a sneaky, limiting word. We can be plagued with the very common disease of “onliness.”
Suppose someone asks you, “How much money do you earn in your job? What is your net worth?” In most cases, you would respond, “I only earn... I am only worth....” Or maybe someone else will ask, “What do you do for a living?” You might answer, “I’m only a teacher,” or “I’m only a lawyer,” or “I’m only a bricklayer,” or “only a homemaker,” or “only a saleswoman,” or “only a student.” Why the only? In other words, regardless of what you have or what you do for a living, with your use of the word “only,” your thoughts are subtly centered on what you do not have, or in the belief that what you do is not worth much, with the subconscious fear that you do not have enough or aren’t enough.

Rather, whatever you have in your life, or whatever you do in life, let it not be identified with an “only.” Instead, let what you have, your talents, your abilities, your possessions, your vocation, be the symbol of God’s goodness to you, God’s gifts — and be thankful.

Second, do not be afraid of taking a risk, of trying something new that will help you grow and stretch your potential. All things in life that are worthwhile involve an element of risk. We cannot know the outcome of every new venture we undertake.
Being able to venture forth and take risks means not being afraid to fail and to make mistakes. No one bats one thousand. Jesus said to one of the individuals who seemed eager to follow him—"Remember, foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of God has nowhere to lay his head.” He was reminding his would-be disciple that following him was to take a risk — it was no simple guarantee of an easy life with all things provided.

A third suggestion for helping you to resign your membership in the “If Only Club” is a continuation of the second — about not being afraid to take risks for fear of failure. When you take a risk, and in the event you fail, do not dwell on the failure. Rather, learn what you can from it and move on. Remember, we can learn more from our failures than from almost anything else.

One of the things that continually fascinates me about the game of golf is how much that sport reveals about life itself. In golf, one not only plays against opponents but against oneself. A golfer frequently becomes his or her own worst enemy. Many golfers are charter members of the “If Only Club.” Players will say to themselves after a bad shot, “If only I had not turned my wrist over quite so much,” or “If only I had shortened my backswing or not moved my head.” Golfers will sometimes then go on to berate themselves for the next several holes. It’s certainly helpful to analyze your bad shot to determine what you did wrong so you can correct it, but then one needs to move on and leave it behind. In that way, we are learning from our mistakes rather than dwelling on them.

The fourth suggestion for helping one cancel his or her membership in the “If Only Club” is to thank God in all things — even for your problems. I know that sounds strange, but it’s the key to getting out of the “If Only” habit. Every successful woman or man that I have ever met has faced many problems, failures, and setbacks. It’s what they have done with them that has made the difference.
When you begin being thankful to God in all things, then many times your adversities can be turned into achievements of the best kind.

There was a young musician who played in one of the finest symphony orchestras in Europe. Times were difficult, and jobs were hard to come by, and a position with an orchestra was a valuable possession. This young man was on his way up when suddenly disaster seemed to strike. He began to lose his eyesight. He was afraid it might be discovered, and he would lose his position, so secretly he began to take his music home and memorize it note by note. Soon he started in on the music belonging to other members of the orchestra, and after a while, he not only knew his music by heart but also that of all the other members in the orchestra.

He became one of the truly outstanding members of the orchestra, and still, no one was completely aware of the condition of his eyes. He had prepared himself for the future when he would not be able to see.

One night, the conductor became ill, and the young man was asked to conduct the orchestra. He approached the podium, took the baton, reached over, and closed the conductor’s score. That night, he conducted the symphony without having to look at a single note. He went on to become one of the noted orchestra conductors in the world. His name — Arturo Toscanini.

Here’s another story of a young woman and how she canceled her membership in the “If Only Club.” She was a young bride from the East who, during the last World War, followed her husband to an Army Camp on the edge of the desert in California. Living conditions were primitive at best, and he had advised against it, but she wanted to be with him.

The only housing they could find was a run-down shack near an Indian village. The heat was unbearable in the daytime — 115 degrees in the shade. The wind blew constantly, spreading dust and sand all over everything. The days were long and boring. Her only neighbors were people of Indian descent, and few of them could speak English.

When her husband was ordered farther into the desert for two weeks of maneuvers, loneliness and the primitive living conditions got the best of her. She wrote to her mother, complaining, “If only I had not come out here.” Her mother wrote back a letter which included these two lines: “Two men were in a prison cell with only one small window. One looked at the window and saw only bars; the other saw the stars.”

She read the lines over and over again and began to be ashamed of herself. She didn't really want to move away from her husband. Then and there, she decided to look for the stars.

The next day, she set out to begin to make friends with the natives. She asked them to teach her weaving and pottery. At first, they were distant, but soon as they sensed her interest was genuine, they returned her friendship. She became fascinated with their culture, history, and everything about them.

She began to study the desert as well, and soon it too changed from a desolate, forbidding place to a marvelous thing of beauty. She had her mother send her books. She studied the forms of the cacti, the yuccas, and the Joshua trees. She collected shells that had been left there millions of years ago when the sands had been an ocean floor. Later, she became such an expert on the area that she wrote a book about it.

What had changed? Not the desert, not the natives. By seeing her problems as opportunities in disguise, she began to resign her membership in the "If Only Club."

Four suggestions, and all from the life and teachings of Jesus:

First, beware of the excessive use of the word "only." It can be a limiting word for you, rather than a word that helps you to grow.

Do not be afraid of taking some risks so that you stretch and grow.

Do not continue to dwell on your mistakes and failures. Learn all you can from them and then leave them behind.

Be thankful to God in all circumstances, even for your problems.

According to Jesus, when we begin to look beyond ourselves and our own problems and find our joy in giving our lives away, then everything in life changes, and we begin to discover the Kingdom of God in our midst. Amen.