Sunday, September 12, 1993
WHAT'S ON YOUR LIST?
Exodus 20:1-20; Matthew 22:34-40

Can you think of anyone who has never said, "I think I'll make a list"? Everyone makes lists, whether they mean to or not. There are shopping lists, laundry lists, party lists, Christmas lists, address lists, and more. Yes, everyone makes lists — the man or woman on the street, the Census Bureau, the pollster, the leading magazines, and even the President of the United States. Remember Nixon's enemies list?

A few weeks ago, Parade Magazine, a supplement in many Sunday newspapers, had a brief story on Erma Bombeck's list of "10 Rules To Live By," adapted from a new book, The People's Almanac Presents the Book of Lists; The 90s Edition.

Here are some of her rules to live by:

Never have more children than you have car windows.

Seize the moment. Remember all those women on the Titanic who waved off the dessert cart.

Know the difference between success and fame. Success is Mother Teresa. Fame is Madonna.

There are no guarantees in marriage. If that's what you're looking for, go live with a Sears battery.

Not too many years ago, it was reported that a student asked historian Charles Beard this question: "Can you sum up everything you have learned in life in five minutes?" The historian said he could do better than that: he could do it in just four lines. Here's his list:

Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad with power.

The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small.

The bee fertilizes the flower it robs.

When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.

Lists are nothing new. They are as old as written history. Between 1792 and 1750 B.C., Hammurabi, King of Babylon, gave the world a list of 282 laws — a code dealing with marriage, theft, slavery, and other civilized matters. About 1200 B.C., Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, and while on the journey to the "promised land," God gave Moses the list of the 10 commandments, still revered to this day by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

The Bible is filled with lists of all kinds — a list of the 12 tribes of Israel and their descendants, the list of the kings of Israel, the list of the major prophets and the minor prophets, the list of the 12 disciples of Jesus, the Beatitudes, and other lists of the teachings of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount. The book of Proverbs in the Old Testament is filled with lists of wise sayings. We'll return to some of the Biblical lists later.

In 1885, when Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado was introduced at the Savoy Theatre in London, Gilbert proved very list-conscious and offered the public a memorable one.

Ko-Ko, the Lord High Executioner, had a list of people whose loss would be a distinct gain to society at large. Ko-Ko sings out, "As some day it may happen that a victim must be found, I've got a little list, I've got a little list, of society offenders who might well be underground, and who never would be missed, who never would be missed." Ko-Ko includes on his list of those who would not be missed—"autograph hunters, people with flabby hands... the idiot who praises with enthusiastic tone, all centuries but this and every country but his own."

List-making can be revealing and fun. For example, ask your friends to tell you the 10 people, or more, in history they would most like to invite to dinner. Who would be on your dinner list?

Or ask your friends and family members to make a short list of what they believe are the most important thoughts or wisdom that guide their everyday living — sort of their personal rules for living. Ask yourself the same question.

Or think of it this way: if you could pass on to your children or close friends a short list of the most important things you have learned in life — the things that add fun, joy, and fulfillment to life — what would be on that list? To get you thinking, here's some of what I would include on my list. They are arranged in no particular order of priority.

I think of them in the form of a circle, so all are equal.

Always park in the shade. Over and over again, I got this advice from my dad. And I have learned that this is not only good advice for parking your car or farm machinery, but on another level, it means using creatively what God has provided. Why park in the bright sun when shade is available? Take advantage of the restful places in life when you find them and when you need them. In other words, go with the flow of life rather than against it.

Turn off the lights when you leave the room. Why be wasteful when it's just as easy to conserve? Again, here's a principle that applies to all of life. We waste so much so carelessly.

Trust everyone, but cut the cards. Jesus said the same thing in another way, "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

Things do not have to be perfect to be good. In the same vein, strive for excellence, not perfection.

"Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." Jesus did not say, "do not plan for the future" or "do not be concerned about the future," but rather don't be anxious about it or worry excessively about it. Appreciate the present rather than always living in the past or worrying about the future.

"In all things give thanks." St. Paul wrote this advice in his letter to the Philippians. Notice he did not say, "for all things give thanks." The Bible is stressing the importance of a grateful attitude in all of life's circumstances.

Why is this so important? Not because God needs our thankfulness. Will God be disturbed if you do not return thanks? The fact is, it doesn't make any difference to God whether you are thankful or not. But it makes a lot of difference to you. God is too universal, too loving, to be

dependent on your thanksgiving. Meister Eckhart, the medieval mystic, probably shocked the people of his time when he said, “I never give thanks to God for loving me, because God can’t help it; whether God would or not, it is God’s nature to be loving.” Gratitude is not for God. It is for you. Giving thanks is an important state of your consciousness that keeps you in an awareness of oneness with the divine flow.

These are some of the things on my list of rules to live by. What’s on your list?

A few years ago, Robert Fulghum’s book, All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, became a best-seller because of the short essay in that book with that title. The essay contained his list of suggestions for living a fulfilling and harmonious life.

Here are some of the things he said he learned in kindergarten: “Share everything. Play fair. Don’t hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don’t take things that aren’t yours. Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and dance and play and work every day some.”

“Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the plastic cup. The roots go down and the plant goes up, and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.“

“Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the plastic cup — they all die. So do we.”

“And then remember the book about Dick and Jane and the first word you learned, the biggest word of all: LOOK. Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and sane living.”

“Think of what a better world it would be if we all — the whole world — had cookies and milk about 3 o’clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap. Or if we had a basic policy in our nation and other nations to always put things back where we found them and cleaned up our own messes. And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together”

Not long after Fulghum’s book became a best-seller, a writer for the Wall Street Journal asserted that Fulghum’s list was too sentimental and he offered as an antidote some truths one should learn in kindergarten but rarely does. Here are some of them:

“No good deed goes unpunished: One is indeed rewarded for good deeds, but only in the afterlife. So, a lifetime of patience is required.”

“If you dress like a slob, you are likely to think like a slob.”

“Marry in haste, repent in leisure: This is so plausible as to be obvious.”

“Marry in leisure, repent in haste: This revised version is directed at those young people who live together for years, then get engaged, then have an expensive wedding and soon get divorced.”

“Wear clean underwear in case of an accident: be protective of your family’s reputation and standing in the community.”

What’s on your list? What are your personal rules for living? I hope you have some and even more important I hope they are based on God’s list as lived by Jesus.

When God gave Moses the 10 commandments the purpose was to bring some order into life so that everyone could live together in peace. Rules like the 10 commandments do not exist for their own sake. No list does. The 10 commandments and other rules for living are necessary for creating an orderly society.

When Jesus entered the world, he did not repudiate the 10 commandments, but built on them. He said that he had come that we might have life and have it more abundantly. And in another place he said that he had not come to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfill them.

And one day when someone asked him, “Teacher which commandment in the law is greatest?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Are these two commandments on your list? Amen.