Sunday, July 2, 1995
I'll DO IT TOMORROW
Luke 9:51-62

Jesus, accompanied by his disciples, was planning a trip to Jerusalem, the Holy City, the capital. The best and shortest route would take them through Samaria. But for Jews, like Jesus and his followers, that meant traveling through unfriendly territory.

There was a lot of meanness of spirit between the Jews and the Samaritans. It was a long-term feud with lots of history behind it. In an attempt to avoid an embarrassing situation, Jesus sent several of his disciples ahead to try to arrange for a place to stay. They reported back to Jesus that they were not welcome. No one wanted to have anything to do with them.

This lack of hospitality made the disciples very angry, so they proposed a simple answer. They said, "Teacher, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" They wanted to teach the unfriendly Samaritans a lesson they would never forget — destroy them and their village. They reasoned that the best way to combat meanness of spirit was with a larger dose of meanness of spirit. However, Jesus would have none of it. Luke says, "Jesus turned and rebuked the disciples. Then they went on to another village."

It wasn't the first time the disciples had been tempted to deal with a complex situation with a simple solution and an overreaction, nor was it the last.

It's a problem we all face — the temptation to propose or accept a simple answer to a complex problem. When it is reported to us that crime is on the increase and that the "war on drugs" is being lost, simple answers are proposed — build more prisons, sentence drug users and dealers to longer prison terms. What's the best way to deal with evildoers? Lock them up and throw away the key.

Unfortunately, increased incarceration rates have been found to have only a negligible effect on crime rates, especially the drug problem.

The trouble is that simple answers do not very often work in complex situations. Dr. Jay W. Forrester, who was a Professor of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Nebraska native, after years of studying complex social systems and problems, came up with a hypothesis which is now known as "Forrester's Law." We're all familiar with Murphy's Law, "If anything can go wrong, it will," or as someone else said, "Jellybread always falls jelly-side down." Forrester's Law says, "In complicated situations, efforts to improve things often tend to make them worse, sometimes much worse, and on occasion, calamitous." Forrester discovered that we can often expect surprising and dismaying results from naive reforms that fail to take into account the many and diverse ways individuals and groups can react to even the simplest, let alone the most complex, change in the social environment.

A paraphrase of Forrester's Law is: complex problems have simple, easy-to-understand wrong answers.

Jesus knew that simple answers are seldom the best solutions to complex problems. They might satisfy our need for revenge, but the deeper problem remains.

What did Jesus do in this situation with the Samaritans who would not welcome him? He went around them. His main goal was to get to Jerusalem, and he wasn't going to be sidetracked with another issue.

And this leads us to the second part of this story from Luke's gospel. As they continued their journey to Jerusalem, Jesus met several individuals who indicated a desire to become one of his followers, but not yet. One man said that he very much wanted to follow Jesus, but first, he had to stay home with his parents, and then one day, after his parents had died, he would follow Jesus. Another person said that he too would follow Jesus, but he first had to return home and take care of some important business matters.

It's been my experience that most of us have a tendency to put things off, to procrastinate. "I'll do it tomorrow," is what we tell ourselves and others. Then tomorrow comes, and we put off whatever action we were going to take until the next day. We're also very good at making up all kinds of excuses as to why we can't start today. Tomorrow comes, and we find more excuses.

A friend of mine tells the story of putting on a sportcoat that he hadn't worn for a year or more, and in the coat pocket, he found a claim stub for a pair of shoes he had left at a shoe repair shop more than a year ago. He had completely forgotten about the shoes. Later that day, he took the claim check to the shoe repair shop and gave it to the repairman and asked whether or not his shoes were ready. The repairman walked to the back of the shop and then returned and said without hesitation, "Your shoes will be ready in two weeks." It's so easy to find excuses for waiting until tomorrow or the next day to make a change in our lives. It's so easy to say, "I'll do it tomorrow."

Maybe you've decided to begin a long-needed regular program of physical exercise, and you tell yourself, "I'll begin tomorrow or next week." Or perhaps you've decided to go on a diet to control your weight, and you tell yourself, "I'll begin tomorrow, or after the holiday, or next week, or before school starts next fall." We make all kinds of promises to ourselves which we do not keep.

Or maybe you tell yourself that you are going to pay more attention to strengthening and building your spiritual life. You are going to be regular in church attendance, but you keep putting off this important step.

I conducted a funeral for an individual who had died of lung cancer at age 55 and had been a heavy smoker. One of his close friends, who was about the same age, told me after the funeral service that he was certainly going to quit smoking because his friend's death had been a warning to him of what could happen. I saw him several months later, and he had not done so. I asked him about it, and he replied that he was going to quit next week. As far as I can tell, he hasn't quit yet, and that was over two years ago.

What is it that keeps us from making those positive changes in our lives that we know are going to be good for us? What keeps us from doing things today and putting them off until tomorrow and then next week and the week after, so that we never do what we know needs to be done?

First of all, we put things off and tell ourselves that we'll start tomorrow because to start anything new involves change, and any kind of basic change in our living is difficult for us.

Or to put it another way, deep down within us, most of us are afraid of any change in our lives. Change, by its very nature, involves loss and gain. We like to hang onto the old habits we have, even though we know they are bad for us. It's difficult to give up something we've had around for a long time. There's a certain security in keeping things as they are and doing things as we have always done them. Furthermore, it's easier and requires less energy.

When Jesus invited people to follow him, they knew that it would involve change in the way they lived. It meant leaving some things behind. So they put off their decision. They said they would follow him later. The likelihood is that most of those who said this never did get around to following his way.

Secondly, we tend to put things off until tomorrow because there's always the risk of failure when we make a change and start off in a new direction. Most of us are afraid of failure. Sometimes we even prefer to do nothing for fear of failure.

Joe Garagiola, former major league baseball star and TV personality, tells about a time when Stan Musial came to the plate in a critical game. As a superhitter, Musial was at the peak of his career. The opposing pitcher in the game was young and nervous. Garagiola, as the catcher, called for a fastball, and the pitcher shook his head; Joe signaled for a curve, and again the pitcher shook him off. He then asked for one of the pitcher's specialties, and still the pitcher hesitated. So Joe went out to the mound for a conference. He said, "I've called every pitch in the book, what do you want to throw?" "Nothing," was the pitcher's shaky reply, "I just want to hold onto the ball as long as I can." Most of us know how that pitcher felt.

Alcoholics who want to quit drinking have told me that they keep putting it off until tomorrow and then the next day and the next because they are afraid of failure. Yet deep down, we know that all things in life that are worthwhile involve the risk of failure. That's why Jesus cautioned those who said they were ready to follow him by reminding them, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." In other words, there's a risk you have to take in following the way of Jesus, and it won't always be easy, but it's worth the risk.

In another place, Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Try this experiment. Ask people, "Who were the great teachers in your life, and why were they great?" You'll discover that a couple of answers always rise to the surface. One is that the teacher was tough, that is, the teacher expected a lot from you. No one ever said, "I had this great teacher who was an absolute snap. Her classes were a breeze to get through, and she expected very little from me." The great teachers are always described as having extremely high standards for the students and for themselves.

The second response you'll get is that the teacher respected the student like a good coach respects an athlete. It's not a deal where the teacher demands that the student please him or her. Rather, it's where the teacher says, "Let me help you find your highest potential." A great teacher knows full well that you are just as responsible for reaching your highest potential as the teacher is.

I knew a teacher who would always begin the class by asking the students what they wanted to know. If an unfortunate student happened to say, "You are supposed to tell me," he would

say, “Don’t you understand that you are as responsible for your education as I am? If you don’t come here wanting to know something, it’s difficult for me to teach you anything.” Jesus wanted the kind of followers who were willing to take a risk and willing to overcome their fear of change.

Some people, instead of being willing to make a change that in the long run will benefit them and take the risks that go with it, stand around waiting for that big break that will come to them automatically and give them instant fame, fortune, happiness, and all the things they want from life without any effort on their part. Or they are always dreaming and wishing for someone else’s success, achievement, ability, position, or talent.

Thirdly, we keep putting things off that we know we should do and say, “I’ll do it tomorrow,” because starting something new is not always easy. In fact, getting started can be the hardest part. It’s easy to dream and fantasize about doing something, but then to actually begin to do it, that’s another story. We keep telling ourselves, “Now is not the right time.”

This story from Luke’s Gospel gives us one other piece of advice. Jesus said, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.”

Once you have made the decision to make a change in your life that you are convinced is God’s will and therefore will be better for you, then do not look back on what you are leaving behind with regret.

There are two kinds of regret in this regard — one is wishing that you had your old life back even though it was miserable, and the second is regretting that you did not make the change for the better earlier.

There are many things in our past which we cannot change in the present. What’s done is done. Leave it behind. It does us no good to beat up on ourselves by continually saying, “If only I had done that sooner.” You cannot go forward in an effective way if you are always looking backward. I meet so many people who are always unhappy because they keep saying to themselves and others, “What if I had done it differently in the past? What if I had not changed jobs 20 years ago? What if I had pursued a different career? What if I had not decided to become an engineer?”

People are always asking, “What is the meaning of life?” And I say, “I can’t give you an adequate answer to that question in the abstract. We are so small compared to the infinite meaning of the universe.” What I do believe is that you and I are free to choose to give life meaning. I can take that responsibility to make it meaningful by what I do, by committing my life to something worthwhile, here and now, today, by giving my life away, as Jesus asks us to do.

But you will not find this meaning in your life if you keep telling yourself, “I’ll do it tomorrow.” Amen.