Sunday, July 9, 1995
IN DEFENSE OF CLICHES
Galatians 6:7-10

According to one dictionary, a “cliché” is “a hackneyed expression or idea.” The word “hackneyed” means “grown stale through overuse.”

One example of a cliché heard every day is: “Have a nice day.” I heard someone respond to this overused statement by saying, “Thanks, but I have other plans.” Other examples of clichés are: “Do not make a mountain out of a molehill.” If you grew up on a farm, you were told to “Make hay while the sun shines.” If you play golf and your putt falls short, you’re likely to hear from your playing partners, “Never up, never in.” Or if you make a long putt, someone will comment, “Even a blind sow can find some acorns.”

If you’re having a difficult time in your life and can finally see some hope, another cliché is, “I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.” A pessimist’s response would be, “The light you see is a train coming your direction.”

Some clichés are nothing more than trite expressions. If you went to journalism school or took any kind of writing class, you were taught to avoid these. Some examples are: “aching void,” “acid test,” “litmus test,” “all work and no play,” “ardent admirers,” “better late than never,” “blushing bride,” “breathless silence,” “budding genius,” “busy as a bee,” “clear as crystal,” “conspicuous by his absence,” “familiar landmark,” “festive occasion,” “grim reaper,” “hands across the sea,” “last but not least,” “method in his madness,” “motley crowd,” “nipped in the bud,” “no sooner said than done,” “pleasing prospect,” “powers that be,” “ripe old age,” “silence reigned supreme,” “sweat of his brow,” “with bated breath.”

Following the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, an expression that was overused was “wake-up call.” During the Watergate hearings, we heard over and over again, and still hear now, “At this point in time,” rather than simply “now.”

Another type of cliché can be described as the use of “pompous or inflated words” rather than more precise language. In an effort to sound literary, the writer or speaker uses too many abstract phrases which sound good at first but have little meaning.

Here’s an example from “A Speech For Any Occasion” written by A. Parker Nevin of Princeton University:

“MR. CHAIRMAN, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: It is indeed a great and undeserved privilege to address such an audience as I see before me. At no previous time in the history of human civilization have greater problems confronted and challenged the ingenuity of man’s intellect than now. Let us look around us. What do we see on the horizon? What forces are at work? Whither are we drifting? Under what mist of clouds does the future stand obscured?

“My friends, casting aside the raiment of all human speech, the crucial test for the solution of these intricate problems to which I have just alluded is the sheer and forceful application of those immutable laws which down the corridors of Time have always guided the hand of man, groping, as it were, for some faint beacon light for his hopes and aspirations. Without these great vital principles we are but puppets responding to whim and fancy, failing entirely to grasp the hidden meaning of it all. We must re-address ourselves to these questions which press for

answers and solutions. The issues cannot be avoided. There they stand. It is upon you, and you, and yes, even upon me, that the yoke of responsibility falls."

"What then is our duty? Shall we continue to drift? No! With all the emphasis of my being, I hurl back the message, no! Drifting must stop. We must press onward and upward toward the ultimate goal to which all must aspire."

That's enough of that. It sounds too much like a sermon.

Bureaucratic language can also be abstract with its own form of clichés. Here's an example from a national church agency memo: "While no present or future optional shape of ecclesiastical operations will reflect a polar possibility in undifferentiated form, there are certain polarities which can serve as useful tools in projecting a shape of the church for the future.... Briefly stated, the rationale for such a stance is that the participatory quality desired can be attained more adequately by the collaborative style and participatory operation of the church agency than by formal constitutional provisions."

These are examples of clichés I am not defending. However, there are clichés that are folk wisdom and are annoyingly true. "A stitch in time saves nine." "The early bird gets the worm." "A penny saved is a penny earned," or as someone said to me, "A penny saved is a penny." "If at first you don't succeed, try again." "The one who laughs last, laughs best." "The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong." Damon Runyon did a twist on this bit of wisdom by saying, "The race may not always be to the swift and the battle to the strong, but that's the way to bet." Incidentally, one of my favorite clichés is: trust everyone, but cut the cards.

You can have a lot of fun with clichés by turning them around or giving them surprise endings. "Don't pay any attention to my husband," a woman said to me, "His bark is worse than his bite." Hearing that cliché one more time, I thought, what a wonderful thing it would be to meet someone whose bite is worse than his bark.

What an amazing tribute it would be to a public speaker, a political or religious leader, or anyone to have it said, "His bite is worse than his bark."

There's a lot of barking that goes on among us human beings. It's so easy. That's why so many meetings of all kinds that have a long list of speakers are like an aquarium at feeding time, with a barking of seals that almost raises the roof. It would be a surprising change to meet a mild-mannered person with a bark no louder than that of a shy and gentle Pekingese, but who bites without much or any barking and sinks her teeth into specific action.

The main trouble with barking — worse than the noise — is that if one barks ferociously enough, it brings on the illusion that one has actually done something about the matter. That is the danger of so many high-sounding resolutions at church gatherings. There are so many resounding barks and so few real bites.

What's all this defense of folk wisdom clichés got to do with the Christian faith? A cliché is a good thing, especially if it helps you to remember a truth without which you would be in danger.

In our scripture reading this morning, St. Paul used a cliché of his time to remind the members of the church in Galatia of an important truth: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow."

The teachings of Jesus have become clichés for many of us, but that does not diminish the truth which they help us remember.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

“In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you.” Or as I memorized it as a child, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (Golden Rule)

In our time, words such as “freedom,” “choice,” and “commitment,” have the ring of clichés, but they also point to a truth without which Christians or any enterprise will be in jeopardy. The essence of freedom is choice, and from our Christian perspective, choice is an invitation to commitment, to an ultimate loyalty to the God who deserves that loyalty — not in the abstract but in the concrete. God does not say, “Trust me and I will do great things for you.” God says, “I have done great things for you; trust me.”

But how is it that we can speak of freedom and commitment in the same breath? Are they not opposites?

When marriages or relationships break down, more than once I have heard one or the other of the parties say, “Oh, I couldn’t keep the commitment; I wanted my freedom.” This understanding of commitment equals bondage, obligation, duty, and responsibility.

I remember asking a new college student what she liked most about being away from home. “The freedom,” she said. She meant the freedom to go to bed as late as she pleased, to get up as late as she wanted, to eat what and when she wished, to dress, perhaps for the first time in her life, without comment or censure. She could attend or not attend classes. She was free to express the most outrageous and unfounded opinions.

“Freedom.” The word, the concept has become a cliché. Yet it is the most sacred of political concepts. At the same time, it is not the unambiguous thing our moral shorthand is tempted to make of it. We all know stories of prisoners who are freed from their imprisonment only to find that their new liberty in the free world is more demanding and dangerous than their old life in jail, and they long for the security of the jail cell.

A church leader in the 19th century wrote: “But what is freedom? Rightly understood, a universal license to be good.”

Freedom, as every struggling individual and nation learns sooner or later, is a means and not an end, and the essence of freedom is not liberation, as we so readily suppose. The essence and the expression of freedom is choice. You are free in order to be able to choose.

All of us know that many times our choices seem limited. We feel trapped. But no matter how trapped we are, we always have one freedom left, the freedom to choose how we will respond. It was Bonhoeffer who, while a prisoner of Hitler, awaiting his own death, showed that in his imprisonment he was free because he exercised the essence of his freedom by choosing how he would deal with his imprisonment, his imprisoners, and his death. He recalled the verse

from Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill; God's truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever."

It was said of Nelson Mandela that during all the years of his imprisonment in South Africa, for conscience's sake, he was the only free person in that country.

All of us are in the constant process of exercising our freedom, whose essence is choice. We are free even to make bad choices, to make mistakes, even big ones.

If the essence of freedom is choice, the object of freedom is commitment. How often I hear people say, "I want to find something to give my life to." Some see such ultimate commitment in the family, or to business, or to the government, or to a profession. People join the military because they wish to be part of something that demands their utmost best, and that is doing something ultimate and worthwhile. People believe in God for the same reason.

Although some of our conventional wisdom says we are anarchic, autonomous little individuals with no sense of each other or commitment and that we are driven by the idea of being number one, our Christian faith tells us that this is not the whole story. Each one of us is also searching for something worthy of our ultimate trust, our ultimate loyalty. The problem is that we often settle for a god or gods that are too small and not worthy of our ultimate loyalty and commitment — money, sex, and power are just a few of these lesser gods.

At the center of our Christian faith is the teaching of Jesus that to gain your life, you must lose it, give it away to something worthy; to be a winner, you must be a loser; to be free, you must choose to be committed.

Willa Cather, in her novel, My Antonia, defines happiness this way: "That is happiness, to be dissolved into something complete and great." She chose this phrase for her epitaph, and it is carved onto her tombstone in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

We are all God's children, and God gives us the freedom to choose the best, the ultimate, the highest. You are free to choose God. None of the lesser gods will do. Freedom is more than a cliché. The essence of freedom is choice; the object of freedom is commitment, commitment to God. Give to God nothing less than your whole life, and then you will be truly free. Amen.