Sunday, February 11, 1996
MISCELLANEOUS
Matthew 5:21-37

In the almost 42 years that my wife and I have been married, we have lived in eight different places. Fortunately, we have lived in Lincoln for close to 25 years and in our present house for more than 15 years. I mention this because moving to another location is hard work, and it's my least favorite thing to do. Each move means decisions have to be made — what to keep and move to the new place and what to leave behind, either to sell or give away.

People who are good at moving are those who are able to do a sound job not only in packing but in sorting things out and neatly labeling each carton with its contents — dishes, bedding, books, bathroom supplies, and more. Those who have moved a number of times also know it is helpful to write on the outside of each carton what room it is destined for in the new home — kitchen, children's bedroom, living room, dining room, garage, or basement.

In one of our moves when our children were young, my wife and I were trying to get things organized and decide what to pack and how to label it. Rowena was neatly putting things in boxes and carefully writing on the outside of the cartons what was inside. I was packing a box of our daughter's toys, games, puzzles, and a variety of other things she had collected. Not quite knowing how to describe what was in the box, I wrote, "Krista's Junk." Being the proper person that she is, my wife suggested it would be better to label it "miscellaneous" instead of "junk."

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that she had a valid point. Because it is a word of five syllables that comes from the Latin, "miscellaneous" suggests a certain respect for the objects so labeled, whereas things designated as "junk" could be considered objects of contempt.

Then I remembered that I frequently referred to a drawer full of unclassified things as my "junk drawer." Maybe you have one in your home. It's filled with a variety of tools, nails, pieces of string, glue, and other materials. The drawer contains such a confusing variety of items that they are difficult to classify. Now I call it a "miscellaneous" drawer.

I was thinking about this again this past week when I was working in my office on this sermon. Because I have to write a new sermon each week, I collect and accumulate a large number of illustrations, stories, and other ideas from a variety of sources. These are difficult to classify according to subject matter. A few years ago, I tried to organize them into categories so that if I was writing a sermon on "forgiveness," for example, I could find illustrations quickly. However, I discovered that it was almost an impossible process because most of the stories or illustrations do not fit neatly into precise subject categories.

So one day, I'd had enough. I grabbed all the remaining papers and now keep them in a large desk drawer called "miscellaneous." I was also proud of myself because I hadn't labeled it "junk."

Miscellaneous. Think of the millions of different objects that must be stored across the country in boxes and folders under the category "miscellaneous." What a powerful word to mean so many different things to so many different people.

Miscellaneous comes from the Latin verb “miscere,” meaning “to mix.” It describes things that cannot be easily classified or put into a definitive category. Some things seem to resist being put into order or do not fit into any narrow classification. There’s an opposite force at work. There are a lot of things in this world that tend toward disorder.

Years ago, when I was studying physics in college, we learned about something called the Second Law of Thermodynamics. As I remember it, in simple terms, the Second Law states that the disorder of the universe constantly increases. Things corrode, fall apart, break down, wear out, and become scattered. When the grandchildren are in our home, we understand this law in a very real way. We do our best to counteract the advance of disorder, and it takes a lot of energy to bring things back into some kind of order. But for some strange reason, it doesn’t seem to take as much energy to cause things to be in disorder. Does it take as much energy to mess up a room as it does to clean it?

It has been said that we human beings have a built-in tendency to want to bring some order into life. We are “ordering” creatures. That’s because we know that if we do not work at bringing some order into the world, all things tend toward disorder. They do not remain static.

We do have different understandings or definitions of what having things in order means. What looks like “disorder” to one person may be “order” to another. A messy desk to one person is an organized one to another. One observer put it this way: “Early in life, we stake out a little patch of the universe that we consider our own. Much of life is spent trying to put order in our patch by arranging things into patterns that are useful or pleasing to us.”

There are theologians who see our human propensity for bringing some order into our lives and the world around us as a sign of transcendence, or in other words, as a signal that God is at work in and through us.

The stories of creation in the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament describe God’s creating as bringing order out of chaos. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” Then the creation stories tell how God brings things into order.

Later on in the Old Testament stories, Moses brings the Ten Commandments and a number of other laws to the Hebrews. Their purpose is to bring some order for living together. Human beings cannot live very long in a state of chaos and anarchy. Any historical society is an order, a structure erected in the face of chaos. That’s what laws do — bring some order into society. In our form of government, we all agree that there are some rules we all need to follow if we are to live peacefully with one another.

Throughout human history, human beings have believed that the created order of society in one way or another corresponds to an underlying order of the universe, a “Divine Order” built into the creation by the Creator God that supports and justifies all human attempts at ordering.

Conflicts occur when we either over-emphasize order or no longer worry at all about disorder and let things go completely to pieces. There’s always a tension between order and disorder.

As I read the New Testament stories of Jesus, one of his biggest disagreements with the religious leaders of his time was over their demand for a tightly defined order, for an exact

classification of human conduct, for trying to have a specific rule for every situation, and their insistence on following all the rules to the letter of the law without allowing for any exceptions.

They even classified people into strict categories. You were either an unrighteous sinner and therefore an outcast, and they couldn't associate with you, or you were a righteous individual, one of God's elect. There was no in-between. By rigidly classifying people and not making room for miscellaneous, the ones who did the classifying became rigid and self-righteous. There was no room in their lives for experiencing or understanding God's grace toward them or toward others. God's grace makes room for both order and disorder. It encompasses the miscellaneous.

Jesus did not advocate doing away with the law or with order, but going beyond them. For him, paying attention to the spirit of the law was more important than the letter of the law. Listen again to what he said in that portion of the "Sermon on the Mount" we are considering today:

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them." Then he went on to say that we are not to relax the commandments but to go beyond them.

He gave examples: "You have heard that it was said to the people of old, 'You shall not kill,' and whoever kills 'shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother or sister shall be liable to judgment."

To emphasize the point of going beyond the law, Jesus said, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

We all know people whose quest for order and classification becomes pathological. Everything and, worse still, every person is put into some kind of category. There is no room for miscellaneous. A narrow label is applied to each individual.

A person is either Black or white, a sinner or saved, a nerd or not a nerd, a liberal or a conservative, extrovert or introvert. He's a grouch. She's a radical. She's beautiful. He's ugly. With one label, we can squeeze the humanity out of the other person and turn off our own humanity at the same time. Most labels are limiting. There are very few that can, in one word, adequately describe an individual. There are no pure ethnic or racial human beings. We are all miscellaneous. Therefore, I like terms such as "child of God" or "human being."

Years ago, an unusual event took place in a Broadway theater in New York City. It was Friday night, and the theater was packed for a performance of Tennessee Williams' play, The Night of the Iguana, starring Dorothy McGuire. Just before the curtain was about to rise, a woman in the audience startled the crowd by suddenly shouting, "Start the show! Start the show! I want to see Dorothy McGuire. I love Dorothy McGuire."

The people sitting next to her quickly moved out of their seats, not wanting to be associated with this mad woman. Ushers and the manager tried to reason with her. They tried to pull her out of her seat, but she pulled back and continued to shout, "I want to see Dorothy McGuire. Start the show."

After a moment of shocked silence, the people in the audience decided they had a maniac in their midst and they began to get ugly, booing the woman and laughing derisively and calling

her names. The woman turned to the shouters and again repeated, “All I want to see is Dorothy McGuire.” There was name-calling and the scene was edging toward chaos.

And then, from behind the curtain, Miss McGuire appeared. She crossed the stage over to the place where the woman was sitting and, with remarkable poise, grace, and kindness, extended her hand. Quietly, willingly, the woman took her hand, and Miss McGuire led her gently toward the exit. As they reached the end of the aisle, Miss McGuire paused, turned toward the audience, and said, “I’d like to introduce you to another fellow human being.”

The audience was stilled, their name-calling and taunts silenced by Miss McGuire’s compassion. The grace of God means that God does not put us into rigid categories. God does not put labels on us except “child of God” and “human being.” God does not have a junk drawer. None of us are junk as far as God is concerned. Miscellaneous, yes — different and diverse, yes — but junk, no. God accepts us in our diversity. God made us that way.

That’s what I like about the word, “miscellaneous.” It affirms diversity. It’s inclusive.

What is there in human beings that drives us to want to divide people into narrow categories or to define ourselves in a narrow way?

God’s creation is made up of a diversity of people — such a wide variety that we are difficult to classify. So when Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” he meant that we are to be more inclusive and less judgmental than the Scribes and Pharisees of his time. We are to celebrate diversity, and we do not need to be afraid of some disorder in our lives. Everything cannot be neatly classified, labeled, or put into a narrow category. Thank God for miscellaneous.

To experience God’s grace and for the sake of sanity, it’s helpful for us to remember that God does not put us into narrow boxes with closely defined labels, and we are not to do that either. Amen.