Sunday, February 18, 1996
WHEN TO LISTEN, WHEN TO TALK
Matthew 17:1-9

One of the best ways to make sense of your life is to think of it as a journey. You have an outward journey as you physically grow, mature, and change. You grow up, begin school, get a job, and some get married. Maybe you have children, change vocations, or move from one place to another.

You also have an inward journey. You mentally grow and mature. Your beliefs change, you encounter new ideas, you see the world differently, and you experience new people. You leave some old ideas behind, meet new problems, and your interests change. A large part of this inward journey is spiritual. You come to understand there is more to life than the eye can see, the ear can hear, or the finger can touch. You encounter and experience mystery. You learn more about prayer. Your concept of God changes. You rearrange your priorities. What seemed so important when you were younger is not as important now. Along your spiritual journey, you come to know doubt, certainty, ecstasy, and tragedy.

There are times when you need to take an outward journey in order to get back on track with your inward journey. In the movie City Slickers, Billy Crystal plays Mitch Robbins, a disillusioned radio advertising salesperson who takes a trip with a couple of long-time friends. At the beginning of the film, he considers whether he really wants to go — what with all the daily trials and tribulations of his life, he thinks the trip will be more trouble than it's worth. His wife disagrees, explaining why she thinks it's so necessary that he get away.

"You need to go find your smile," she tells him. She insists that rediscovering his sense of humor matters more than anything else he's doing at the time.

She's right. And over the course of the film, Mitch learns this too. He comes to understand the value of laughter and what a difference it makes to have a smile in one's heart. At the end of the movie, nothing in his outward journey in life has changed, but everything inward has. He still has the same job, the same family, and the same problems, but having re-found his smile, he is able to embrace them with a renewed sense of joy.

Many people today are in the same place Mitch was at the start of the film. They've lost their smiles. There's little or no joy in their hearts. Their inward journey has come to a standstill. They feel trapped, insulated.

On this journey called life, you never travel alone, although sometimes you might try to do so or think that you are doing so. You carry with you past experiences, memories, things learned from others, failures and successes.

In your journey through life, there are starts and stops, hills and valleys, detours and surprises. Sometimes you get lost. At other times you might wander aimlessly with no sense of direction. There are holding patterns and unplanned side trips. Sometimes too, you discover that you are carrying too much baggage on your journey, much of it unnecessary. There are other times when you need something but you forgot to bring it with you.

The Bible is filled with stories of people and their outward and inward journeys of faith: Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Elijah, Job, Jesus, his disciples, the Apostle Paul, and more.

Today and in the next several sermons, we are going to be looking at some parts of Jesus' journey and what we can learn from them for our own journey through life.

Jesus' journey, like yours, began at his birth. He was prepared for the journey in a home where faith in a loving God was central. He learned first about God from his parents, then his larger family, which included other members of the local synagogue.

When he was about 30 years old, he heard the preaching of John the Baptist and was deeply moved by it. He was baptized by John, and his spiritual journey continued as he wrestled with how he should carry out his ministry.

He developed his own group of disciples who joined him on his journey. One day, Jesus took with him three of these disciples on a spiritual journey of prayer. Why only three accompanied him on this brief journey, we don't know. Sometimes Jesus went alone. Maybe only three were invited, or perhaps only three accepted the invitation. Perhaps these three, like Mitch in the movie City Slickers, had lost their smile or needed to rediscover a sense of the sacred. It could be that the others were not yet ready for this step in their own spiritual journey. They didn't see much need for prayer.

Or maybe the remaining nine knew that prayer can be dangerous — it can change a person. It is well known that prayer is not for the purpose of changing God but for changing us.

Suppose through prayer you discover that what you really want out of life is quite different from what you are now doing? Who knows where prayer might lead you? You could become a tither to the church or do something else radical.

Or suppose through prayer you begin to take Jesus' words seriously when he said, "Do not worry about tomorrow, and stop worrying about so many unimportant things." There are those for whom worries provide what they think are safe boundaries. Their worries keep them from venturing forth or trying anything the least bit different or risky. As one person wrote, "Afraid of trusting the promise of an oasis, they defend the desert; afraid of feeling good, they shield themselves with anxiety."

"The truth is," the columnist Russell Baker wrote, "I don't feel good most of the time and don't want to. Moreover, I do not comprehend why anyone else should want to. It's perfectly normal not to feel good. In our drawerful of cultural biases is the conviction that unhappiness is the mark of sensitivity and intelligence."

Maybe Russell Baker is correct. It often seems to me that in our society, there is a tendency to think of gloomy people as being deep and especially thoughtful, whereas we tend to think of happy and optimistic people as being shallow.

It could be, too, that the other disciples had been with Jesus when he had gone apart to pray and nothing much happened. I've had that experience. We all have our spiritual dry spells. Sometimes you've come here for worship and you felt that nothing touched you personally. You were only going through the motions. Or you've tried prayer somewhere else and wondered if it was worth the effort. There's a certain amount of patience and waiting that is necessary in coming into an awareness of God's spirit in our lives. Life-transforming spiritual experiences cannot be manufactured according to a schedule. What we can do is to be open to them, to provide the opportunity. Then they occur at unexpected times.

For example, sometimes a familiar piece of music can deeply move us, and at other times, the same piece does nothing for us. It's like the saying, "When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear." I believe the three disciples who accompanied Jesus on this prayer journey went out of faithfulness and commitment. Their willingness to go along signified their openness and readiness. And this time they weren't disappointed.

Not only did they come to know God's spirit among them and within them in a fresh way, but they also saw Jesus in a new light. In their vision, they saw him with Moses and Elijah from the Old Testament. It's another way of saying that they saw him as the fulfillment of both the law and the prophets in their tradition. It was a vision of unity and connectedness that they had not experienced before. It was so overwhelming that they stood in awe at the glory of God.

And of course, they wanted to hold onto it. Peter put their desire into words, "Let's build three booths so that we can hang on to the vision." It's normal to want to hang on to those precious moments in our lives.

Then came the voice of God, "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." Pay attention. It will take time for you to understand what's happened here.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them some good advice in the form of a command: "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Two commands stand out in this prayer journey. The first is "Listen." The second, "Do not speak, do not tell anyone, until the time is right." The two go together. When to listen, when to speak.

You've known people who don't listen, and when they speak, they tell you too much too soon. Not only do they tell you more than you want to know about their successes, failures, illnesses, and troubles, but they also talk too much about their religious experiences.

Somewhere in his life's journey, Jesus learned when to listen and when to talk. Remember that incident in his ministry when a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery was brought to Jesus by the Scribes and Pharisees. They wanted to test him. "Teacher," they said, "this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?"

Jesus listened carefully, and there was a long period of silence before he said anything. The silence seemed so long that they asked him again for an answer. Finally, he stood up and said, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone." He knew when to listen and when to talk.

Like you and me, the disciples needed to learn more about listening. They had the tendency to act impulsively — so God's word to them on this journey was: "Listen to your teacher."

After listening and reflecting on what's been heard, we need to learn when to talk. In this story, Jesus advised the three disciples to "tell no one about what had happened on the mountain until after he had been raised from the dead."

You've known people who tell you too much too soon, not only about their religious experiences but also about their problems and successes. Although I don't regularly watch any of the daytime television programs that feature people who want to talk about their bizarre problems in public, it seems to me they have not learned when to talk and when to keep silent.

The same thing is true of some radio talk programs I sometimes hear on my car radio when I'm driving. One day I heard a man with great intensity share some deep dark secret that he had never told before. Then another caller came on the line, and she said that she never had trouble telling other people her experiences and her secrets. She went on to say that she called in not to talk about that, but to try to find out why she didn't have any friends.

The psychologist asked her if she tended to be very open with people from the moment she met them. "Oh yes," she answered. "Last week, for example, I invited my new neighbor to dinner. She was shy, so I began talking right away. I told her about my own adoption, my son's problems, and my most recent extramarital love affair. She listened, but she wouldn't tell me anything about herself. I saw her a few days later, and I asked her to tea, but she never showed up. What am I doing wrong?"

The psychologist said, "You need to learn when to listen and when to talk, and when you talk, you need to learn what to tell others and what not to tell."

Some people tell others too much too soon. They're always talking about when they were saved and how it changed their life forever and what they are going to do. Somehow it seems as if all their energy gets used up in talking about their spiritual experiences, and nothing much else happens.

There are times when we need to let the energy of the vision work within us before we talk about it. Let it incubate. The deep experiences in life — spiritual and otherwise — need to mature within us before we talk about them with others.

"Tell no one ... until." Jesus was saying, "You've experienced a mysterious and overpowering vision on this brief journey with me. You're not ready to completely understand it, so don't talk about it yet. You've still got some spiritual growing to do."

Jesus's counsel to keep quiet for a time takes the pressure off all of us who experience the incomprehensible and inconceivable in our lives. Death, tragedy, disloyalty, surprising experiences of joy and happiness — all are equally beyond our finite understanding instantly. Many times, it is better to sit in silence for a while.

The faithful mystics throughout history who have experienced some of the deep mysteries of the Divine speak of them prudently, reservedly, cautiously, and with difficulty. The deepest spiritual experiences are, for the most part, inexpressible. When they need to be told to someone, they must be talked about carefully, reverently, and with the sense that there is still much lacking in our knowledge of God.

The life journey of a Christian is something like that. It is frequently a gradual growth and training, a wading deeper and deeper into the truth. To be born again is only the first step. You need to continue to grow and mature in the faith — and learn when to listen and when to talk. Amen.