Sunday, June 2, 1996
THE PERILS OF EMPTINESS
Matthew 12:43-45

A few months ago, a father wrote an article about his son that appeared in the editorial section of the Wall Street Journal. Here's part of what he said:

"It's six a.m. as I write this, and I'm looking into my 17-year-old son's room. David is not there, having stayed out all night again. He doesn't work, and he doesn't really go to school. This is not to say that David doesn't engage in commercial activity. Once when he brought his 'products' home, we called the cops. They talked to him, took them away, and said they would prosecute in a year, after testing to see if they are what they appear to be.

Not that I think prosecuting would have done anything. The last time he was arrested, he was carrying all the gang's drugs because, at age 16, he's allowed to go on school grounds (even though he's not a student), and he wouldn't have been subject to the stiff penalties his older colleagues would have faced.

This is not to suggest that David is only interested in amateur drug dealing. His résumé includes some pretty nasty would-be class A felonies too.

Is this South Central L.A.? No, it's south-central Bothell — a nice suburban area north of Seattle. Am I an uneducated welfare parent? An angry white male? Hardly. My wife and I provide a full-service, two-parent home. I have a graduate degree and am gainfully employed. We've provided all our children with books, bikes, baseball, soccer, and martial arts. All the same, David has not attended school regularly since ninth grade. But he's a bright guy — he tests at grade level without going to class. And he can talk rings around psychologists, counselors, parole officers, and social workers.

When people ask me why I don't do something, I can only respond: 'What do you suggest?' Ground him? A spanking? He's almost as big as I am, and he has bigger friends. Besides, I don't think a violent response, even if I could deliver it, sends the right message.

One more thing, his girlfriend is pregnant. When David's child is born, he'll be 17½."

This is a sad story with no simple solution. Yet, there's something missing from this picture as the father describes family life. The dad mentioned all the things they had provided for their son — books, bikes, baseball, soccer, and martial arts — but he didn't mention attending church together or any other efforts to instill a knowledge of right and wrong, integrity, or a sense of personal responsibility in their children.

There's a book by Stephen Carter, a Yale Law professor, titled Integrity. Carter has written another book called The Culture of Disbelief. In Integrity, he describes his first lesson in personal integrity. He was in the first grade at P.S. 129 in Harlem. Here's what he said:

"The teacher had us all sitting in a circle, playing a game in which each child would take a turn donning a blindfold and trying to identify objects by touch alone. If you guessed right, you stayed in the next round. If you guessed wrong, you were out. I survived almost to the end, amazing the class with my abilities. Then, to my dismay, the teacher realized what I had known and relied on from the start: my blindfold was tied imperfectly, and a sliver of bright reality

leaked in from the outside. By holding the unknown object in my lap instead of out in front of me, as most of the other children did, I could see at least a corner or a side and sometimes more — but always enough to figure out what it was. So, my remarkable success was due only to my ability to break the rules.

Fortunately for my own moral development, I was caught. As a result of being caught, I suffered in front of my classmates — a humiliating reminder of right and wrong. I had cheated at the game, and cheating was wrong.

I don't remember many details of the public lecture I received from my teacher, but I do remember feeling terribly ashamed. The shame was so intense that it has stayed with me ever since. As I grew older, whenever I was tempted to cheat — at a game, on homework — I would remember my teacher's stern face and the humiliation of being revealed to the world as a cheater."

Unfortunately, many people, if caught cheating at that age or later in life, would feel no shame or humiliation. Why? Because they hadn't learned a sense of right and wrong, nor had they seen integrity modeled by their parents or peers. Stephen Carter was raised in a deeply religious home where church participation was expected, and skipping church was not an option. Carter goes on to argue that, in our culture, we care far more about winning than about playing by the rules.

This reminds me of another news story, which reported the results of a major research project conducted over several years.

According to the research, parents who want their children to develop a sense of integrity would do well to lead by example, attending church as a family and living lives based on deep religious principles.

Students interviewed at universities reported perceiving hypocrisy in parents who attended church only on certain holidays or special occasions, like weddings or funerals. The young people noticed a lack of discipline and commitment in their parents' religious faith, viewing it as a kind of leisure activity competing with other leisure options. In this competition, regular church participation often came second, third, or fourth. It was something to do when there was nothing else to do.

Reading the father's story in the Wall Street Journal and reflecting on the research reminded me of a parable Jesus told in the Gospel of Matthew. He said:

"There was a person who drove an evil spirit out of their life, something like a bad habit. But this same person left their life empty, like cleaning out a house and leaving it vacant, and they were pleased with the emptiness. Not long after, the same evil spirit, searching for a place to live, saw its former residence empty and clean. So, it returned with seven of its friends, even more wicked than before. And the last state of that person became worse than the first."

It's a story about the perils of emptiness. In the research I mentioned earlier, many young people do not follow their parents' faith because their parents' lives are spiritually empty. Without a solid foundation, there's no basis for building integrity.

Other times, emptiness is the result of conscious decisions. I've often heard well-meaning parents say, "We're not going to indoctrinate our children with any religious beliefs. We'll let

them decide for themselves." In other words, they're leaving that important part of their child's life empty. But emptiness is dangerous. If parents don't provide nourishment, something else will fill the void.

This principle of emptiness applies to all parts of life. If you leave your house empty while on vacation, it's best to make it look occupied — stop deliveries, set lights on timers — because an empty house invites trouble, just like an empty life invites unwelcome influences.

In our lives, emptiness is perilous because we all need the approval of others and the sense of belonging. That need can be positive if it draws us to groups that build strong character, like a church, but it can be harmful if it leads us to people who drag us down.

An empty life, an empty faith, a spiritual vacuum — these are invitations to trouble. It's not enough to know what a person doesn't believe; it's crucial to know what they do believe. The only way to counteract emptiness is to continually fill your life with trustworthy principles that guide your decisions.

How do you do this? It means building positive relationships with people who bring goodness into your life. It means having friends to turn to in times of need. It means being an active member of a faith community that offers support and forgiveness. It means testing your decisions against solid ethical principles.

Ask yourself: if your children grow up, would you want them to do what you're considering doing? After you act, will you admire yourself for it?

The point is, there is a person of integrity inside you, but sometimes it takes the right questions or thinking to uncover it. Your Christian faith is there to help you maintain integrity, even when faced with disappointment or hurt. God created you with the capacity to rise above your circumstances and overcome your weaker self. God is ready to fill any emptiness you have. And if your life is filled by God, your integrity will never run out. Amen.