Sunday, October 6, 1996
TREMENDOUS TRIFLES
Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-20

You've probably had this happen to you. The other day, when I took my sport coat out of the closet, I noticed a loose, dangling thread on the bottom hem. Instead of cutting the thread, I tried to pull it apart, only to find that I had hold of one of those running stitches. Instead of breaking off, the thread continued to unstitch itself until the entire hem came loose. Instead of freeing myself from one little thread, I now had a much larger problem.

Many times in life, it's the little things that get us into the biggest trouble. G.K. Chesterton called these "tremendous trifles." Life, Chesterton observed, does not usually present us with big temptations or grandiose sins. Instead, we constantly encounter little temptations that easily slip under the threshold of our levels of acceptance and tolerance. These little, apparently insignificant temptations nibble away at us, gradually compromising our integrity with each bite.

Human moral failure does not usually begin with enormous, glaring misdeeds like murder or armed robbery. Instead, we are far more likely to experience the gradual decay of our moral fiber through small ethical compromises, subtle misdeeds — tremendous trifles. Eventually, our standards of acceptable behavior slip lower and lower until we can justify almost anything as long as it benefits us.

Just as we can gradually lose our physical fitness when we don't eat properly and exercise regularly, so too can we lose our ethical and moral fitness when we don't pay attention to it.

How do we go about building and maintaining our ethical and moral fitness?

First of all, we need to know and build our lives on universal standards of behavior that will guide us in our day-to-day living and decision-making, just as we follow guidelines for physical fitness.

One almost universally accepted set of ethical standards, especially for Jews and Christians, can be found in the Ten Commandments.

One evening at a social gathering, a woman whose children were not known for their best behavior decided to give me her opinion on the failure of the church and schools to provide proper moral instruction to the younger generation. It's significant that she didn't also mention the failure of the home in this regard. Among other things, she strongly suggested that if all young people had to memorize the Ten Commandments, the world would be in much better shape.

This mother had a good point. As I mentioned last week, there's often a wide gap between knowing what's right and doing what's right. But we have to begin with knowing what's right.

So, I asked her, "Do you know the Ten Commandments?"

"Of course," she answered, somewhat upset that I'd dare ask.

"I wonder if you could name them for me," I replied.

She cleared her throat, mumbled a few words, and, in embarrassment, could only think of two: “You shall not kill” and “You shall not steal.” Our brief conversation came to an end, as did her good opinion of me — if she ever had one in the first place.

Like that woman, most of us have heard of the Ten Commandments, and most of us believe they are basic and solid rules to guide us. But I suspect many of us would struggle to name them all if asked. To help, they’re printed in their short form on today’s Order of Worship.

This year, one expectation we have for each member of the confirmation class is that they memorize the Ten Commandments.

Some of you may have seen the movie The Ten Commandments. One of the scenes shows God as a kind of divine drill or magic buzz saw. Moses, played by Charlton Heston, holds two stone tablets while the fiery finger of God writes the Ten Commandments in perfect Hebrew. It’s a sensational scene for a movie, but that’s not how ethical systems come into existence, nor how the Ten Commandments originated. They didn’t drop from heaven fully written, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t inspired by God.

The Ten Commandments, and the Old Testament, which contains several versions of them, emerged from the living, worshiping life of the Hebrew people and their relationship with the one living God.

All orderly societies need rules and ethical standards. The Hebrew people found that these commandments were fundamental to living together. They reminded them of their relationship with God, helped protect them from each other, and guided them in building lives of personal integrity and a sense of God’s presence. They knew these commandments were from God because, when they lived by them, the whole society benefited.

The first four of the Ten Commandments deal with our relationship to God, and the other six with our personal behavior and relationships with each other.

Let’s look at the first commandment as an example. It’s listed first because it’s the foundation upon which all the others are based. In its longer form, it states (and I’m paraphrasing), “I am the only true living God that exists. Do not worship any other gods except me.” It’s when we begin worshiping other gods — false gods like success, money, fame, or pleasure — that we get into trouble. This first commandment is probably the one we break most often.

Paul Tillich, one of the most perceptive theologians of the 20th century, often defined a person’s god as their “ultimate concern.” Your god is the reality that elicits your deepest feelings and utmost loyalty. Thus, your god might be your job, your family, or whatever attracts your strongest devotion. In that sense, every person has a god they worship. The question isn’t “Is there a god for you?” but “What kind of god does your life serve?” Does it give you freedom or slavery? Life or death? Does it diminish you or lead you beyond yourself?

There are plenty of gods available to worship. Which one do you worship? Ask yourself: Where is your first loyalty? What is the ultimate value your life is organized to serve? Where does your security rest?

Or, on a deeper level, consider these questions: Does your life serve a unified whole? Or is it split by divergent, competitive values, serving conflicting goals? If your God is one, there should be a unity that comes to your life through the worship of that "oneness."

If God is one, then there cannot be one law for people we like and another for those we don't. That's why Jesus said, "Love your enemies." There can't be one value by which we relate to our own kind and another for strangers.

Now look at commandments two, three, and four. They all relate to the first one: "Do not make idols of any kind." "Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God." "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." Set aside time to worship God and keep your life focused.

This leads to the second main point in answer to the question: How do we build and maintain our ethical/moral fitness? First, we need to know and build our lives on universal standards of conduct, and second, we need to consciously work at gaining and maintaining ethical fitness.

Notice how much ethical fitness is like physical fitness. You're not born physically fit. You achieve it by giving effort each day. Sometimes that effort is unconscious, natural, almost accidental, especially when we're young. I watch my grandchildren run and play, naturally exercising their muscles. Or watch a tiny baby stretch.

As we grow older, getting and staying in shape requires a conscious, deliberate, sweat-for-sweat's-sake effort — walking or other forms of exercise.

Reaching fitness isn't enough; you have to maintain it. And there's no substitute for real work over an extended period. Walking twenty miles in a single day is no substitute for walking regularly every day. Nor do you get fit by osmosis. Hanging around active people, reading books on fitness, or being a spectator at sports events can be worthwhile and even inspirational, but they don't cut it when it comes to staying in shape.

Keeping ethically and morally fit is much the same. You may come from the most moral, high-minded family in the world, and that's a help. You may have been raised in a community of honest, hardworking people, and that makes it easier to be ethical yourself. You may even have the good fortune to live with a highly moral spouse and work in an environment where your colleagues and superiors are inclined toward honesty, fairness, and respect. But that doesn't necessarily mean you're ethically and morally fit.

To become morally and ethically fit, you have to think about issues, wrestle with them, be mentally engaged, and practice your ethical principles day after day. It's a warm, supremely human activity that cares enough for others to want what's right to prevail. The best definition of ethics or morals I've heard is "obedience to the unenforceable."

A student of the anthropologist Margaret Mead once asked her to describe the earliest sign of civilization in a given culture. She expected the answer to be a clay pot or a fishhook or a grinding stone. Mead answered, "A healed femur." The femur is a bone in the leg. Mead explained that no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle reigns. A healed femur shows that someone cared. Someone had to do the injured person's hunting and gathering until the leg healed. Compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization.

Ethical fitness is something we all need to work on, and the best foundation for it is our Christian faith, with its emphasis on the worship of the one true and living God. This God

created every human being in God's image. If this God is present in every person, then we must treat every human being as sacred and holy. That's where all ethics and morals begin. Amen.