Sunday, January 11, 1998
HALFTIME
Luke 3:15-17,21-22

"Halftime" is an important break in those team sports that have a time limit on the length of the game, such as football, basketball, ice hockey, and soccer. During halftime, the competing teams go to the locker room, and with the coach's leadership, reassess their game plan and make the necessary adjustments for the second half of the game.

Our lives are only in some ways like a game and cannot be neatly and equally divided into two halves because the length of time for each life varies, and therefore, the first half could be longer or shorter than the second half.

In spite of the fact that none of us knows exactly how long we are going to live, halftime can be a good metaphor for examining your life.

In fact, in your life and mine, we might have several halftimes. For many people, however, the first halftime in life often takes place at the age of 35 to 40. Hundreds of years ago, it was earlier because life expectancy was not as long.

The halftime in the life of Jesus was at about age 30, although his second half was very short because he was crucified. At age 30, as we read earlier in the scripture reading today, he was baptized by John and then took his halftime break in the desert as he reassessed his life before beginning his ministry of teaching and preaching.

Whether or not Jesus, during those first 30 years of his life, thought much about what he would be doing later in his life, we don't know. However, if you're like me, during the first half of your life, you probably did not have the time or take the time to think about how you would spend the rest of your life. You finished high school, and many of you attended college. If you're married, you probably got married before the age of 35 or maybe a little later, embarked on a career, maybe had children, and acquired many things to help make the journey through life comfortable.

It's likely that you played a hard-fought first half. You may have been winning, or it seemed as if you were winning. But sooner or later, you begin to wonder if this is really as good as it gets. Somehow, keeping score does not offer the thrill it once did.

You could have taken some vicious hits in the first half. A good many women and men never make it to halftime without pain, serious pain — divorce, too much alcohol, not enough time for your children, guilt, loneliness. Like many good players, you started the first half with good intentions but got blindsided along the way.

If you're like me, even if your pain was slight, you are smart enough to realize that you cannot play the second half as you did the first. For one thing, you do not have the energy you once had. Fresh out of college, you had no problem with the fourteen-hour days and going into the office on weekends. It was part of your first-half game plan, something you considered necessary if you hoped to succeed. But now, you yearn for something more than success.

As you grow older, you also become more aware that all games come to an end. The clock is running. What once looked like an eternity ahead of you is now within reach. And while you do

not fear the end of the game, you do want to make sure that you finish well, that you leave something behind no one can take away from you. If the first half of your life was a search for success, the second half is a journey to significance.

It's also important to remember that the game is usually won or lost in the second half, not the first. It's possible to make some mistakes in the first half and still have time to recover, but it's harder to do that in the second half. In the second half, you should, at long last, know what you have to work with. And you know the playing field — the world you live in. Hopefully, you have experienced enough victory to know how hard the game is most of the time, yet how easy it seems when the conditions are just right. You have experienced enough pain and disappointment to know that while losing a few rounds is certainly no fun, loss is survivable and sometimes uncovers the best that is in you.

Unfortunately, some people never get to the second half; a good many don't know it exists. That's because the prevailing view in our culture has been that as you close out your fortieth year, or maybe a little more, you enter a period of aging and decline. This is a worn-out concept I refuse to believe, and if you believe it, I want to convince you otherwise. The truth is, you and I can continue to grow until the day we die.

I don't know where you are individually in your game of life, or how far along you are on your journey. I don't know if you are ready for the halftime reassessment or not. Regardless of where you are, I urge you not to accept the view that the second half of your life will never measure up to the first. It can be even more exciting and fulfilling.

Remember, the second half of the life of Jesus, although only three years long because of his crucifixion, was one of tremendous significance.

Here then are some suggestions from the life and teachings of Jesus that will guide you when you take your halftime break as you prepare to begin the second half of your life, whenever that might be.

The first suggestion is this: try writing your own epitaph. Saint Augustine said that asking yourself the question, "What do I wish to be remembered for?" is the beginning of adulthood. It's a very important discipline at any time in your life, but especially in halftime. It is, I should confess, a somewhat haunting thing to think about what would be appropriate for your gravestone while you are vitally alive.

A good epitaph should say something about who you are at the essence of your personality and your soul. That's because the things that stir within our soul's holiest chambers are gifts given to us all by our Creator, and these gifts vary from individual to individual. It's one way of expressing a conviction that human beings are more than animals or machines. It's an acknowledgment that God created us as spiritual beings with a purpose and a destiny.

One man I know quite well came up with this epitaph: "100X." It means 100 times and is based on a parable that Jesus told about a farmer who went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still, other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop — a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. (Matthew 13:3-9)

The man who chose this epitaph is an entrepreneur, and he wants to be remembered as the seed that was planted in good soil and multiplied a hundredfold. He said that the parable of the sower gets to the center of his dreams and to the kernel of his experiences. His passion is to multiply all that God has given him, especially his talents and abilities, and in the process, give it back.

He acknowledges that his own circumstances provided a moist and fertile soil in which he could grow. It was a fortunate environment. He was given far more opportunity for growth, personal development, and financial rewards than most of us. In that regard, he said, he was lucky, for indeed, he has been given much with which to work. But he believes, as Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much is also required."

The second suggestion for you to consider at halftime is to take the time to take stock. Following his baptism and experiencing the power of God coming to him like a dove, Jesus paid attention and went into the desert to take stock of himself, his past, and his future. Halftime cannot be a noisy place.

For many of us, the first half is busy and noisy. It is not that you do not want to listen to what God is trying to say to you; it's that you never seem to have time to do it.

Here's my personal illustration. When the Pastoral Search Committee of this church informed me that I was their first choice in the early summer of 1971, I was forty years old, and I took time to consider it. It was my halftime. I considered it quietly and prayerfully for 30 or more days. I took stock of my life, my talents, and my abilities. I consulted with family members and with close friends.

It is not unnatural, nor should it overly concern you, that sometime in your life, you feel the need to consider a change. The mistake most people make when they begin to feel this way is to ignore the voice that is telling them to stop and listen. There are many ways to ignore it. Some simply bear down, thinking that they need more discipline, more focus. Some turn to diversions, both healthy and reckless. Others enter a sort of sleepwalking stage where they force themselves to hold on until retirement. None of these approaches will make your second half better than the first, and may in fact make it worse.

If you are hearing an inner voice trying to get your attention, it is time to head for the locker room, catch your breath, and get ready for the second half — a better second half than the first.

The third suggestion for halftime is this: make peace. Too many people approach the second half of their lives with regrets over the first half. "I should have developed more relationships." "I should have spent more time with my family and friends." "I should have taken care of my health."

Regret is a tough emotion to live down: it haunts you in ways that will sap your strength and inspiration to go on to better things. Thus, an important issue in halftime is to make peace with your first-half set of issues.

This doesn't mean that you are proud of all you have done or that you would change nothing in your life if you could. Any honest look will recall several or a number of things you wish you

had done differently. The key is to keep these things in perspective and accept them as an inevitable part of growth.

A friend of mine recalls having regrets about how he and his wife raised their daughter. He expressed these regrets to a family acquaintance and took great comfort in this reply: “It doesn’t help much to dwell on those things you did or didn’t do in the past. At the time, you did the very best you could, given your knowledge and experience. You didn’t do anything intentionally to disappoint your daughter, even though now that you have the benefit of a few years’ experience, you can see how you might have done things differently.”

Since you cannot go back and undo past mistakes, you really only have two options. You can dwell on them and become consumed with the effects they may have had on your family and career. Or you can come to terms with them through God’s grace, accepting them as important markers from which you can learn something valuable for the second half. Halftime is not about beating yourself up for what you did not do, but about coming to terms with your failures and recognizing that you live under grace.

The Christian word for this is “repentance.” It’s a persistent theme in the New Testament and in the Christian faith. What is repentance? It is a willingness to admit our mistakes and failures and then to make a turn and start off in a new direction; to make a new beginning and leave behind our old bad habits, wrong thoughts, and disabling prejudices. Make peace!

In summary, here are my three suggestions for halftime. All of them are really part of one piece and are separated only for better understanding. First, try writing your own epitaph. What do you want to be remembered for? What does it mean for you to move from success to significance?

Second, during halftime, take stock and especially pay attention to your inner voice. What gifts has God given you, and are they being used in a way that gives your life fulfillment and at the same time makes a contribution to the world around you?

Third, make peace. Learn from your mistakes and leave your regrets behind. Accept God’s forgiveness, and you’ll be able to forgive yourself and move on.

Finally, remember this: it is never too late to move from the first half to the second. It’s not a matter of age but of choice. It’s a matter of listening to your inner voice. The more you listen to the voice within you, the more you are listening to God. Here’s the way Dag Hammarskjold described it: “I don’t know who or what put the question. I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment, I did answer yes to someone or something, and from that hour, I was certain that existence is meaningful and that therefore my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.”

I wish you God’s blessing in your halftime, whenever it occurs. Amen.