Sunday, June 28, 1998
QUICK SOLUTIONS
Luke 9:51-62

Whenever our plans are not going the way we think they should, or when problems seem to baffle us, we are in danger of settling for a quick solution or simple answer that, in the long run, may be no solution at all and may even make the problem worse. Quick solutions, and even not-so-quick ones, can create unintended consequences.

A few years ago, Edward Tenner wrote a book titled Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences. It explores what he calls "the strange consequences of nearly everything." Some examples:

- Laws protecting marine mammals have produced a sixfold increase in the sea lion population, with devastating consequences for their favorite delicacy, steelheads.

- The proficiency of smoke jumpers at extinguishing small forest fires has produced a "fire deficit" by building up flammable materials that feed intense fires, dangerous to many people who, encouraged by firefighting proficiency, build homes at the edges of forests.

- Federal water projects made America's arid Southwest able to sustain millions of new residents, and air conditioning made the region attractive to millions, including many seeking relief from allergies. But the water irrigated lawns, golf courses, and wind-pollinated trees and plants that the new residents wanted in order to feel at home — and which the water now made possible — caused the allergy sufferers to begin suffering again.

- A flood in Bangladesh in 1970 claimed more than 225,000 lives — partly because breakwaters and other flood-control systems, designed to protect lives from the ravages of nature, had encouraged widespread settlement of flood-prone land.

- An attempt in the American South to control fire ants, whose bites can be deadly, by dousing fields with pesticides instead killed off their natural predators, leading to an explosive growth of fire ants. They are uncontrolled to this day.

In his book, Tenner is not arguing against the use of technology. Nor is he saying that we should not seek solutions to difficult problems. Rather, he's making the point that we always need to remember that even with the best of intentions, there are often unintended consequences, and there are very few quick and easy solutions to life's complicated problems. To put it another way, we should be skeptical of the assumption that technology can always solve problems that are essentially human in nature.

Alice Hoffman's novel Turtle Moon has a character named Lucy, a young divorced mother distressed over the behavior of her teenage son. Reflecting on the complaints she hears from other mothers about their children's physical problems, she thinks, "There is, after all, strong brown soap for poison ivy, iodine for cuts and bruises, mud for bee stings, honey for sore throats, chalky white casts for broken bones. But where is the cure for meanness of spirit?" That's a long-term problem for which there is no short-term solution or simple answer.

There's a story in Luke's gospel about this issue. Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem. In planning for the trip, the best way was to go through Samaria. But for Jews, like Jesus and his disciples, this was going through alien territory.

There was a lot of meanness of spirit between the Jews and Samaritans. It was a long-term dispute with lots of history behind it. In an attempt to avoid an embarrassing situation, Jesus sent several of his disciples ahead to try to get room reservations for an overnight stay. They reported back to Jesus that no one would allow them to reserve the necessary rooms. So the disciples suggested a quick solution to the lack of hospitality on the part of the Samaritans: "Teacher, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?"

It was another way of saying, "Let's kill all the Samaritans in that village. That will teach them a lesson." They reasoned that the best way to combat meanness of spirit was with a larger dose of meanness of spirit. However, Jesus would have none of it. Instead, they traveled to Jerusalem by an alternate route.

It wasn't the first time or the last time that the disciples were tempted to use a quick solution to a complicated problem. More importantly, we still succumb to the same temptation today.

There are several types of quick solutions or simple answers that continue to attract our attention.

One type of quick solution that is still around is the kind the disciples proposed — force, raw power, kill those who oppose us or treat us with inhospitality. When it is reported to us that crime is on the increase and that the "war on drugs" is not being won, quick solutions and simple answers are proposed — build more and larger prisons, sentence convicted criminals to longer terms, and kill more lawbreakers with the death penalty.

Unfortunately, increased incarceration rates have been found to have only a negligible effect on crime rates, especially the drug problem. In fact, there is no evidence at all that our "war on drugs," as it has been carried on for the past twenty years, is reducing drug use or drug trafficking in the poor inner-city areas where both activities are so concentrated.

And there's another problem. What kind of society are we hoping to create by putting large numbers of people in prison for longer terms? What will these millions of people, most of them unskilled, uneducated, and often brutalized by imprisonment, be prepared to do when they emerge after ten or fifteen or twenty years in prison?

Lest you misunderstand, I don't have any quick or simple answer to such complex and long-term problems. I only know that there are no quick or simple answers, and that we need to consider many options so that in our haste we do not make the problem worse rather than better. Quick short-term solutions are not always the best in the long term.

A second type of quick solution or simple answer in dealing with a problem is to find a convenient scapegoat on which to blame the problem, believing that if we got rid of that one thing or person or group, the problem would be solved.

History is filled with examples. Hitler, in the 1930s, used the simple-answer-scapegoat idea to a large extent in Nazi Germany. He blamed most of the troubles that Germany had on the Jews. Exterminate this group of people, and everything will be all right. He even called it the "final solution."

Enough people believed him so that an enormous amount of tragedy and death came to much of the world, in addition to the killing of millions of Jews.

The fact is, every radical leader of the left or the right is a simplifier. He or she cuts the world down to fit his or her own shrunken self and proposes deceptively simple answers to solve all of our complex problems. A scapegoat is found who is the primary cause of all of our troubles. The liberals say it is the conservatives who are causing all the trouble, and the conservatives say it is the liberals.

It's tempting to use the scapegoat-simple-answer because it satisfies our own emotional need to explain a distressing state of affairs without implicating us. Then we are never part of the problem. It's always someone else. Congress blames the President. The President blames Congress, and both blame the Supreme Court. We blame our political leaders for offering simple answers and forget that we want to hear simple answers and quick solutions to our most distressing problems.

Not too many years ago, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was fashionable to blame every kind of problem on the Communists, implying that if Communism were not around, most of the world's problems would be gone. Now we know that's not the case. Some people even suggested that if we killed all the Communists, our problems would be solved.

Jesus knew that killing the Samaritans because they would not allow Jesus and his disciples to stay overnight in their territory would have solved no problems at all, but would only have increased the bitterness between the two groups.

We who are Christians are not immune from proposing quick solutions and simple answers. Following the shootings in different schools around the country in the past several months, I heard Christian leaders say that the main cause of the problem was the Supreme Court's prohibiting prayer in schools. Other Christian leaders have gone further and suggested that the reason our country is plagued with bribery, alcoholism, rape, drugs, pornography, sexual permissiveness, and much more is that prayers cannot be said in public schools.

To begin with, the Supreme Court did not rule that prayers could not be said in public schools, but that the schools could not require that certain prayers be said. As an individual, you can pray all you want in any public school.

I am as firm a believer in the power of prayer as anyone I know. I also believe that Jesus gave us the ultimate model and method for praying. Here's what he said in the Sermon on the Mount: "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others...but when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret...When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as some people do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

What Jesus teaches is that there are no quick, simple answers to many of life's issues. As Dr. M. Scott Peck says in the opening sentence of his book, The Road Less Traveled, "Life is difficult." In the sequel, Further Along the Road Less Traveled, the opening sentence is, "Life is complex." These are givens. Do not be misled by easy answers or quick solutions.

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Being a committed follower of the way of Jesus is not as simple as it might seem although sometimes the Christian faith is packaged as if it is very easy to screen out doubt, paradox, ambiguity, the dark night of the soul, limits and setbacks. “Accept Jesus as your personal Savior and all your problems will be solved.” But it’s not quite that simple.

Although being “born again” as a Christian may take only as long as a 15 second sound-bite. Staying “born again” is not that easy. It is a struggle against constant temptation which means being born again and again and again. All of the followers of the way of Jesus beginning with his first disciples have discovered that putting their faith to work is going to cost them something and they and we are not always willing to pay the price.

At age 51, Noah Adams abruptly decided that he had to have a piano. He didn’t know how to play, but he thought that buying one would compel him to learn. He didn’t just buy an old clunker or even an inexpensive new one. He invested in a new Steinway upright, a financial commitment that provided extra incentive to practice.

He discovered that learning to play was a daunting task. He found it difficult and frustrating; he couldn’t simply sit down and make the beautiful music he wanted. There were scales to learn and basic rhythms to be mastered. Initially he decided against going to a teacher, trying such shortcuts as “Miracle Piano Teaching System” on the computer. A friend’s warning proved to be prophetic: “You might be learning music with that computer, but you’re not learning how to play.” 1

Eventually, Adams signed up for an intensive ten-day music camp. He discovered that there is no substitute for regular, disciplined practice and the tutelage of teachers. By the end of the first year and many many hours of practice, his frustrations began to fade. He actually desired time for practice. There are no shortcuts for the worthwhile things in life.

There are no quick solutions to many of life’s vexing problems. Jesus taught his disciples and teaches us to beware of quick fixes. Beware of the person who says he or she can solve all of your problems or all of society’s problems with a few simple answers. Beware of yourself when you are tempted to settle for a short-term, shortcut solution to a long term problem.

We can learn from the example of Adam’s piano lessons. He began by simply trying to learn the basics so he could eventually play one piece of music as a gift to his wife. This did not dramatically change his schedule, much less his life. But he gradually began to discover that he wanted to play the piano whenever he could, and these desires began to transform his priorities and life. And even though it was often difficult, he discovered that a new and deeper joy had been added to his life.

That’s the way it is with following the way of God. Amen.