Sunday, March 19, 2000
REFRESHING SACRIFICE
Mark 8:31-38

This weekend is known throughout the Western Christian church as the second weekend in Lent. The old German word "Lent" originally meant no more than the spring season. Eventually, it was used to translate a Latin word that came to mean the 40 days prior to Easter, beginning with Ash Wednesday. Some historians believe that originally the time of Lent was only 40 hours before Easter but later became 40 days.

In some ways, as we shall see, the season of Lent is the most counter-cultural of liturgical seasons for at least two reasons. But why 40 hours and then 40 days? According to tradition, Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness following his baptism and before he began his public ministry. But, as always, there are precedents in the Old Testament. Moses fasted 40 days on Mt. Sinai. Elijah fasted 40 days on the journey to Mt. Horeb. The life of Moses is traditionally divided into three 40-year segments. In the Old Testament story of Noah and the ark, it rained 40 days and 40 nights. The people of Israel were said to have spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness before they were allowed to enter the Promised Land. These are only a few of the ways the number 40 is significant in the Old Testament. Why "forty" and not some other number, I'm not sure. We're all familiar with the saying, "Life begins at forty."

Earlier I noted that the season of Lent is counter-cultural for two reasons. First, Lent is about penance for our sins. Sin, of course, is a notion that does not sit well with our secular culture. Maybe Adolf Hitler sinned, but otherwise, we are all victims of maladjustment and cultural conditioning. Maybe, like the word "repent" we considered last week, we define sin too narrowly. Sin is an act against reason. In other words, sin is stupid behavior. If you are annoyed by the concept of sin, try this experiment: substitute the phrase "stupid behavior," and with that clarification, see if you notice instances of it in your past or present.

Second, the season of Lent is counter-cultural because it emphasizes a period of self-denial, whereas the culture in which we live emphasizes just the opposite — self-gratification. Self-denial is what Jesus was talking about in the passage read earlier from Mark's gospel when he said to his disciples and the crowd gathered to hear him, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will save them."

Like the word "repent," which I referred to in last week's sermon, and the word "sin," "self-denial" is frequently defined too narrowly and primarily in negative terms. We don't often consider the positive side of self-denial or what I call "refreshing sacrifice." Too often, self-denial is construed as puritanical and life-denying. Self-denial, as Jesus used the term, does not mean that enjoying life or finding pleasure in life is intrinsically evil. On the contrary, the great teachers in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament tell us that everything God created is good in itself, and this includes our passions and even our pleasures.

The problem is that we are strongly disposed to make inordinate use of the good things around us. We plot our comforts, indulge our appetites, and end up being consumed by the things we are consuming. So Christian tradition, following the teachings of Jesus, recommends a counter-action, especially during Lent. By setting aside a special season for emphasizing self-denial, it does not mean that's the only time we are to practice it. Rather, it's a way of reminding us to pursue it all the time. That's why we set aside all kinds of periods for special

emphasis. For example, we observe “Healthy Heart Month” to remind us to take steps to prevent heart disease all year long. One day in seven is set aside to be holy to remind us that all days are holy.

Sacrifice and self-denial can be refreshing. It’s similar to the rigorous training athletes and others pursue. People go to health clubs and work out regularly and watch their diets to keep themselves healthy, and they find that in doing so, they are refreshed.

When Jesus said, “Deny yourself. Take up your cross,” he is asking each one of us to do the same thing with our whole person — to become what we are in essence but not always in practice: free agents in full possession of ourselves, to not let us be consumed by the things we are consuming.

In his book, The Road Less Traveled, Dr. M. Scott Peck makes the same point. The opening sentence of that book is one of my favorites: “Life is difficult.” He goes on to say, “This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it — once we truly understand and accept it — then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.”

He continues, “Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead, they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy.”

“They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race, or even their species and not upon others. I know about this moaning because I have done my share.”

He then points out that discipline is a basic set of tools we require to deal with life’s difficulties and to solve life’s problems. Without discipline, we can solve nothing. What makes life difficult is that the process of confronting and solving problems can be painful. And since life poses an endless series of problems, life can be difficult and is full of both pain and joy.

But here’s the good news: it is in the process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning. Problems call forth our courage and our wisdom; indeed, they create our courage and our wisdom. They help us to grow mentally and spiritually. So wise people learn not to dread but to actually welcome problems. That’s what Jesus was talking about when he said, “Take up your cross and follow me.”

However, there are those who are not so wise, and because they fear the pain involved, they attempt to avoid problems. They procrastinate, hoping they will go away. They ignore them, forget them, and pretend the problems do not exist. They even take drugs to assist themselves in ignoring them. They want to avoid them rather than suffer through them.

There are people who will go to extraordinary lengths to avoid their problems and the suffering that goes with them. Sometimes they build elaborate fantasies in which to live to the total exclusion of reality. Carl Jung said, “Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering.”

Wise people, however, learn not to dread but to actually welcome problems. As I said earlier, that’s what Jesus was talking about when he said, “Take up your cross and follow me.” Welcome your problems, your obstacles, your sufferings. Take them and deal with them. On

the other hand, when we avoid the legitimate suffering that can result from dealing with problems, we also avoid the growth and the deep satisfaction that problems demand of us.

A few more words of explanation are needed here to more fully understand what Jesus meant by “life’s crosses.” There are times when we talk about taking up our cross that we mean something different from what Jesus meant when he invited us to do so.

In times of adversity, we’ve all heard people say in a whiny voice, “I guess this is my cross to bear.” One day I overheard a woman say, “My aging mother is a helpless invalid and is very dependent on me. I can’t spend much time away from her. This may continue for many years. I guess it’s my cross to bear.” And a man said, “I was injured on the job last year, and now it looks as if I’m permanently disabled. I guess it’s my cross to bear.” Although I have sympathy for such individuals, this is not what Jesus had in mind when he invited those who wanted to follow him to take up their cross.

We know how, in everyday conversation, people frequently speak of personal problems that have come their way as a “cross to bear.” Sooner or later, everyone’s got something to complain about. That’s the nature of human existence. But if your so-called “cross to bear” is involuntary, that is, if it is not something you have voluntarily chosen to do because of the self-denial that is involved and the meaning it gives to your life and the lives of others, then it’s not your cross to bear in the way that Jesus meant it.

Certainly, the involuntary suffering that many people endure throughout their lives deserves our sympathy and many times our help, but a better label for it would be their “thorn in the flesh.” That’s the metaphor St. Paul used to describe whatever disability or weakness he had to deal with throughout his life. We don’t know what his emotional or physical problem was because he doesn’t tell us, but we do know it was something he did not choose and from which he hoped God would deliver him, but he had to live with it anyway.

How, then, do we deal with the “crosses” in our lives, the problems we voluntarily take up?

What Jesus is telling us here is that discipline, which includes self-denial — that is, getting your selfish self out of the way — is the approach we need to solve life’s problems. We need discipline to handle life’s crosses effectively. When we teach ourselves and our children discipline, we are teaching them and ourselves how to suffer and how to grow through suffering.

Discipline can be defined in several ways. In this sermon, discipline has two elements: delaying gratification and accepting responsibility.

When Jesus said, “Deny yourself,” he was talking about delaying gratification. As I mentioned earlier, it’s not a very popular idea in our time. On the contrary, we are mostly urged to think first of ourselves, to pursue instant gratification, to buy now and worry about paying later. We are told over and over again, “You can have it all now.”

Why are there so many teenage pregnancies in our time? Because we refuse to deny ourselves. We refuse to control our appetites and desires. We refuse to delay gratification. Do it now, we are told.

Dr. Peck tells this story about one of his patients. She was a 30-year-old financial analyst, and she was complaining to him how, over a period of months, she had an increasing tendency to

do those things at work that gave her gratification and pleasure and never got to those things in her job which were equally necessary but which she didn't like to do. Finally, one day Peck asked her, "Do you like cake?" She replied that she did. "Which part of the cake do you like better, the cake or the frosting?" "The frosting," she answered enthusiastically. "And how do you eat a piece of cake?" he asked. "I eat the frosting first, of course," she replied.

From her cake-eating habits, they went on to examine her work habits, and as was to be expected, they discovered that on a given workday, she would devote the first hour to the more gratifying half of her work and the remaining hours getting around to what she enjoyed the least. Peck suggested that if she were to force herself to accomplish the unpleasant parts of her work in the first hour, then she would be free to enjoy what she liked to do the most for the rest of the day. "Isn't one hour of pain followed by six or seven hours of pleasure preferable to one hour of pleasure followed by six or seven hours of pain?" She agreed, and being a person of strong will, she changed her work habits.

Denying yourself, delaying gratification, is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with. It's the only decent way to live.

Denying yourself has one other component in addition to delaying gratification. Lest you misunderstand, when Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, he did not mean that we are to treat ourselves as unworthy. He did not mean that we are to put ourselves down as having no value. He did not mean that we are not to love ourselves.

On the contrary, Jesus saw the self as very important, and its importance is enhanced when it is aware of its connection with others and with God. To activate this connection, we need to consciously choose to commit ourselves to something greater than self. We need to have a higher loyalty than pure selfishness. When we make a commitment and devote our time and energy to a worthy ideal, then we are drawn out of ourselves and continue to grow spiritually.

If we do not commit ourselves to something greater, then we shrink and diminish, and life loses its meaning and worth.

Jesus knew, as modern psychology has confirmed, that each one of us is made up of many selves. There is our mean self, our selfish self, our unselfish self, our rational self, our intuitive self, our emotional self. There is the self that whispers, "Satisfy your every desire now. You deserve it." There is the self that urges us to do our duty, to accept responsibility. We have multiple personalities.

To deny yourself and take up your cross means that you are able to rise above your basic self and selfish desires and to connect with others and with God. Your multiple selves are drawn together into one. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

What we learn is that happiness always turns out to be a combination of pleasure and self-denial. Everything in life that produces true contentment — marriage, children, professional achievement — involves sacrifice. None is presented on a bed of feathers. Lent is a good time to work on the sacrificial side of the equation.

To put it in other words, when you begin to love your life, to give it away, then you win. You win because your self, your life, is stretched, pulled, and enlarged rather than narrowed, shriveled, and turned inward. It’s refreshing sacrifice. Amen.