Sunday, April 9, 2000
DEALING WITH TROUBLED SOULS
John 12:20-33

Today's sermon is about dealing with troubled souls — our own souls and those of others around us. What does our Christian faith mean by the word "soul?" It's difficult to define exactly, but here are some possibilities: a person's soul is one's inner core, your persona, your spirit, your essence, your character, your inner being, your identity, your total being — mind and body together.

What then is a "troubled soul?" When your soul is troubled, you feel off-center, out of sync, detached, out of focus, off balance, not in harmony. You wonder if you are on the right track or headed for the correct destination. You sense that something isn't quite right, as though you are coming down with something. A troubled soul can have physical symptoms such as a knot or emptiness in the pit of your stomach, a lump in your throat, an aching heart, a sense of extreme sadness, or even a pain in the back.

As Jesus was nearing the end of his public ministry and could sense the opposition growing against him, he said at one point, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, 'Father save me from this hour?'" (John 12:27)

Most of us can identify with his words, "Now my soul is troubled," and with his second statement, "Father save me from this hour." In other words, "I don't want to deal with my troubled soul. God, help me avoid it and find an easy way out."

The causes of a troubled soul are many. It can be a broken relationship, a lack of a sense of direction in one's life, facing a difficult decision, or the pain of loss because of a death, divorce, loss of a job, or a friend moving away. A troubled soul can come from a child gone wrong, a physical health problem such as cancer, heart disease, stroke, or an injury from an accident. All of us have had the experience of a troubled soul.

The crucial question is: how do you deal with a troubled soul and the pain, physical and emotional, associated with it? The initial temptation is to want to escape as much pain and suffering as possible. You can attempt to do this in several ways. To begin with, you can try to hide the fact that your soul is troubled and keep telling yourself that everything is all right. The difficulty with this strategy is that, sooner or later, your troubled soul will cause problems in some other way. And because it has been covered up or hidden for a time, it will be worse than if you had dealt with it earlier.

Or you can simply do your best to blame it all on someone else. You can say to yourself, "The fact that I am troubled and in pain and suffering has nothing to do with me. It's all someone else's fault." Of course, it may be partially true that someone else is involved. If so, it's important to figure that out as honestly and openly as you can and then deal with it. Remember, though, you always have to ask, "What is my contribution to my troubled soul?" A wise person once said, "Remember, no one can make you feel troubled without your permission."

The strongest temptation of all in dealing with a troubled soul is to try to stop the pain as quickly as possible without ever addressing the underlying causes. In today's world, with so many pain-killing drugs, that's a powerful temptation. But remember, as someone said, "Spray

paint won't fix rust. A band-aid won't remove a tumor. Wax on the hood won't cure the cough of an engine. If the problem is inside, you have to go inside."

Before proceeding further, let's clear up one misconception. There's a misguided expectation that we human beings are supposed to be happy all the time and never have troubled souls. What we learn from the life of Jesus is that none of us is immune to the ups and downs of life. Emotions — all of them — are the nuts and bolts of the spiritual journey. No matter how spiritually mature you are, like Jesus, your soul will still be troubled at times. Remember, too, that only if you heal from the inside can you begin to set yourself free.

The good news is that God has so created us that we have built within us a variety of alarm systems. On your life's journey, you need to pay attention to those alarm systems when they go off. Pain is one of those valuable alarm systems, and there's much you can learn from the way Jesus dealt with pain, even the pain of a troubled soul, as you travel your journey through life. The temptation is to try to fix the pain or the troubled soul by treating the symptoms on the outside, wanting to get rid of it as soon and as easily as possible, rather than paying attention to what it is trying to tell you.

In his best-selling book Anatomy of an Illness, Norman Cousins wrote: "For years we have had it drummed into us — in print, on radio, over television, in everyday conversation — that any hint of pain is to be banished as though it were the ultimate evil." "As a result," said Cousins, "we are becoming a nation of hypochondriacs, escalating the slightest ache into a searing ordeal." I remember especially one commercial for a popular painkiller that said, "When you haven't got time for the pain."

There are certain kinds of pain and suffering that you had better have time for because of the messages they are trying to give you. If you too quickly try to get rid of or avoid the pain of the troubled soul before you understand its message, you can make the problem worse.

Listen to Norman Cousins again: "About 90% of pain is self-limiting. It is not always an indication of poor health, and most frequently it is the result of tension, stress, worry, idleness, boredom, diet, smoking, excessive drinking, inadequate exercise, stale air, or any one of a number of other abuses encountered by the human body and soul. Pain or a troubled soul is not the enemy, it is rather a signal to us that something is wrong."

More often than not, a troubled soul is a messenger trying to tell you something you need to hear but do not necessarily want to hear.

There's another side to what you do with the pain of a troubled soul. You can also pay too much attention to it. Most people know that there are times when a troubled soul can deter you from doing something that needs to be done in spite of your troubled soul. The same is true of physical pain. Very few, if any, individuals feel like getting out of bed and walking a few steps following surgery. Those steps can be painful. But it's now known that if you want to regain your strength, you need some exercise even when it first hurts to try. If you pay attention to the pain, it can keep you from overdoing it, but it is also necessary to endure some pain in order to get well more quickly.

The same is true of the pain of grief. When a loved one dies, you can use your troubled soul as an excuse for not doing anything for too long a time. It can keep you from being with people and taking action that can be helpful in dealing with the pain of grief. By paying too much

attention to grief, you never get through it. On the other hand, to deal with the troubled soul of grief, you have to go through it, rather than around it.

During my almost 45 years in ministry, I have conducted hundreds of funerals and have been with an equal number of families and individuals as they have dealt with their troubled souls because of the death of a loved one.

I remember one funeral where a young woman, aged 36, died suddenly of a heart attack. She and her husband had been married ten years and had three children. After the funeral, I was alone with the husband in their home, and his soul was very troubled. He asked over and over again, “Why did this happen?” I had no adequate answer. Finally, after a long silence, I was able to say, “Howard, I don’t know how Sarah’s sudden death fits into the ultimate will of God. I do know that the main reason your suffering is so great is because you two loved each other so much and because you had so many good times together. I also know that God still has a will and purpose for your life now that this has happened.”

A little over a year later, I received a letter from Howard. He remembered little of what I had said at the funeral service, but he did recall our conversation after the funeral. He said in his letter, “I still remember what you said that day as we talked. You told me God has a will and purpose for my life in spite of the sudden death of Sarah, and you helped me understand why my pain was so deep so that I could face it, learn from it, and come through it. At least that gave me a place to begin, and I am now on the way.”

He also said that even though his suffering was still there, he would not have traded his ten years of a loving relationship with his wife in order to avoid the pain.

What more can we learn from the life and teachings of Jesus in dealing with our own troubled souls and those of others?

On one level, our faith, with its Hebrew Old Testament heritage, has always maintained that body and soul are one. We human beings are not simply mechanical devices like an automobile, which needs only mechanical repair from time to time. We are children of God with built-in healing capabilities, which, if encouraged and not interfered with, can go a long way in keeping us healthy.

Therefore, on our journey through life, we need to pay attention to our spiritual health as well as our physical health because they are closely connected. We are spiritual beings as well as physical beings, and when our souls are nourished and healthy, we can deal with the pain we meet in life more effectively.

So in dealing with your troubled soul, pay attention to your thoughts and your beliefs. Beliefs can set a tone for certain things to happen. Our bodies are very intelligent. They need to get their rest. If a thought comes along that says to the body, “In order to get the rest you need, you have to get sick,” the body will comply. Jesus knew this. Time after time in his ministry, he knew it was necessary to go apart for a time of prayer and rest.

Our bodies and our souls are linked by an intricate intuitive circuitry. Notice the pattern of any recurring beliefs or emotions that occur before an illness or some strong physical pain. They may be premonitions. Your body responds to your mind’s beliefs, conscious or unconscious. Thoughts such as, “This job is eating me alive. Life’s not worth living. I’m scared to death. I’m

so tired I could keel over," all can transmit powerful messages to your body, even self-fulfilling prophecies. It's your troubled soul trying to get through to you.

Pay attention to your beliefs and to the signals your body and soul are giving you. Look at it this way: learning never stops. On our deathbeds, we'll probably still have another issue to address. The universe is kind; it wouldn't consider depriving us of one last chance to grow. The objective is to develop compassion. Enter your most contentious emotions — fear, loneliness, alienation, or whatever is troubling your soul. If you stay open, you can learn from them.

There's yet another step in dealing with your troubled soul: continue to seek inner guidance. It's a form of prayer. The continued cultivation of your relationship with God is in itself health-giving. As indicated earlier, it doesn't mean that your soul will never be troubled, but it does mean that you will have the strength and wisdom to deal with it.

I believe that from the moment we are born to the day we die, we have guidance and protection all around us and within us. Call it what you will — God's Spirit, a guardian angel, a higher power, the power of love — we are not as alone as we sometimes imagine.

That's what Jesus continually tried to teach his followers. One day, when Jesus and the disciples were on their way to another village, Jesus asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" They answered, "Some say you are Elijah, and still others another one of the prophets." "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

Then Jesus began to tell them he would undergo great suffering, rejection, and death, but that he would rise again after three days. Peter didn't like that kind of talk. He didn't want to hear anything about pain and suffering. However, Jesus warned all of them that they had better find time for the pain, face it squarely, and learn from it.

He didn't want followers under false pretenses. Whenever you give yourself over to some higher purpose, or when you commit yourself to another person in friendship or marriage, there is both joy and pain. There are times when it is not possible to have one without the other.

If you have dreams, then you also need to be prepared for a troubled soul when some of your dreams are shattered. The other choice is to have no dreams at all and therefore no troubled soul. Above all, what Jesus taught and lived is that it is only when you examine your troubled soul that you can come through it. This is exactly what Jesus did. When we deal honestly with our troubled souls, it means that we are able to make sacrifices for the sake of growth.

Jesus said, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason I have come to this hour."

A troubled soul, pain, and suffering — these need not be our enemies but rather friendly messengers to lead us into a new life. Amen.