Sunday, August 6, 2000
CONTENDING WITH DISAPPOINTMENT
John 6:24-35

"Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life." (John 6:27)

Is there anyone here, or who is listening on radio or television, who has not known disappointment in his or her life? It is one of the oldest human experiences. Each one of us could make a list of our unfulfilled wishes or of outcomes never attained, seeds we planted which never grew into plants. Anyone who has hopes or dreams can identify with disappointment. As Alexander Pope wrote: "Blessed is the man who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed."

Disappointment is a problem which transcends economics. You can be well-off financially and still have all kinds of disappointments. You can be disappointed with your children, disappointed with your parents, with your marriage, in not reaching whatever goals you have set for yourself. You can be disappointed in your job, or in your friends or family members, disappointed because you want to have children but have difficulty in doing so. You can be disappointed because your life lacks meaning and direction.

Disappointment is a reality for all of us no matter how young or old we are. It is common to hear people talk about facing a "mid-life crisis." What is often involved here is contending with disappointment. A man or woman comes to the realization that he or she is not going to fulfill the dream in the way it was envisioned. There are times too when a dream is achieved but an emptiness remains. The question comes, "Is that all there is?"

Contending with disappointment is not an easy matter, yet there are all kinds of people and institutions peddling techniques which promise to solve our problems with almost no pain.

Look at all the self-help books that are near the check-out counters in supermarkets — each promises a better personal life through psychological intervention or attitude manipulation with little or no pain. If these mass-produced materials are to be believed, you can learn how to love in a few easy lessons, how to overcome conflict in your marriage, how to get a promotion in your job, how to improve your love life by following the few simple formulas contained in the text.

Assuring us of an easy, quick way to happiness and fulfillment, we are given the false impression that personal change is a simple, painless matter. It's the opposite of another old saying, "There is no gain without pain." Unfortunately, these fantasies can lead to even greater disappointment.

So in this sermon, we are going to consider this whole matter of disappointment in life and what the Christian faith has to say about contending with it.

What is disappointment? In the simplest terms, disappointment is unmet positive expectation. The word "positive" is important. There are some unmet expectations which bring us joy and satisfaction and not disappointment. For example, you might go to see a physician with the expectation that your symptoms will lead to a diagnosis of terminal cancer. You will not be disappointed if that expectation proves to be false. But most of the time, disappointment

happens when we expect a certain good thing to take place and it doesn't. We are disappointed.

What then does our Christian faith have to say about contending with disappointment?

First, our faith tells us that some disappointment is going to be a part of every human being's life. God has not promised anyone a life free of all disappointment. There will even be times when you are disappointed with God. Therefore, do not be surprised when disappointment occurs in your life. It comes to all of us, young and old, rich and poor, healthy and sick, married and single, religious and not religious. Even Jesus experienced disappointment.

That's because as human beings created in God's image, you have the capacity to dream of building a better world; to imagine improving your own lives and the lives of others. Having positive expectations is built into your inner nature. And when you have dreams, the fact is that all of them will not be fulfilled according to your desires. There will be disappointment.

Disappointment comes in many forms. Sometimes other people will disappoint you — your friends, your neighbors, your co-workers, your relatives, your children, your spouse. Events in your life do not always come off as planned. Your health may fail or deteriorate. And there will be times when you are disappointed with yourself. Life has an unpredictable quality to it.

On the other hand, imagine a life devoid of positive expectations, dreams, wishes, and hopes, and therefore little disappointment. It would be a dull, bland, boring existence — something like a stew without seasoning of any kind: acceptable, perhaps, but unexciting.

Positive expectations, dreams, and hopes all have the capacity to enlarge and inspire your life. They can lead you to attempt extraordinary adventures. They can help heal the sick and give hope to the hopeless.

Expectations provide you with a sense of direction and help guide you toward the future. They project you into the next day or year, so you are able to foresee what is required and respond accordingly. They provide a mental dress rehearsal of sorts, which allows you to prepare for a variety of contingencies.

We relish positive expectations because thinking about future events brings them to the present consciousness and gives you a delightful taste of what is to come. Expectation builds excitement. A young child is going to the circus for the first time. Her mind races with thoughts and images she has associated with the big top. She visualizes seeing lions and tigers, clowns and trapeze artists. She replays these images in her mind until she can hardly contain her excitement.

A young man is preparing for his first year in college. He daydreams about living on his own, the stimulating classes, and the formation of new friendships. He envisions himself as very adult and wise.

However, to have dreams, visions, and expectations is to open yourself to some disappointments. Your dreams are not always realized.

Sam Keen wrote: "Life is not a bowl of librium. And a good part of the secret of happiness lies in learning to suffer with dignity. Loneliness, loss, disappointment, failure, disease, boredom

are unavoidable. To think otherwise is illusion or neurosis. Even if you jog, eat health foods, grow, meditate, and go to confession regularly, you will sometimes fall sick."

Second, even though disappointment will come to everyone in varying degrees, some can be avoided or at least modified, and that involves changing or being flexible with your dreams and expectations.

Do not set your aspirations in concrete so that they cannot be moved or modified. No dreams are sacrosanct. Few involve matters of life and death, and none are irreplaceable. As important as expectations or goals are in general in helping us to function creatively in this world, no single hoped-for outcome is essential. Remember that expectations are nothing more than wishes or anticipation. Don't empower them with royal treatment or see them as permanent fixtures that cannot be removed or changed. In religious terms, don't make a god out of your expectations and dreams and worship them. Jesus said, "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life."

Thus a key to reducing disappointment is a willingness to give up what you want when you can't get it. Some expectations are completely unrealistic. For example, for me to expect to earn my living as a professional golfer is foolish. Though I might dream about it or wish it to be true, if I hold onto this expectation, you can be sure I am going to be disappointed. And the more I invest in this expectation, the more disappointment I will experience. So I need to let go of that fantasy.

Too many of us are overly invested in particular expectations. The longer you hold onto them when they are totally unreasonable, the more suffering and disappointment there will be.

The well-known prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr fits here: "O God, give us serenity to accept what cannot be changed, courage to change what should be changed, and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

A dancer who, after years of preparing for her career, suffered an injury to her knee that left her unable to continue. Her disappointment was monumental. She saw her whole life as a preparation for a journey that was now impossible to take. Dismayed and despairing, she defended against similar circumstances by not allowing herself any strong expectation of another kind. She became blase and indifferent, almost frozen in her rigid defense. Only by wanting to risk again was she able to overcome her despair and disappointment.

Remember too that surrendering a particular dream does not mean surrendering yourself. You continue to exist long after you give up the desire for a specific outcome.

Third, it helps in dealing with disappointment to trim down the number of your expectations. Beyond the trivial, most people carry around too many explicit expectations. Not only can you have too many desires and therefore open yourself to too many disappointments, but you can act as if the fulfillment of each one of them is as important as life itself. As I said earlier, you can make the fulfillment of your dreams equal to God.

Thus far, I have mentioned three ways of contending with disappointment according to our Christian faith:

Disappointment, of one kind or another, is going to be a part of your life. It comes to everyone.

Some disappointments can be avoided or modified by your willingness to change and modify your expectations or dreams along the way.
Be willing to reduce the number of your expectations. You could have too many. As you go about reducing them, you can separate the realistic from the unrealistic.
Fourth, our text tells us, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life.” Some of our dreams and expectations, even if you attain them, aren’t worth very much. They have no lasting power. There are people who spend all their time and energy working for goals that perish. Then they lose either way — if they succeed in fulfilling their dream, it perishes quickly, and if they don’t get it, they are very disappointed.

I still recall a book I read years ago. It was the true story of the Bradshaw family in Salt Lake City, Utah. The patriarch of the family, Franklin Bradshaw, had a desire to achieve that was so consuming that he worked every day of the year, not even making time to attend his three daughters’ weddings. In the process, he became one of the richest men in Utah, but everything else around him became tragedy. The family became a battleground, which extended even to the grandchildren. One Sunday morning in July 1978, Franklin Bradshaw, then 76, was shot to death by one of his grandsons, and later investigation showed that the murder had been planned by one of his daughters — the motive, to get her inheritance sooner. Today, the daughter and her son are still in prison, and the rest of the family has disintegrated. All the “food” they labored for has perished.

What is the food that does not perish that we can labor for? To put it most simply — it is love. “Love God and love your neighbor as yourself,” as Jesus stated it. You begin to experience the love of God in the practice of loving others. The two cannot be separated. The more we become aware of our connection with God and with one another, the more we will be able to overcome disappointment in life. It’s that simple and that complicated.

It’s complicated because love requires responsibility. The forty-one-year-old husband and father who walks out on his family because he feels suffocated with mortgage payments and being tied down thinks he’s breaking out to happiness. So, he leaves his family, sells the station wagon, buys a sports car, moves into a singles complex, and grows a beard. He thinks he is going to gain happiness by shedding his responsibilities. The real key to the love the Bible is talking about is maintaining responsibility in your ongoing relationship with people who depend on you.

The key ingredient for finding fulfillment in life and thereby being able to handle life’s difficulties and problems is an ongoing loving relationship with other human beings and therefore with God. Some weeks back in the sermon entitled, “Bowling Alone,” I spoke of all the research that demonstrates that when we are in loving relationships with other people, all of life is better. It is the one food that doesn’t perish. Amen.