Sunday, July 1, 2001
**SIMPLE ANSWERS**
Luke 9:51-62

When you plan a trip, it's a good idea to consider what dangers or obstacles you could encounter along the way. Jesus, accompanied by his disciples, was planning a trip to Jerusalem. The best and shortest route would take them through Samaria. But for Jews like Jesus and his followers, that meant traveling through unfriendly territory.

There was a lot of animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews. It was a long-term feud going back into history. In an attempt to avoid an embarrassing situation, Jesus sent several of his disciples ahead into a Samaritan village to see if they could arrange for lodging and food. He was also planning to extend his ministry to these outsiders, as he had previously done with other outcasts.

The disciples who tried to arrange for lodging and food reported back to Jesus that they were not welcome. No one wanted to have anything to do with them. You can almost appreciate the anger of James and John over the refusal of hospitality by the Samaritans toward Jesus and them. They were being protective and didn't know how to handle rejection. So they proposed a simple answer. They said, "Teacher, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

They wanted to teach the unfriendly Samaritans a lesson they would never forget — kill all of them and destroy their village. They reasoned that the best way to combat meanness of spirit was with a larger dose of meanness of spirit. Jesus, however, refused their suggestion. Luke says, "Jesus turned and rebuked them." Instead, he chose an alternate route and went on to another village on his way to Jerusalem.

This wasn't the first time the disciples had been tempted to deal with a complex situation with a simple solution and an overreaction, nor was it the last.

It's a problem we all confront — the temptation to propose or accept a simple answer or a quick solution to a complex problem. For example, when it's reported that crime is on the rise or that the "war on drugs" is being lost, simple answers are proposed: build more prisons, sentence drug users and dealers to longer prison terms. What's the best way to deal with any lawbreaker? Lock them up and throw away the key.

Unfortunately, increased incarceration rates have been found to have only a negligible effect on crime rates, especially on the drug problem. All of the research I've seen indicates that the increased use of the death penalty has also had little or no effect on crime rates.

And there's another problem with simple answers: 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?

Another example: we keep hearing from the news and politicians of both major parties that there is an "education problem" in this country. As far as I can tell, the "education problem" is never very clearly defined. Yet simple solutions are proposed for this general and often complex issue. One simple answer: mandatory testing. You're probably much smarter than I

am, but I don't understand how that will solve whatever the education problem is. But the simple answer sounds so good and easy to put into practice.

I think one reason we are so attracted to simple answers, in addition to the fact that they are simple and therefore sound good and reasonable, is that we are in a hurry to solve the problem. Or to use one of the popular and overused clichés of the day, "We are seeking closure," whatever that means. I don't know where the current usage of this word or phrase originated. The contemporary use of the term, however, is now applied sloppily to things in one's personal life and to simple solutions for complex social problems.

It's an example of certain words and phrases that creep into our daily lives, taking over our patterns of speech until it seems as if they are almost indispensable when, in fact, they are often trite and misleading. And yet they will not go away. In fact, they seem to grow stronger with repetition. The more we use them, the more we also come to accept what they mean as something good. For example, we talk about "seeking closure" as if that is always a good thing to achieve, when in fact sometimes it is not.

For example, the disciples assumed that if all the Samaritans were killed in that village because they were unwilling to be hospitable to Jesus, that would achieve "closure" on the problem of the hatred between the Samaritans and the Jews. They were wrong. There is no closure on the problem of hate simply by killing people. Simple solutions to complex problems never achieve closure. They often have unintended consequences and only make the problem worse. There are many problems for which we will never find total closure.

Speaking of overused words and phrases, another one is: "getting on with my life." This handy phrase may be properly used by accident victims, grieving widows or widowers, or others who have suffered the death of a loved one or some other tragedy. It presumes that the life in question has an identifiable course or pattern that the one using the phrase plans to resume after a disruption, and that's a good thing to do.

Unfortunately, the phrase is now frequently overused by people who have little or no idea what their next move will be. I am convinced the disciples could have used this phrase in that manner: "Let's kill the Samaritans so we can get on with our lives," but they had no idea what their next move would be. What people today often mean with this phrase is, "Yes, I've been selfish and cruel, and I've certainly fouled up the lives of a lot of people around me, but I'm not going to think about that. I'm going to act as if everything is OK and get on with my life." It's another example of a simple answer to a complex problem.

And since I'm talking about overused clichés that are misleading and that imply simple answers to complex problems, here's another one: "I've gotta do what I've gotta do." This purposeful-sounding expression also seems to justify behavior of any kind. In the background is the implication: "I've gotta do what I've gotta do to survive."

Certainly, it's true that people in extreme circumstances — war zones, prison camps, and other extreme conditions — might have to resort to extreme measures to survive. But now the phrase is used by people in circumstances where the goal is nothing as basic as survival. People do what they "gotta do" in order to land a contract, ignore an obligation, advance a career, or just "feel good about themselves." This expression, when overused, can imply a simple answer to a complex problem.

Here's one more: "I'll always be there for you." It sounds reassuring. But it is usually the expression most commonly uttered by someone who is leaving rather than embarking on a relationship. When a husband and wife decide to divorce, so that each one can "get on with my life," it is now customary for at least one to assure the other: "But you know I'll always be there for you." The fact is that he or she does not know that. Clearly, the phrase "I'll always be there for you" is contrary to fact, for if he were really committed to "being there for her," he would not be leaving her to "get on with his life." The real meaning is: believe in my eternal good intentions, but don't expect anything from me.

Another kind of simple answer in dealing with a problem is to find a convenient scapegoat on which to blame the problem. Then you can conclude that if you get rid of that one cause or person or group, the problem will be solved and closure will be achieved. History is filled with examples. Hitler in the 1930s and '40s used the simple-answer scapegoat idea to a large extent in Nazi Germany. He blamed most of Germany's troubles on the Jews. Exterminate this group of people, and everything will be all right. He even called it the "final solution." Enough people bought the idea that an enormous amount of tragedy and death came to much of the world.

The fact is that every radical leader of the left or the right is one who oversimplifies. He or she cuts the world down to fit his own shrunken self and proposes deceptively simple answers to solve our most complex problems. Frequently, a scapegoat is found who is the primary cause of all our troubles.

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 ourselves. 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 leaders for offering simple answers and forget that we want to hear simple answers and quick solutions to our most distressing problems.

The big problem, and Jesus knew this, is that simple answers do not work very well in most situations and, in fact, frequently make the problem worse. Dr. Jay W. Forrester, who was a professor of management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Nebraska native, after years of studying complex social systems and problems, came up with a hypothesis known as "Forrester's Law." We're all familiar with Murphy's Law: "If anything can go wrong, it will," or as someone else put it, "Jelly bread always falls jelly-side down."

Forrester's Law states: "In complicated situations, efforts to improve things often make them worse, sometimes much worse, and on occasion, calamitous." Forrester discovered that we can often expect surprising and dismaying results from naive reforms that fail to take into account the many and diverse ways individuals and groups can react to even the simplest, let alone the most complex problems in our world.

Since Forrester proposed his law, others have shown through their research that the simple answers we put into practice with the best of intentions often have unintended consequences.

A few years ago, Edward Tenner wrote a book with the title: Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences. It explores what he calls "the strange consequences of nearly everything." Here's one of his examples: 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, which water now made possible. These caused the allergy sufferers to begin suffering again.

Jesus knew that killing the unfriendly Samaritans and destroying their village would not have solved the long-term problem of meanness of spirit and distrust between the Samaritans and the Jews but would have only increased the bitterness between the two groups. What Jesus teaches is that there are no quick, simple answers to many of life's problems. Slow, patient work is often needed. That's also true in our personal spiritual growth.

Being "born again" as a Christian could 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. And it means being 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 one, but he thought that buying one would compel him to learn. He didn't buy an old clunker; he invested in a new Steinway, a financial commitment that provided an extra incentive to practice.

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

Eventually, Adams signed up for an intensive ten-day music camp. There, he discovered that there is no substitute for regular, disciplined practice and the tutelage of qualified teachers. By the end of the first year and many hundreds of hours of practice, his frustration began to fade. He actually desired time for practice.

There are no shortcuts for the worthwhile things in life. There are no quick solutions or simple answers to many of life's vexing problems. 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. Amen.