Sunday, April 18, 2004
GET A LIFE
Luke 10:25-28; Matthew 6:25,34

A comment frequently heard today is, “Get a life!” It is usually directed toward a person who is all worked up over some small detail which, in the long run, has little consequence. You’re standing by an elevator, and after pushing the “up” button, you become irritated because the elevator has not yet arrived. You have to wait 5 seconds longer. Your irritation bubbles over, and someone says, “Get a life.” Or someone you have helped has proved to be ungrateful, or some reward you thought you deserved has not been given to you, or a man or woman you believed to be a friend has made some unkind comment about you. It would be appropriate if someone said to you, “Get a life.”

What is meant by that phrase is that you’re overreacting, you’re being absurd. Here you are on earth, with only 70 or 80 or 90 years to live in total, and you are wasting many irreplaceable hours brooding over grievances that, in a year’s time or less, will be forgotten by you and everyone else. Why not devote your life to worthwhile actions and attitudes, to inspiring thoughts and enduring undertakings? Life is too short and the universe too big for you to be worried and anxious over little things.

I once read a quote in a newspaper column: “I have a rule against registering complaints in a restaurant because I know there are at least four billion suns in the Milky Way — which is only one galaxy. Many of these suns are thousands of times larger than our own, and vast millions of them have whole planetary systems, including literally billions of satellites, and all of this revolves at the rate of about a million miles an hour, like a huge oval pinwheel. Our own sun and its planets, including the earth, are on the edge of this wheel. This is only our own small corner of the universe. So why do not these billions of rotating suns and planets collide? The answer is, the space is so unbelievably vast that if we reduced the suns and planets to scale, each sun would be a speck of dust, two, three, or four thousand miles away from its nearest neighbor. And mind you, this is only the Milky Way — our own small corner, our own galaxy. How many galaxies are there? Billions. Billions of galaxies spaced about one million light years apart. (One light year is about six trillion miles). Within the range of our biggest telescopes, there are at least one hundred million separate galaxies such as our own Milky Way, and that is not all by any means. The scientists have found that the further you go into space with the telescopes, the thicker the galaxies become, and there are billions of billions as yet uncovered by the scientist’s camera and the astrophysicist’s calculations. So, why are you upset because the waitress brought you string beans instead of limas?” In other words, “Get a life!”

Jesus said it in another way. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said, “I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Can any of you, by worrying, add a single hour to your span of life? So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” In today’s words, he might have added, “Get a life!”

Yet today, many people are consumed by the little details. A newspaper reporter wrote recently: “For a few terrifying hours the other week, I misplaced my PDA (Personal Digital Assistant), the command central that keeps me focused on what I have to do and where I have to be. It felt as if the earth’s axis had shifted a degree. ... After a frantic search, the reunion of woman and gadget seemed, in hindsight, a bit overwrought. After all, for years before the

advent of tiny personal digital assistants, I had been governing my schedule with Stone Age pencil and paper. Surely I could return to those days. Surely I wasn't so dependent on computer chips and digital brains to tell me how to live my life."

That reporter's story underscored, for me at least, how reliant we are on gadgets that didn't exist but a blinking cursor ago. Too many of us can't imagine life without cell phones, portable DVD players, or wireless laptops. But indeed, there was such a life.

On a personal note, I appreciate the efficiency of technology. I am not opposed to new and better ways of keeping in touch with each other, and I'm convinced the same would be true of Jesus. My computer has made parts of my work easier for me. I have a cell phone, which is very helpful, especially in emergencies. The problem is when you place too much emphasis on gadgets and imagine that your life would be over without them.

Technology is useful, but it's also blurring, for many people, the distinction between a job and play. These days, it's not unusual to see people using laptops at hotel pool sides and on the beach. I see people talking on cell phones everywhere. I often wonder what people are talking about and why it couldn't wait. Jesus once said, "The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath." Translated into today's terms, he might say, "Technology was made for us. We were not made for technology." Do not become its slave.

"Get a life." How do you do that? That was the question a lawyer asked Jesus, only he used different words. According to Luke's gospel, a lawyer asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In today's words, the lawyer might have been asking, "What must I do to get a life?" Jesus responded by asking a question in return: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" The lawyer answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and you are to love your neighbor as yourself." Then Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer. Do this, and you will live." In today's words, "Do this, and you will get a life."

To love God wholeheartedly and to love your neighbor as yourself can mean a variety of things. It can mean something different every day because you never know in advance what loving God and loving your neighbor will require. That is why the lawyer wisely asked Jesus a follow-up question, "Who is my neighbor?" In answer to that question, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan.

That story has a number of implications. It implies that you could meet your neighbor in someone you heretofore had thought of as your enemy. You could meet your neighbor in someone you never met before who is now near death in a ditch by the side of the road. You could be that person who is injured, and you meet your neighbor in someone you would not expect to help you.

To "get a life" in the way Jesus described it is to see life as being full of surprises. It is to see life as a gift and an opportunity.

Here are some additional kinds of advice, which I believe Jesus meant when he told the lawyer how to "get a life."

To "get a life" means to realize early on that there is no perfect life. But also remember this: as you have heard me say before in sermons, life does not have to be perfect to be good. To put it another way, every dog has a few fleas. Nobody's perfect. You'll have bad hair days. So

what? At least you have hair. And if you don't, so what? At least you're alive. Have you gotten upset because you don't have a perfect life? If so, you are getting yourself all worked up over insignificant things.

Get a life. Travel light. Less is more. Too many people in today's world believe that "more" is always better. It isn't. Too much is a burden. Too much stuff interferes with physical, mental, and spiritual freedom. Having too much stuff depletes energy and escalates costs.

Remember the compliments you receive in life. Forget the insults. Also, remember that just because someone doesn't love you the way you think they should, or the way you want them to, doesn't mean they don't love you at all.

Take time to relax and have fun. All work and no play does make Jill a dull girl. A disciplined person can trust her internal compass to revert to due north once routine resumes. Too often, Christians tend to be too grim and overly serious in their religious faith. Too often, going to church and experiencing the presence of God is thought of as being a burden and as boring, stern, dull, and even painful. I've met people who claim to be religious, yet have given me the impression that their religious faith has taken the joy out of life, rather than helping them to enjoy life. Nowhere did Jesus say, "I have come to bring gloom and dullness into your life." He did not say, "I have come to make you miserable." He did say, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Get a life! Do not be afraid of new experiences. If you're afraid your palms will sweat when you go to the Junior-Senior Prom, roll antiperspirant on them and go to the dance. Or go with damp palms. The key is to repeatedly expose yourself to challenging experiences that force you to grow. That wobbly anxiety will diminish as you go along, though it often reappears when you tackle something new. The wider your range of positive, enhancing experiences, the more interesting a person you'll become. Stay "safe" at home, and you'll wither. Get a life by allowing yourself to be inspired to support good causes. Stand up and be noticed. This does not mean you should become overbearing or support narrow ideologies that exclude others, but speak your mind and take action on behalf of what really matters in this world — things like fairness, justice, community, knowledge, truth, and equality.

Because human beings are created in God's image, you are designed to do your part, small or large, to help advance creation. There's no better way than that to "get a life."

If you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember these four three-word statements: Get a life! Life is good! Be happy now! Let it go! Amen.