Sunday, June 27, 2004
THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK
Luke 9:51-62

Accompanied by his disciples, Jesus was planning a trip to Jerusalem. The shortest route would take them through some Samaritan villages. However, for Jews such as Jesus and his disciples, that meant traveling through unfriendly territory. Not only was it the shortest way to get to Jerusalem, but Jesus also wanted to take his ministry of God's love for all people to the Samaritans, who were considered by many to be outside of God's compassion. His trip to Jerusalem provided a unique opportunity to do that. After all, he had taken his ministry to others who were considered ritually unclean, so why not the Samaritans? Remember that later in his ministry Jesus would say to his disciples, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

There was a long history of animosity between Jews and Samaritans. In an attempt to avoid an embarrassing situation, Jesus sent several of his disciples ahead to try to arrange a place for them to stay. They reported back to Jesus that they would not be welcome, especially because the Samaritans knew he was headed for Jerusalem.

The disciples were angry, so they asked Jesus, "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. Destroy them and their village. They reasoned that the best way to combat meanness of spirit was with a larger dose of meanness of spirit. However, Jesus would not allow it. Luke says, "Jesus turned and rebuked them." He then led them on to another village that was more welcoming.

You can appreciate the anger of these two disciples over this refusal of hospitality to Jesus. However, Jesus knew how to handle rejection. It brings to mind overzealous evangelists of another generation who offered God's grace to the audience and then tossed balls of hellfire at those who refused to accept the offer. These disciples had forgotten the earlier words of Jesus when he had sent them out and told them that when they were rejected, they should simply move on. Seeking revenge was not to be an option.

This wasn't the first time that one or more of his disciples did not think before speaking. It's a problem we all face — the temptation to speak, to propose a simple answer to a complex problem. When people get frustrated that crime rates are rising or that the "war on drugs" is being lost, quick answers are proposed — build more prisons, sentence drug users and dealers to longer prison terms.

Unfortunately, increasing prison terms have been found to have only a negligible effect on crime rates, especially in drug-use cases.

The fact is that simple solutions do not very often work in complex situations. Dr. Jay W. Forrester was a Professor of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Nebraska native. After years of studying social systems, he came up with a hypothesis which is known as "Forrester's Law." You're all familiar with Murphy's Law, "If anything can go wrong, it will," or as someone else said, "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 you can often expect surprising and dismaying results from naïve reforms that fail to take into account the many and diverse ways individuals and groups can react to complex changes in the social environment.

A paraphrase of Forrester's Law is: complex problems have simple, easy-to-understand wrong answers.

Over and over again, as Jesus was trying to teach his disciples, he advised them to think before speaking or taking action. He knew that simple or easy answers are seldom the best solutions to complex problems. They might satisfy your need for revenge or your need to feel good, but the deeper problem remains.

When I began my professional ministry following my ordination in 1957, it was widely accepted in the profession that premarital counseling was necessary and helpful. It was believed that required counseling sessions for a couple planning to be married would lower the divorce rate and improve the quality of the marriage relationship. Ministers, priests, and churches began to require a number of premarital counseling meetings, and many of them included various kinds of personality inventory tests.

Then some bright, curious researcher decided to test the assumption that required premarital counseling had a positive effect. The researcher's study over a period of years showed that there was no difference at all in the divorce rate among couples who had participated in required premarital counseling and those who had no premarital counseling. Nor could he find any difference in the quality of the marriage relationship between those who had been required to have premarital counseling and those who did not. The researcher discovered that the only advantage of required premarital counseling was that in some cases, it made the counselor or the minister or priest feel better.

Years ago, a professor of psychiatry who was a friend of mine told me that he had discovered a hypothesis which was true of all psychotherapy: "All psychotherapy does the therapist some good."

What did Jesus do in the situation with the Samaritans who would not welcome him? He went around them. His main goal was to get to Jerusalem, and he wasn't going to be sidetracked by their inhospitality. They could reject him, but he was not going to reject them.

Think before you speak or take action. Not every problem you meet in life has to be solved immediately. There are times when it's better to walk away and let things be. Just because someone else has said or done something hurtful toward you, this doesn't mean you have to seek revenge immediately or ever.

This leads to the next incident in this story from Luke's gospel where, again, an individual spoke too soon without thinking. "As they were going along the road, someone said to him in a moment of religious fervor, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'" Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." It was another way of saying, "My ministry is totally dependent on the hospitality and generosity of others. Are you willing to do the same?"

You can infer from the story that this individual, who so quickly volunteered to follow Jesus, did not become a follower after Jesus told him it wasn't going to be as easy as he might imagine.

This individual was the kind of person who quickly volunteers but is not very good at following through, especially when the going gets tough. Years ago, when I was a student minister in a Congregational Church in West Haven, Connecticut, there was a man in the church who every year raised his pledge of financial support to the church with a significant increase. He and his wife were the first to return their pledge card and mail it in. The problem was that he never honored his pledge. He couldn't be counted on to keep his commitments.

As Jesus and his disciples continued their trip to Jerusalem, another individual gave a hint that he might become a disciple, so Jesus issued the invitation, "Follow me." This person said that he very much wanted to follow Jesus, but the timing was wrong. His excuse was, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." The reply Jesus made to this man sounds very harsh and demanding: "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Whether this man's father had already died is not known. It is more likely that this man was saying to Jesus, "One day I'll become one of your followers, but the time is not right for me now. Sometime in the future, after my father has died, and I've settled his estate and taken care of some other business matters, then I'll consider it."

The next prospective follower that Jesus met on his way to Jerusalem quickly volunteered to become one of his disciples but also had an excuse for not doing it right away. He said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home."

It's been my experience that people who say, "I truly want to be a part of that worthwhile activity, but the time is not right. I'll do it later," do not follow through and do it later. They keep putting it off.

Maybe you've decided to begin a long-needed program of regular physical exercise and you tell yourself, "I'll begin two weeks from now." Or you've decided to go on a diet to control your weight and you tell yourself, "I'll begin after the summer season is over, or before school starts."

Or you tell yourself you are going to pay more attention to strengthening your spiritual life. You are going to be more regular in worship attendance, but you keep putting it off.

I officiated at a funeral for an individual who died of lung cancer at age 55 and had been a heavy smoker. One of his close friends was about the same age, and he told me after the funeral service that he was going to quit smoking because his friend's death had been a warning to him. I saw him several months later, and he told me he was planning to quit next week. That was over two years ago, and he is still planning to quit next week.

What is it that keeps you and me from making those positive changes in life that you know are going to be good for you? Why do you speak before you think? What keeps you from doing things today and putting them off until tomorrow and then next week and the week after?

First of all, you keep putting things off and tell yourself that you will start next week or the week after because to begin anything new involves change, and change in living is difficult. Change by its very nature involves loss and gain. It's difficult to give up something you've had around for a long time. There's a certain security in keeping things as they are and doing things as you have always done them.

Second, you put things off until later because in any major change there's always the risk of failure, and no one likes to fail.

Joe Garagiola, a former baseball player, tells about the time when Stan Musial came to bat in a critical game that was tied. As a super hitter, Musial put a lot of pressure on the opposing pitcher, who was young and nervous. Garagiola, as the catcher, signaled for a fastball and the pitcher shook his head. Joe signaled for a curveball and again the pitcher shook him off. He then asked for one of the pitcher's specialties and still the pitcher hesitated. So Joe walked to the mound for a conference. He said, "I've called for every pitch in the book. What do you want to throw?" "Nothing," was the pitcher's reply. "I just want to hold onto the ball as long as I can."

Not wanting to fail is a strong motivation for being reluctant to make any major change in your life. Yet deep down you know that things in life that are worthwhile always involve the risk of failure. That's why Jesus cautioned those who said they were ready to follow him to consider the cost. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." He wanted the kind of followers who were willing to take a risk and willing to overcome their fear of failure.

This story from Luke's gospel gives you one final piece of advice. Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Once you have made the decision to make a change in your life that you are convinced is God's will and therefore will be better for you, then do not keep looking back on what you are leaving behind with regret. Let it go!

There are at least two types of regret — one is wishing you had your old life back even though it was miserable, and the second is regretting that you did not make the change for the better earlier. There are many things in your past which you cannot change in the present. What's done is done. Leave it behind. It does you no good to beat up on yourself by continually saying, "If only I had done that sooner." Amen.