Sunday, March 25, 2007
NEEDED: A GENTLE CYNICISM
Matthew 7:15-23

I want to thank Jim for inviting me to give the sermon today. When he first asked me to consider preaching a sermon in this series, I was reluctant for several reasons. Number one, I misunderstood the theme. I thought he said he was planning a series on "THE SERMON ON THE AMOUNT." One sermon on the subject of money and giving would be adequate.

Then, when I understood the series was on "THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT," which is found in Matthew 5, 6, and 7, I was reluctant because he said I would be given an assigned text. I've had some difficult experiences with assigned texts. In a seminary preaching class, I was asked to prepare a sermon based on Genesis 27:16, which reads, "My brother Esau is a hairy man and I am a smooth man."

However, Jim assured me that I could select any one of a number of possibilities from Matthew 7:7-28, which is the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. It contains a number of not necessarily connected teachings of Jesus. So there are lots of choices. It has in it, for example, what is commonly called the "golden rule," "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you." (Matthew 7:12) There is a secular golden rule that states: "The one who has the gold, rules."

The third reason I was reluctant to preach a sermon is that I am thoroughly enjoying sitting in the congregation with my wife and listening to the excellent sermons from Jim and other staff members. Jim said Rowena could sit up here with me, but I knew she would not want to do that. However, I accepted his invitation so that Jim would have a week off from preparing a sermon. I also thought you would not suffer too much in hearing one more sermon from me after 35 years of sermons. I also knew it would be the final sermon in the series so I could draw it all together and quote from any part of the Sermon on the Mount.

Seventy-eight years ago, in 1929, Reinhold Niebuhr, a preacher and theologian, published his first book with the title, LEAVES FROM THE NOTEBOOK OF A TAMED CYNIC. It was comprised of notes from a journal he kept while serving his first congregation, a small parish in Detroit, Michigan. As he looked back on those years, he came to think of himself as a "tamed cynic." The more I study the teachings of Jesus, the more I see him as a "gentle cynic" in addition to being a tamed cynic. You can discover this especially in his collected teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

In his book, Niebuhr writes about two of his older parishioners, one a millionaire who was utterly convinced that his wealth had come about because he had tithed, given 10% of his income to the church since he was a very young man. Another member, also in his 70's, who had given interest-free loans and credit to striking auto workers in a time of widespread industrial unrest, died a broken and bankrupt man. Why was one man so seemingly rewarded and the other so harshly treated when both had done what they believed to be God's will?

It's a question that haunts everyone. You've known people who have always tried to do what they thought was God's will, did their best to live an honest and upright life, and yet suffered all kinds of tragedy. You also know others who were sure they were doing God's will and seemed to prosper. Many of you have wondered about your own life in the same way. What does Jesus have to say about such puzzling questions in the Sermon on the Mount?

He begins with several warnings. The first one is that there are no sure signs to prove a direct correlation between doing God's will and being personally rewarded in a material sense. Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "God makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." Good people and bad people suffer and are blessed.

I believe most people seek the good and try to do what is right. The problem comes when you begin to claim that your modest victories are God's victories and proof that God is on your side. For you to say or think, "my wealth and prosperity are proof of my goodness," is dangerous and leads to self-righteousness. It's like the basketball team claiming that it won because God was on its side and by implication opposed to the other team.

The gentle cynic says, "beware of pointing to your material circumstances, whether they are good or not so good, as evidence of God's approval or disapproval."

A second warning which comes from the teachings of Jesus as a gentle cynic tells you to beware of those persons or institutions who keep telling you how good and moral they are. Be gently cynical of those who are going to lead you on a moral crusade to root out all evil and moral decay and build a perfect society. Be gently cynical of the politician who promises everything and holds himself or herself up as the only righteous person.

Because a person claims that he or she is leading the moral cause in God's name does not guarantee anything. Jesus said in today's scripture reading, "Not everyone who says, Lord, Lord, shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven." In other words, because someone uses religious language is no proof of his or her righteousness. The gentle cynic, like Jesus, is not fooled by overly moral and pious language.

You can fight injustice and seek noble goals, but at the same time be corrupted by the power and zeal in the process which then breeds new injustices. This is frequently the dreary path of social change.

Be gently cynical, especially when any conflict is portrayed as a clash between an all-virtuous force, "We," and an evil and demonic enemy, "They."

Too often, the word "cynic" has a bad connotation. You might think of a cynic as a person who is mocking or sneering, sarcastic, ill-tempered, unbelieving, and scornful. There is that kind of cynicism.

But there is another type. Historically, a cynic was a member of a philosophical school in Athens. It was a group of philosophers who believed virtue to be the only good and who also believed that all of us are motivated by selfishness. Jesus was a "gentle cynic" in this sense.

He was not surprised at the selfishness in human beings. He was not surprised that people can easily deceive themselves and others about their motives. He knew that many times we cover our true intentions with a cloak of false morality or piety. He was not surprised that Peter denied him and that Judas betrayed him and that Judas could've convinced himself that he was doing it for a good reason. In the same way, you should not be surprised by selfishness in human relationships, or by greed. People will try to take advantage of you from time to time. Friends will betray you. Your children will sometimes disappoint you, and you will disappoint

them. There is a necessity for each one of us to have a gentle cynicism about our own motives and the motives of others.

Here are some of the characteristics of the gentle cynicism of Jesus which can also be yours and mine.

First, a gentle cynicism is aware that no human forms or institutions are infallible or perfect. Any institution can be corrupted, the CIA, the FBI, the Justice Department, the Executive Branch, the Congress, a business corporation, a labor union, the church. Thus, the gentle cynic is rightly skeptical when anyone or any group or institution claims that it has all the answers and does not need to be watched or called to account. One of my favorite quotations is, “TRUST EVERYONE BUT CUT THE CARDS.” Jesus said it in another way, “BE WISE AS SERPENTS AND INNOCENT AS DOVES.”

Frequently, leaders of the radical left or right appear to be especially eloquent and are able to obtain fanatical followers. They are unrestrained by doubts, hesitations, or the absence of facts. They are convinced their theories are true. Here’s another favorite quotation which reflects a gentle cynicism, “NOTHING IS SO FIRMLY BELIEVED AS THAT WHICH WE LEAST KNOW.”

The gentle cynic is aware of the fact that we tend to look for oversimplified answers and that we need to be on guard.

We Christians need to be especially careful. William James once observed that the trouble with Christians was that they were forever lobbying for special favors in the courts of the Almighty. They wanted their prayers answered instantly and precisely in the form and at the time specified. They displayed an all-surpassing vanity in believing that God would intervene to upset the processes of nature in their favor. They expected that the sun would rise and rains fall at their bidding and in their favor.

Second, the gentle cynic works for an open type of tolerance. He or she recognizes that no action comes completely certified as clear and right. Every proponent and opponent may, in fact, and in the light of subsequent history, be partly right and partly wrong. So the gentle cynic listens with seriousness to the opposition. The gentle cynic knows that no one has a corner on all the truth.

This means that the gentle cynic is not afraid of new knowledge. He or she is not afraid of what Biblical scholars have discovered or might discover in the future. He or she is not afraid of new scientific discoveries. The gentle cynic is not afraid to look through telescopes or microscopes in order to learn more about the creation. He or she is not afraid of what Charles Darwin discovered, or Albert Einstein. According to Darwin, it is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.

Third and most important, the gentle cynic knows the truth of the statement, “THE ART OF BEING WISE IS THE ART OF KNOWING WHAT TO OVERLOOK.” I’ve found this statement to be true of many issues in life. The art of leadership is knowing what to overlook. The art of parenthood is knowing what to overlook. The art of getting along with your spouse is knowing what to overlook. So many of our problems in life come about because we give too much energy and attention to issues, which in the long run, do not matter.

It is conceivable that the French soccer team would not have lost the World Cup title last year if its star player had overlooked an insult to him from a player on the Italian team. Because of the spoken insult, the French player rammed his forehead into the Italian player's chest and he was ejected from the game for unsportsmanlike conduct. According to one news account, the French player defended his action by saying, "I am a man," meaning unfortunately, that, being one, he could not let an insult go unavenged. Would he have been any less a man if he had the brains and the sense of proportion to walk away from a provocation? Not according to the example of Jesus. The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.

A well-known prayer first written by Reinhold Niebuhr is called the "serenity prayer." It is widely used by Alcoholics Anonymous and many other support groups. Its theme is knowing what to overlook. "O God, give us the serenity to accept that which cannot be changed; the courage to change what should and can be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other." Amen.