

Living In The New Age

Selected Sermons Delivered
at the

United Church of Christ

(Congregational)

WILLIAMS BAY, WISCONSIN

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LIVING AS EASTER PEOPLE

Eastern Synod

April 21, 1987

Text: Mark 16:1-8; Colossians 3:1-5; 12-16

CONTENTS

<u>Title</u>	<u>Page</u>
"Living As Easter People"	1
"Memories: Shared, Savored and Healed"	7
"The Equipment of Peace"	13
"Releasing The Gifts"	19
"Christian Politics"	25
"Saints I Have Known"	31
"Give The King Thy Justice"	37
"Prepare The Way"	43
"Lost Innocence"	49
"Mountains"	55

Part of this annual pilgrimage is remembering the friends and family members who have passed away in the past year and to share with them the love and life of the Easter story. We are reminded that in God's eternal life, we are not forgotten, that in God's eternal life, we are not forgotten, that in God's eternal life, we are not forgotten.

"LIVING AS EASTER PEOPLE"

Easter Sunday

April 22, 1981

Text: Mark 16:1-8; Colossians 3:1-5; 12-16

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This is a very special day! Our church is filled with joyful people bearing witness to the power of the Easter Story. We gather here as a people of great diversity, as people who come from different experiences, from different religious traditions, and who bring different ideas, philosophies and interests---and we join together as one people in a united community.

As expected, today's attendance surpasses that of any other worship service. All week, I've been wondering why it is that everybody turns out on Easter Sunday.

Certainly we are here because it's a "nice" thing to do; we feel it's good to bring the kids and expose them to this worship service. Some of us may be here partly out of guilt or family pressure.

Some of us are here to celebrate a year's worth of searching and service in the church family. Some of us are here to respond to the "still, small voice" within that has been forgotten or even ignored during the year, but which today speaks more loudly and guides us to this service.

I imagine there are other reasons as well. We come to celebrate the mystery and beauty of life and to rejoice in the coming of springtime. We have had some glorious days lately, and we come to give thanks for their beauty. We are enthralled these days with the budding trees, the bright flowers, and the greening of the grasses. We celebrate the rebirth and renewal that follows the dormancy of winter.

Some of us come today to share in the annual ritual--- coming to Easter services with family and friends, dressing up, feeling good and worshipping together.

Part of this annual pilgrimage is remembering the friends and family members who have died this past year, and to hear again how they are not forgotten, that in God's eternal creativity they blossom and flourish in another

dimension.

Maybe the clearest and most unspoken reason regarding why we are here today has to do with a central question of our life: what is the meaning of life and what is the final experience called death? We come to wonder about these experiences called life and death, and ask our questions about eternity.

And so we gather here this day, in these moments, as a community called together to hear again the haunting and beautiful Easter story in Mark's gospel and to be reminded about what that story means for our life now.

The apostle Paul tells us through his letter to the Colossians that we have been raised with Christ. Easter Sunday simply tells us to listen to this, and to believe it. For if we believe it, our lives will be different. We will no longer be dominated by anger, malice, evil desire, idolatry or negativity. Our lives will take on new qualities: compassion, kindness, gentleness, humility, patience, and above all, loving care. We become filled with joy and happiness, thankful for the gift of life and breath.

This is what it means to be "Easter people." We gather to worship and to hear the Easter story, and to celebrate our life together. But most importantly, we remind ourselves that we are risen, that we are no longer bound over by death, that death no longer has power over us.

This doesn't mean that we deny the reality of death. It means we accept death, and in facing its reality, we find life. Our society is not too good at this. In fact, we seem to seek newer and better ways to deny the reality of death.

While in California two weeks ago for my aunt's funeral, I had occasion to speak with the funeral director about California funeral customs. Having lived there for some years, I said I knew that people tend toward memorial services in which the body is not present at all. (It seems to me that sometimes this can be a way to deny the reality of death. We don't have to confront a dead body, and the reality of death is not experienced fully.) The funeral director then told me that more and more people in his area are opting for quick cremation and no service at

all---no family gatherings at which to cope with grief, or to remember the gifts of the departed one. This seems to me to be another way to deny the reality of death.

There are other ways that we have become good at putting death out of sight and out of mind. Every time we schedule ourselves so completely that there is little time to ourselves, we participate in another form of denying death's reality. We live as if we have all the time in the world to fill up, and never face the fact that our time will end. Every time we prepare for tomorrow and the next day, or live in our yesterdays and forget about today, we try to forget about death's inevitability.

If we know we would die tomorrow, we would live more fully today. But we don't want to face that reality, so we live as if nothing makes a difference, and live less than full lives.

We are actually getting quite good at denying the reality of death. But Easter's tremendously hopeful message comes only after Good Friday, when Jesus accepted death---when he went to the cross and died a painful and slow death, and was entombed among the cold, cold rocks. Only through his accepting and experiencing the full reality of death do we come to Easter and witness the resurrection, the renewal, the rebirth.

To accept death is to start living each day fully, with a sense of purpose and meaning to life. I, myself, have plodded along the pathways of life doing this, that and the other thing, thinking nothing of living a full life. But at age 14, I went with friends to the funeral home to view the body of a 19 year old person killed in a car accident. That experience shook me to the core of my being. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I couldn't concentrate in school until I worked it through myself and made some decisions about how I would live my life from then on. I resolved to make the best of my limited time on earth. Various directions and experiences of my later life have found their roots in that death-accepting experience.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a world renowned authority on death by virtue of her work with thousands of dying people and their surviving families, has reflected on the meaning of

life and death in the book Death: The Final State of Growth. Her message is straightforward:

"There is no need to be afraid of death. It is not the end of the physical body that should worry us. Rather, our concern must be to live while we're alive...It is the denial of death that is partially responsible for people living empty, purposeless lives; for when you live as if you'll live forever, it becomes too easy to postpone the things you know that you must do....In contrast, when you fully understand that each day you awaken could be the last you have, you take the time that day to grow, to become more of who you really are, to reach out to other human beings.

We are living in a time of uncertainty, anxiety, fear, and despair. It is essential that you become aware of the light and power and strength within each of you, and that you learn to use those inner resources in service of your own and other's growth. The world is in desperate need of human beings whose own level of growth is sufficient to enable them to learn to live and work with others cooperatively and lovingly...If you send forth love to others, you will receive in return the reflection of that love; because of your loving behavior, you will grow, and you will shine a light that will brighten the darkness of the time we live in..."

We are created by God to bear witness to love: to face head-on the uncertainty, the anxiety, the fear, the despair with acts of love. And in so doing, we give our lives meaning and purpose.

Kubler-Ross continues: "It is all within you if you look and are not afraid. Death can show us the way, for when we know and understand completely that our time on this earth is limited, and that we have no way of knowing when it will be over, then we must live each day as if it were the only one we had. We must take the time, now, to begin---one step at a time, at a pace that makes us not afraid, but rather eager, to take the next step, to grow into ourselves. If you practice life with compassion, love, courage, patience, hope and faith, you will be rewarded by an ever-increasing consciousness of the help that can come forth if only you look within yourself for strength and guidance. When human beings find a place of stillness and quiet at the highest level of which they are capable, then the

heavenly influences can pour into them, recreate them, and use them for the salvation of humankind. Death is the final stage of growth in this life. There is no total death. Only the body dies. The self or spirit, or whatever you may wish to label it, is eternal."

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and the apostle Paul have similar ideas about what Easter means: that we are risen with Christ, and because of this, we can live life fully---and practice compassion, love, courage, patience, hope, and faith.

To be risen with Christ this day means that life is ours to embrace completely and fully. It is to live in the full knowledge that Christ's resurrection has conquered death's power, freeing us to live as God's children, freely, spontaneously, positively, lovingly and joyously.

Negativity, bitterness, fearfulness, distrust---these and their other friends are all set to flight when we live as Easter people, assured that Christ is risen, confident that we are risen in Christ---embracing our gift of life fully and firmly, all to the Glory of God from whom all life's boessings flow.

"MEMORIES: SHARED, SAVORED AND HEALED"

May 24, 1981

Memorial Sunday

Text: Deuteronomy 4:9-14; Matthew 9:14-17

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This weekend, two streams of tradition converge and bring us thoughts about memories and remembering. The first stream is the obvious one called "Memorial Day." This is our national holiday in which we pause to remember the sacrifices of those patriots who have given their lives in the service of our country. The list of persons remembered includes slaves and presidents, soldiers and peacemakers. It includes people we have never known, as well as friends and family members who are no longer with us. Our memories are stimulated this weekend---and we pause in our enjoyment of a long weekend to give thanks for those who have gone before.

The second stream of tradition flowing this day is not as obvious as the first, because it has to do with our religious tradition. This Thursday is the traditional Feast of the Ascension, the day in which the Church remembers Jesus' commissioning the disciples to spread the Gospel, and on which he is taken up in a cloud into heaven. Ascension Day reminds us of Jesus' reign in heaven, of the communion with the saints who have died and gone to be with him, and of that final step in our own journey. By recalling the many special memorial gifts to this church, we have proclaimed our faith in the communion of the saints, and the continuation of their work in heaven and on earth.

Given these two traditions, our national Memorial Day observance and our religious Ascension Day observance, I am drawn to share with you some thoughts about memories and remembering. The sermon title provides you with three pegs upon which you may hang ideas about memories and remembering: that memories are to be shared, savored and healed.

Memories are something we all have. Every experience of our life, every sensation picked up by eye, ear, nose, mouth, etc., are all stored in the brain. Many of our experiences are simply forgotten and left to either build with other memories fresher in the mind, or to swim around somewhere in our unconscious mind.

Communication is not possible without memory---and it is much more interesting when our conversation is peppered with stories and experiences from our life.

This is why I say that MEMORIES ARE TO BE SHARED. My Great Aunt May had a gift of remembering. At 87 years of age, she could remember things from her childhood as if they happened yesterday. She could remember what she did with whom the day before as well.

I would sit for hours in her tiny little pink house and listen to her stories from the past. My questions would be met with clear recollections. Through her sharing her memories with me, I could glimpse another world---the world of the early 1900's. Through her stories I learned something about her and how she came to be the person she was. I learned about her sister, my grandmother. Great Aunt May also had stories about my father when he was a boy, and of me when I was a baby.

Her sharing memories helped me learn about my family and about myself.

We all know of similar experiences. We know that a good story from our experience makes for enjoyable conversation. People like to hear them, and we like to share them. It helps us to pull something from deep inside and bring it to the light of day and to have it affirmed and accepted by other people. Those of us who haven't had quite the same experience can have a vicarious experience---we can have it by putting ourselves in the storyteller's shoes as he or she tells the story. Sharing memories brings humor to conversation, it brings compassion for another's experience, it brings us closer in relationship with the others with whom we share our most exciting, most powerful and most intimate memories.

Our forebearers in the Jewish-Christian heritage know full well the power of sharing memories. After all, this is the only way that our faith has been transmitted down through the centuries. Originally, the great experiences of God's intervention in human life were passed along from person to person, generation to generation, by means of poems, songs, and narrations---great stories told in the humble homes and around the comfortable campfires.

As these remembrances were put into writing, they became a part of what we know as the Bible. The Bible is the shared memory of generations' worth of people who have experienced the power of God's love in their own lifetimes and vicariously through the experiences of those who went before.

The scripture passage from Deuteronomy teaches us something about sharing memories: that we are not to forget the mighty acts of God in our lives---to forget them means these experiences will leave our hearts and our lives---to remember them means our children will gain from these memories and these stories, and they will be further along in their pilgrimage of faith because of what they have learned from the past, adding to their own present experience.

By sharing our memories, we deepen our connection with each other, with our religious heritage and with our God.

The second thought I have about memories is that MEMORIES ARE MEANT TO BE SAVORED.

I met an old woman, about 88 years of age, who was very hard of hearing. She told me that because she couldn't hear, and because she wouldn't wear a hearing aid, that most of her day was spent in silence, not talking with others. "What keeps you so sharp?" I asked her. She said that her mind is filled with pleasant memories, and she relives them in her mind, over and over, enjoying once again the people who have gone before, the places she has visited, the emotions of her youth and of her maturity.

There is a special feeling when we relive a memory in our lives for the pure reason of pleasure---to recall the feelings of a certain occasion, to relive step by step all the events of a special day, to recall the smells, the feel of the air, the mood of the moment. Like enjoying a good meal, we relax, we heighten our awareness, we prepare ourselves for every taste, texture and enjoyment. These memories are appreciated, not analyzed; they are cherished and preserved.

Savoring our memories, like eating a fine meal, nourishes us and energizes us for the next step in our journey. Feeling good about past events, past experiences or people in our lives, we can enter our present existence more

fully, feeling well, feeling confident, feeling whole. As we experience the present more deeply because of a pleasurable memory, we also face the future willingly, anticipating other positive experiences.

Memories are to be savored, relished and enjoyed.

My third and final thought about memories is MEMORIES ARE TO BE HEALED.

In the passage read from Matthew's gospel, chapter 8, we learn something about demons. Some of our memories are not pleasant. They are unpleasant. While some are buried deep within, others are closer to the surface. These painful memories cause us discomfort, and sometimes, even illness.

These memories are like demons lurking in the depths of our lives, slowly eating away inside us. Jesus casts out those demons with a word and heals the sick. Matthew tells us "he took our infirmities and bore our diseases."

This is how our memories may be healed---by turning them over, one by one, to the love of Christ. These memories can be personal, they can be communal, they can be national. They do reside inside us. And we can do something about them. Sometimes we think there is nothing we can do about the past: "what's done is done, and we might as well forget it." This isn't true---in the sense that the past sometimes bothers us: words we said or didn't say, an experience of great pain, all are still inside us. We can help ease the pain of the bad memory by bringing it out into the open, by looking at it and why it bothers us, by praying about it, and by offering it up to God for God's healing. Just like a cut on the hand needs the open air for quick healing and needs some treatment, too, so does a cut inside us need to be out in the open and to receive treatment. It can do more damage inside, untreated, as any cut can fester without treatment.

In the book, Healing Life's Hurts, Dennis and Mathew Linn analogously compare memories that need healing with an iceberg---and God's love with the blazing sun:

"As the blazing sun shines and melts the surface of the iceberg, the submerged parts of the iceberg surface and expose themselves to the blazing

sun. Doing healing of memories every day, either alone or with others, I find that deeper and deeper parts of the submerged unconscious get exposed to the Lord's warmth and tenderness. Just as the blazing sun soaks up parts of the iceberg's surface every day, so too, healing of memories through continual prayer becomes a gradual giving over to the Lord what he gently brings to the surface in prayer. Under the Lord's warm sun, our iceberg melts into a beautiful, sparkling jewel supplying fresh water for new life."

As you experience the Memorial Day festivities, recalling the gifts given on our behalf by those no longer with us, think about your memories.

Remember that they are to be shared with other people---that we really do want to hear your life expressed in story; that memories are to be savored---that our present and future life is greatly enhanced by the enjoyment of our past and the nourishment and energy that it brings; that memories also require healing. Like a great iceberg, our memories need to be melted by the warmth of God's light, thus providing our life with more of the living water so necessary for our personal growth, and for the growth of the kingdom of God on earth.

The healthier we feel, the more we can contribute in the great human-divine partnership of building a new heaven and new earth.

"THE EQUIPMENT OF PEACE"

August 23, 1981

Text: Isaiah 59:2-17; Ephesians 6:10-18a; Matthew 5:3-12

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Today is a very special day for me. I stand before you filled to the brim, spilling over with joy, with sadness, with a deeper sense of the awesome mysteries of life. Much has happened during my week. Every day I spent time at the hospital, serving as this week's chaplain. During this period of time, I think I have experienced the whole gamut of human emotions: speaking with victims of auto accidents, with people who have suffered strokes and heart attacks, and gently touching the perfectly formed and delicate hand of a newborn baby. I stroked the cold, wet forehead of a dying woman.

During the week I spent moments with friends of all ages, and received the little gifts of laughter, of a gentle touch, of a shared thought. Like you, I enjoyed the fantastic weather, with the white billowy clouds, the deep blue sky, the bright sunshine, the greens and the blues of trees and the lake. And this morning, I am filled with the experience of baptism as another soul enters into God's Holy Church.

During this past week, in the midst of deeply felt joys, I have also experienced deep sadness and sorrow over the state of our world, especially as I have read, day in and day out, about the continual preparations for war.

I don't want to preach about unpleasant things any more than you want to hear about them; and yet, we are called upon, you and I, to remember that God works through us in moments of discomfort and conflict, and seeks to bring us to a new life.

This week I came across an appropriate statement about preaching: "There is no special honor in being called to the ministry. There is only special pain. The pulpit calls those anointed to it as the sea calls its sailors, and like the sea, it batters and bruises, and does not rest."

All week long, I have felt battered and bruised by the

calls of this pulpit. In the midst of being with the births and deaths and sufferings and joys of individuals from our family, I have also been wrestling with the life and death of the earth and the whole human family.

And so this pulpit---the physical reminder of the proclamation of the Word of God---calls us this day to confront the critical moral and spiritual crisis of our time: the systematic preparation for the unleashing of nuclear terror upon parts of or all the world.

Writing eight centuries before Christ, the prophet Isaiah captures a truth of our human existence:

"Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil and they make haste to shed innocent blood; the way of peace they know not, and there is no justice in their paths. Truth is lacking; God saw that there was no justice. God saw that there was nobody, and wondered that there was no one to intervene..."

At this moment, thousands upon thousands of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons in Russia, in the U.S., and in a handful of other countries across the globe are poised and ready. These monstrous products of science, technology, and failed moral systems now embrace the earth in what the prophet Isaiah called a "covenant with death."

Should one or more of these weapons be released, either by human accident, computer error, or some rationalized diplomatic solution to a knotty problem, our Lord's creation faces an unthinkable prospect:

- major and minor population centers would be smashed
- the earth's protective ozone layer would be destroyed
- people would die of concussive effects or suffocation brought on by the loss of oxygen to the firestorms
- exposure to immense amounts of radiation would kill others within two weeks
- food, air and water would be poisoned by radioactive fallout
- physical suffering by radiation sickness, burns, and lacerations would be compounded by the psychological

cal torment from loss of family, friends and the accustomed environment

- bacteria, viruses and disease-bearing insects would mutate, adapt and multiply, endangering a humanity whose immunity has been broken down by excessive radiation
- within five years, leukemia would be rampant, and for another 45 years, solid cancers would rage within human beings
- sterility for some, and deformed offspring for others, would result from damage to the genetic structures of life.

Of course, all of these possibilities assume survivors somewhere. Unleashing even a fraction of the power available would destroy the entire earth, including those who first unleashed the weapons, if not by a retaliating enemy, then by the radiation and deterioration brought about by their own weapons.

Isn't it remarkable, that while we know all this, having read it or heard it somewhere before, that we manage to live our lives normally! How is it that we accept the possibility of sudden annihilation as if we expect it to happen? Certainly, we don't really want to think about it and would prefer to live by forgetting about it. Or what's worse, we might even believe what the politicians and the military tell us, that we could win a nuclear exchange---so why worry?

"Their feet run to evil and they make haste to shed innocent blood; the way of peace they know not. God saw there was nobody, and wondered that there was no one to intervene..."

The problem Isaiah recognized in his time is the same one we face now: we have chosen not to join God, but to turn away from God and pursue our own god-like adventures. We seek to wrench and tear our human will from the earth; we seek to exercise our power over people by works of violence; we make haste to shed innocent blood; we almost delight in the multiplication of our sins.

Since 1945, our nation and others have systematically prepared for the destruction of each other, if not the whole earth. For 34 years, our nation, the self-proclaimed

--that the building and threatened use of nuclear weapons is a sin against God, against God's creatures, and against God's creation;

--that it is immoral to spend trillions of dollars and the sustained effort of total national economies for the purpose of preparing for war, when millions of people lack adequate health care, drinking water, educational opportunities, housing and food;

--that the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us as a church to discover ways we can become peacemakers, reversing the arms race, and seeking ways to settle international conflicts without the use of brute, suicidal force.

I know the realities of our global situation are grim. But you and I know also that while so much seems impossible for humans, all things are possible with God.

You and I both know it's depressing to think about these matters and these policies. Yet, we must never give in to despair and to hopelessness. To do so is to die, to hand death an early victory. Remember the central proclamation of Christian faith: that CHRIST IS RISEN, that Christ lives in us and surrounds us, empowering us to be the ones who will stand for truth and justice, the ones who will intervene.

Hear again, these words from Paul: (Ephesians 6:13-18)

"Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,..."

Rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and strengthened by the hope that comes from faith, may we covenant together

Christian nation, has justified the development and deployment of sophisticated weapons systems on the basis of defense. In the past two years, however, under Democratic and Republican administrations, our government has changed its posture.

On August 6 of last year, Jimmy Carter signed Presidential Directive 59, in which he officially declared that the unthinkable, nuclear war, is now thinkable. Among other things, the directive shifts our official nuclear strategy from one of deterrence--that by threatening to use nuclear weapons on an enemy, the enemy will not use theirs on us--to one of "first strike," by targeting the enemy's missiles and bombers, which can be destroyed only while on the ground before they are used. This deterrence strategy is like warning the bully down the street that if he beat up our kid brother, we'd punch him in the nose. Now we're telling the bully that we're preparing to wipe him out by surprise before he gets a chance to lay a hand on our kid brother. Needless to say, the bully will plan his own surprise after learning our intentions.

How ironic that on the date in which the horrors of nuclear war were introduced to the world, August 6, 1945 at Hiroshima, our country decides to announce it is prepared to strike first and ask questions later!

The irony continues to August 6 of this year when, 17 days ago, the Reagan administration announced the production of the neutron bomb, designed to kill people and not destroy much land or property. This announces to the world that the United States is the first nation in the world intending to use nuclear weapons in conventional conflict---and intends to use them in supposedly "limited" warfare.

The word that this pulpit brings today, battering and bruising us along the way, cannot be a political strategy, or a military strategy, or an ideological argument---the word that comes to us must be the Word of God.

That Word, coming to us from the Bible itself, from such interpreters of the Bible as Pope John Paul II, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Billy Graham, and the lay and clergy delegates from the United Church of Christ to our General Synod two months ago, is this:

to make peace, to stand for truth, and to proclaim the Word of God in every facet of our life.

Like the 19th century Christians who preached that to follow Christ meant to turn away from the institution of slavery, to refuse to cooperate with it, and to work for its abolition, may we become the abolitionists of our day, working for the elimination of nuclear weapons from the earth.

Clothed in righteousness and shielded by God's Holy Spirit, we shall stand firm, and we shall become One with God's Holy Word.

"RELEASING THE GIFTS"
October 11, 1981

Text: Isaiah 53:8-11; II Corinthians 8:1-5

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Each year at this time, our church turns its thoughts to that nasty little five-letter word: MONEY.

Some preachers and their churches harp on it week after week; just tune in to Bob Schuller any Sunday morning and you'll see what I mean. Other preachers and churches don't say a peep about it, and their lack of it really shows. Hopefully, we're somewhere in-between, moderation being our best policy.

Since our thoughts are turning to that five-letter word with our 1982 proposed budget being distributed later, with an appeal regarding our nursery remodeling project forthcoming, and with an annual bazaar and dinner around the corner, what better time to start a series of sermons which focus upon the gifts God has given us.

At the outset, I want you to hear three basic thoughts that form the core of this sermon---the paths I take to illustrate them may be winding---so I want to be sure to tell you the general direction now:

- that God is the creator, the owner, and the lender of every gift
- that God lends us specific gifts as an investment to further God's own purposes
- that our being faithful to God's purposes means to give freely of everything we are; and everything we have---and in being faithful, our life has its fulfillment.

God's basic investment strategy is made plain to us in Isaiah chapter 55. Isaiah tells us that every gift originates with God, and every gift returns to God, that every gift has a purpose.

This echoes what we know from the 2nd chapter of Genesis, how our lives are completely dependent upon God: it is God who forms our bodies out of the clay, and then gives

us the breath of life, breathing into us God's spirit, animating the clay. Without God, there is no life. God gives us the spirit; it is loaned to each of us, to each of our earthen vessels, and then in a short while, it is returned to God: "Into your hands I commend my spirit---" were the words of Jesus on the cross. We return the spirit to God. Just as God sends rain and snow---and doesn't expect they return to the heavens without first changing the earth in some fashion---so God sends spirit into us, expecting us to use it as a gift to transform the earth towards the fulfillment of God's purposes.

God makes a deposit into our account, and we use the deposit as a loan, repaying it at the end of our life, with some interest. Not just an in and out. "It shall not return to me empty."

We are very good at living our day-to-day lives without thinking about the very gift of life, and the gifts God has given us. We are very good at doing what we do without regard for how we are contributing our lives towards the fulfillment of God's purposes.

It is not until we are face to face with the reality of death that we stop and think about the meaning of our lives. And certainly this past week we've each had that opportunity to reflect. Many of you were deeply affected by the news of Peg Palmersheim's death at a young and vibrant age. All of us were troubled by the violent death of President Sadat, and continue to be troubled by extremely volatile situations in the Middle East, a condition that threatens life in all parts of our world.

When we are faced by events like we have known this week, especially by untimely death, we are all shaken and forced to assess the meaning of life itself. We look at our own lives; we look at the lives of those who have just died; we wonder---why is there such tragedy?

Finally, with pain and tears and questions, we usually take comfort in noting the contribution made by the deceased: how they have shared life with us, shared vigor, shared vision, shared passion for peace, have diminished themselves for others---how they gave their lives that others might know life more fully. We can say they have taken Isaiah seriously and given God a return on the investment:

Peg Palmersheim and Anwar Sadat transformed our lives and this earth by their lives---and in so doing, return to God having accomplished God's purposes.

What we witness is a transaction between human beings and God---a giving, a sending, a releasing of gifts one to another. And therein lies the meaning and purpose of life itself: to receive and to give gifts.

Of course, we know that already. It's obvious. We know it is difficult to do. One of the major problems in our North American life is being able to let go, to release, to give. Ours is a society based upon acquisition: on getting, hanging on to, clinging to, holding on to. Worth in our culture is not determined by the intrinsic value of the human person, but by one's net worth, one's holdings and acquisitions.

It's no wonder that the #1 selling drug in this country is Valium. People are unable to let go, to release, to relax naturally. We are too often trying to hold onto, to hold life and our things in control.

Some people are beginning to practice letting go and releasing themselves. Among those who exercise, a common movement is to tighten up every muscle in the body and then relax. Doing this several times will release body tension. Another way to do this is to breathe deeply, hold it in for a while, and then let your breath out with a "whoosh," releasing bad feelings, discomforts and tensions.

Another form of release is laughter. When Norman Cousins of the Saturday Review was diagnosed as having an incurable cancer, he read all he could on the subject and started himself on his own program, which included renting movies and old TV shows like "Candid Camera" and watching them, laughing for an hour or so a day. That program of laughter provided his system with a special form of release that proved to be healing to his ailment, and he is alive and well this day.

In an age which teaches us to tighten our muscles, to feel stresses and strains, to acquire and to cling and to hold, we need to hear of the healing and the health that can come to us when we let go, when we release our lives and

our gifts for God's purposes.

There's a great story in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 8, about a group of churches. The churches gave of their gifts liberally, beyond their means.

Paul proclaims it is the will of God that they, and we, give liberally, freely, of our lives, and the fruits of our livelihoods, for the strengthening of the Church.

He goes on, in chapter 9, to say that God loves a "cheerful giver." But the Greek word is literally "hilaros," from which we get our word "hilarious." So a responsible translation of that verse 7 in the 9th chapter of the second letter to the Corinthians might read: GOD LOVES A HILARIOUS GIVER!

It doesn't say, "God loves a prudent giver" or those who conserve and preserve for their own lives first, and secondly, for the needs of the Church. No, God loves a hilarious giver---a foolish giver, perhaps?

How's this for a story about foolish givers? In 1979, two women, Jenny and Millie of Sauk County, Wisconsin, decided to help conserve resources and save space at the county landfill by setting up a recycling program. They observed how much plastic materials were going into the landfill and decided to do something about that by recycling plastic. Their commitment to this project was so great, or should we say foolish, that they, in order to buy a plastic grinding machine, cashed in on their life insurance policies.

God loves hilarious, foolish givers, people who release their gifts and resources to make the world a better place.

William Stringfellow, Episcopalian layman, author and attorney, tells of the time he gave some pretty "foolish" advice to a minister:

"I had one day to fly to Boston to visit the Harvard Business School to give a lecture. I was late...in leaving my apartment to get out to the airport. Just as I was about to go, the telephone rang. I

had not the will power not to answer it, in spite of my rush. It was a clergyman who was calling. 'I have a woman in my office,' he told me, 'who is going to be evicted in the morning. Tell me what to do for her.' I asked him a few questions and, as it turned out, the grounds for the eviction were the non-payment of the rent. The woman apparently had no money to pay her rent. She had, or asserted that she had, certain complaints against the landlord, but the complaints that she had were not sufficient, assuming that they could be legally established, to justify non-payment of the rent. They were no defense to the eviction, and if she wished to pursue them it would have to be done in a separate action against the landlord, apart from the eviction proceeding. By this time, I was even more anxious about catching the airplane and said to the minister, 'Well, sell one of your tapestries and pay the rent,' and hung up and caught the plane. On the plane I thought the telephone conversation over and thought that perhaps I had been rude and too abrupt in answering the minister that way and I considered calling him back after landing to apologize. But by the time the plane landed at Logan Airport I had rejected that idea. My answer had not been rude or irresponsible. On the contrary, exactly what he and the people of his congregation, which does have several beautiful and valuable tapestries, must be free to do is to sell their tapestries to pay the rent---to pay somebody else's rent---to pay anybody's rent who can't pay their own rent. If they have that freedom, then, but only then, does the tapestry have religious significance; only then does the tapestry enrich and contribute to and express and represent the concern and care which Christians have in the name of God for the ordinary life of the world. The tapestry hanging in a church becomes and is a wholesome and holy thing, an appropriate and decent part of the scene of worship, only if the congregation which has the tapestry is free to take it down and sell it in order to feed the hungry or care for the sick or pay the rent or in any other way serve the world."

The gifts God has given us, our very lives, and the material blessings we possess, have religious significance only when we are willing at any time to give them up for the well-being of others.

It's time to think about how we give to the Church: not in terms of five letter words like "money," but in terms of

how we release to the Church the gifts that God has entrusted to us.

It is time to tell the world: hey, we don't need your advice about holding and acquiring and being selfish, and becoming tight, and that it hurts to give. It's time to hear the truth from Isaiah and Jesus and Paul, to let go, to loosen up, to share, to release our gifts for the accomplishment of God's purposes.

The more we give, the better we feel. The more we give, the more blessings are heaped upon us. The more we give, the more joy God knows---because in our giving, God's purposes are fulfilled.

And so we end where we began. To release our gifts is to acknowledge

- that God is the creator, the owner, and the lender of every gift
- that God lends us specific gifts of life and material as an investment to further God's own purposes
- that to give of everything that we are and everything we have is to be faithful to God.

It is in releasing our gifts to God's care, through the Church, that our lives find meaning and fulfillment in the midst of our earthly pilgrimage.

"CHRISTIAN POLITICS"

October 26, 1980

Text: Isaiah 58:1-12

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This week I noticed a political cartoon in which one of the angels outside God's "office" has just answered the phone and is telling God who is calling: "That pest, Jerry Falwell from Moral Majority, is on the line...Now he wants to know if you hear prayers from Jews, Muslims, unredeemed gentiles, left-handed agnostics, pantheists, vegetarians, blacks, democrats and homosexuals." God replies: "OY! Tell him to stick to politics and leave the religion to ME!"

The humor in the cartoon makes its point, though contrary to the cartoonist's thought, it might be more difficult to separate religion and politics. Politics has always used religion for its purposes, and religion has used politics to work out its purposes.

Let's look at our own national religious practices. At the founding of our nation, there were strong and powerful voices which proclaimed that this was the "new Israel," the new "promised land" given to us from God. The God who was giving this land was, of course, the God of the Bible and of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Since then, religion has permeated all levels of our national life. Our coins read "in God we trust." Our pledge of national allegiance says "one nation, under God." Our presidents call upon God regularly to justify their positions. Richard Nixon, in his first "Watergate speech" to the nation, concluded with the line "God bless America, and God bless each and every one of you." All three major presidential candidates this year claim they are "born again" Christians.

Religion, of course, has also used politics to fulfill its purposes. There is continual lobbying to maintain special tax laws for religious institutions. Martin Luther King merged religion with politics during the 1960's. Cardinal Spellman blessed the bombs on their way to Vietnam. Father Berrigan poured blood on draft records during that same war.

There are many more examples of how politics and religion

have used each other over the years of human history. These days, we are facing another chapter as we witness the 1980's version of religion and politics.

Some weeks ago, the prominent fundamentalist church in town published a few sermon titles for the coming weeks. The titles were something like "What The Bible Says About Homosexuality," and "When It Is Right For a Christian To Go To War."

As I read those titles, I started to think, what if our church were to print those titles in the paper? A lot of people would probably say, "Yep, there goes that United Church of Christ getting into controversy again." I also thought---the campaign by several national Christian groups to affect the 1980 congressional and presidential elections has reached Williams Bay.

Groups such as Moral Majority, the Christian Voice, and the Christian Voters Victory Fund have raised millions upon millions of dollars to press their religious and political views onto our nation. They communicate their message through most of the television preachers, through free press coverage, and by means of computerized mailing lists containing some 20 million names and addresses.

You might be interested to know that our church is on one of those mailing lists. The first mailing we received came in June. It was an invitation to go to Dallas, Texas to attend the National Affairs Briefing, in order to, and I quote,

"become an informed leader on domestic and foreign policy issues in this non-partisan gathering."

A distinguished roster of speakers was listed, starting with Ronald Reagan and ranging from John Connally to Jessie Helms and Phyllis Schafly. I was told further that,

"you'll walk away from the National Affairs Briefing not only with enlightened perspective from the distinguished panel of speakers, but with carefully researched and documented data. And you'll walk away from the National Affairs Briefing with the know-how to inform and mobilize

your church and community in this non-partisan effort to do something that can determine the moral character of America."

I was amused to see that I was being invited by millionaire television preachers and Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys, apparently well-informed moral leaders of our country.

I was not so amused to see that I was being misled by statements that this was a "non-partisan" gathering. Press reports of the meeting later recorded how the "non-partisans" gave Governor Reagan 20 standing ovations during his speech, which included the time when he said, "I know you can't endorse me, ...but I endorse you."

To offer equal criticism of another major candidate, I would add that President Carter was one of the first to introduce "born again" religion into modern politics by being the "born again" candidate in 1976.

Another supposedly "non-partisan" mailing came here last week, sent from the Faith America Research and Educational Association. They mailed a summary of the positions which were of "concern to the Christian community." They told me that they prepared this leaflet as

"a public service for the Christian clergy and laymen, independent from, and not connected with, any candidate or political organization."

I was given permission to reproduce these in our Sunday bulletin as "non-partisan information" to my congregation.

In looking at the tract, I discovered that the "key moral and religious issues" were presented through slanted and simplistic language. The candidates and their responses were obviously arranged so as to favor very clearly one of the candidates.

I also noticed some glaring omissions in the "key moral and religious issues"---there was nothing mentioned of legislation designed to ease world hunger, the plight of our elderly poor, or even about defense spending issues---all with their own moral and ethical implications.

The new coalition of right wing political organizers and fundamentalist Bible thumpers is also putting out other types of "non-partisan" information. There is great irony surrounding their tactics, however.

One group published a kind of "congressional report card" in which congressional leaders were given a rating on a 0-100 scale regarding their stance on 10-15 votes taken over the year.

The results were, and continue to be, rather amusing. A Methodist minister in Congress received a rating of 8; a Baptist minister in Congress received a 16; a priest received a 0. On the other hand, one of those receiving a perfect 100 is one of the congressmen indicted for taking \$25,000 in ABSCAM money. Another perfect 100 is now sweating out charges of participation in a homosexual incident.

These inconsistencies find their way into the political programs of the "moral majority" crowd as well. For the most part, these people want to limit the power of government, and they want the government out of such issues as school busing, welfare, and business regulation. Yet they seek greater government involvement in other issues.

A writer in the October issue of The Christian Century summed this position as follows:

"For example, they seek a broad role for government in eliminating abortion, in restricting the rights of homosexuals, in taxing for new weapons systems whose need is unclear, and in mandating prayer and Bible reading in the public schools. In short, they do not want government intervention when their own freedoms are at stake, but they are willing to use the power of government to force life-style changes on others."

The criticism which I and others have about this resurgence of right wing religious and political influence goes deeper than blunders and inconsistent approaches to issues. A far more important criticism comes at the point of an area we all are qualified in, and that is biblical interpretation.

The radical political and religious right claims a biblical interpretation which is limited, narrow, ignorant and ill-advised. It is strange to me that those who claim that our moral systems come from the Bible cannot offer biblical texts which oppose abortion, busing, sex education in the schools, ERA, or which affirm greater defense spending, prayer in the public schools, and greater tax deductions for those who support church work.

It is even stranger that the likes of the so-called "moral majority" actually ignore biblical passages which specifically speak to the need to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and sick, rehabilitate the prisoner, welcome the stranger, and beat swords into plowshares.

I am reminded about Mark Twain's comment that "most people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the Scriptures which troubled me most are those which I do understand."

By all appearances, the radical right is not interested in biblical morality, or in grappling with complex issues with complicated solutions. They are more interested in legislating private morality, and by so doing, imposing their standards and values on all citizens.

I fear the new right is putting faith into its own narrow construction of reality, not in a profound biblically-based ethic which encompasses both personal and social morality.

Before closing, I want to focus briefly on what this discussion means for us here in this sanctuary.

We can be thankful that groups like the Moral Majority are causing us to reflect more seriously on the basis of our own faith and practice as Christians. They do us a service to the extent that they challenge our understandings of God's truth---and offer us the possibility to forcefully state our own convictions, challenging half-truths.

To do this, we might resolve to know our faith and Bible more fully. We need to know the roots of our particular brand of Christian faith and life---for the very survival of a fruitful and diverse democracy is incumbent upon this study.

We might also watch how we mix politics and religion in our own life. Do we use God in order to justify our own political and economic views? Do we realize that no political ideology can ever be identified as God's will, that all ideas and constructions of reality are subordinate to God and to God's judgment?

Finally, I think we must always seek to follow the biblical injunction of watching after the poor and protecting the weak. When groups claim to be a "moral majority," we must safeguard against the possible tyranny of the majority.

We need to remember that the Crusaders were a "moral majority" in Europe; that the Nazis claimed moral superiority as well. We must always protect and defend the rights of minorities endangered by the tyranny of majorities.

Some 600 years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah spoke of a people who acted as if theirs was a righteous nation, and they poked fingers at those they judged to be wicked. They treated religion as mere observance of ritual, ritual which itself was cheapened by quarreling, fighting and oppression.

Through Isaiah, God spoke in judgment of this kind of hypocritical self-righteousness, and said, "...the fast I choose is to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house."

Our healing as individuals and as a nation occurs as we embrace those who have needs---not to mock and reject them because of our self-righteous judgments. There are problems in our nation which need faith and action in order for solutions to be realized. And Isaiah again reminds us, "if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then the ancient ruins shall be rebuilt, and you shall be called the repairer of the breach."

We are assured by biblical truth that as we perform religious and political tasks, the ruins of our civilization shall be rebuilt, and God will be delighted in our efforts. May we be blessed with humility and discernment as we seek to understand God's will for our lives and for our world.

"SAINTS I HAVE KNOWN"

November 1, 1981

All Saints Day

Text: Hebrews 11:39; 12:2

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One warm and sunny July day, two years ago, I left my home in San Francisco to drive with a friend to Lodi, a town situated in the heart of the rich and fertile Sacramento valley. The occasion was to gather with ten other friends who, over a period of 7 years, had worked on a common project. We met at a lovely ranch nestled among the grape vines, blessed with a pool and a jacuzzi. We swam and relaxed, and then retired under some shade trees to do our business.

We soon gathered for dinner, and it was one of those dinners you always remember: trusted and loving friends sharing friendly and significant conversation over fresh salads, french bread, quiche and fresh fruit.

Before we knew it, it was time to leave. I got a ride as far as the commuter train heading back into San Francisco. Once in the city, I needed to catch a streetcar. Standing on the San Francisco street was an experience in contrast. Where a few hours before I had been relaxing in 90° temperatures in a large swimming pool, now, at 10:30 p.m., I was standing in the blowing and swirling fog of a July San Francisco night. A short time earlier, I had been enjoying a sumptuous meal with close friends; now, I was watching various people of the night limping up to trash barrels to find treasures of food or drink.

It was then that I spotted a curious man. He was behind me, huddled in a phone booth, trying to find shelter from the night air. He kept trying to warm himself by rubbing himself with his hands. And then I noticed something more about him: he was naked from the waist up, and must have been very cold. I felt pity towards him, and while I thought about giving him my own jacket, I also knew I wasn't able to do that. As my streetcar appeared, I remembered that after swimming, I had not put on my undershirt. I reached into my pack, retrieved the undershirt and gave it to the man huddled in the phone booth---hardly enough to keep him warm, but better than nothing at all.

As I boarded the streetcar, I thought more about the man and his plight, thought about my action, and thought about the possible causes for his nudity. The more I thought, the more I became aware that my small and almost insignificant action was motivated by my experience with a saint whom I had met, also on the streets of San Francisco, a UCC minister named Don Stuart.

For twelve years, Don Stuart walked the streets of San Francisco from nine at night until five in the morning, dealing with people like the one I saw that foggy July evening. Don was known as the Night Minister, walking the toughest neighborhoods day and night, alone, with the protection of a clergy collar. The first time we met, I immediately was taken with his gentle spirit, his soft-spoken voice, an easy sense of humor, wrinkled compassion surrounding his eyes. He reached out with a warm embrace, eager to share his overflowing love. Tall and thin, his whole presence radiated love.

As I walked with him one night, I learned something about night culture and how the presence of a saint can transform that culture from barrenness to warmth and growth.

As we walked, his parishoners spoke to him from street corners and alleys, calling out, "Hello, Father," shaking hands. Here were drug pushers, alcoholics, pimps, residents of the streets.

We passed an old woman dressed in a tattered coat and scarf, sitting on her beat-up old suitcase outside the bright windows of Macy's, head bowed, quietly passing the night away. Don stopped and pressed a quarter into her hand and said, "Emma, go buy yourself a cup of hot chocolate," and kept walking.

And that's what the whole night was like, pressing a quarter into one hand, holding the hands of another while discussing a problem; sitting in a hallway speaking with a would-be suicide; making the rounds of his parish on the street corners, in the ticket windows of the porn films, in sleazy hotel lobbies, at the Greyhound station, in coffee shops, and sometimes in homes and apartments.

During one night, walking the streets with this Night Minister, I was touched and taught by one who exuded love

and compassion, who saw human need and sought to make life a little more bearable for people who were little known to the rest of a world resting in comfortable beds during the night. Don Stuart embodied a definition of a saint as "a person who is exceptionally gentle, charitable, patient."

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As I reflect upon the saints who have touched my life over the years, I think, too, of the United Methodist Bishop of Zimbabwe, Africa, formerly known as Rhodesia---the Bishop who became the first black prime minister of that nation.

I first met Bishop Abel Muzorewa over a sandwich at my office in San Francisco. He had come then, in 1975, to lobby United States support for an embargo of Rhodesian products until the black majority could gain a representative democracy in their homeland. Hardly statuesque at 5'2" in height, the Bishop spoke with forcefulness and authority as he recalled God's calling him to work for the freedom of his people.

I shall never forget how, a year later, this saint challenged a room full of 500 people to really feel the gospel to which we were giving only lip service. Prior to his addressing the crowd, we sang the Spiritual, "Oh Freedom," in a half-interested sort of way, the way most of us whites sing our hymns and songs. When we finished singing, Bishop Muzorewa got up and said, "You know, when you were singing 'Oh Freedom'---did it mean anything to you? It doesn't mean anything to you because you already have your freedom." The Bishop then went on to speak about his people's struggle for freedom from the tyranny of white minority rule. He spoke of his deep struggles to relate the Christian gospel to national political life and how the gospel of Jesus Christ demanded that people across the world affirm the rights of blacks in southern Africa to adequate housing, food, education, freedom from unwarranted search and incarceration, and freedom of electing a truly democratic form of government.

While he was speaking to us, a death threat was phoned in to the conference center. Later, the Bishop spoke of the assassination squads which had been following him in Africa. Yet, his personal sense of security was strength-