12-1-85. Announcmet. The last few minutes before the curtain goes up on a stage production is one of the most exciting of all times. The actors are nervous, trying to think their way into the part they must play; the crew is going through the light switches and the sound effects and the props that must be ready to hand. There is an anticipatory buzz from the audience, as late-comers climb over people to get to their seats. Slowly the lights are dimmed in the theatre. When their brightness has been cut, the lighting master holds the switch for a count of five, and says to the cast, the house is at half. That means the show is about to begin. All the preparation for the production is now to be tested and proved--rehearsals, sets, costumes, direction, the artistic imagination, all await a bit breathlessly. And then, quickly, the house lights are extinguished, and the curtain raises. The set comes to life and light, and the play begins. Today we begin a new month and a new subject, and fof the next four weeks weshall stand at that moment of waiting and watching, and then when the overture ends, we see the beginning of the Xn drama of redemption and release. Text Luke 1. Today begins what is the high spot of the Xn calendar; with the resurrec// the coming of a newborn babe is the focus of the faith. It is called the season of advent, which is the Latin for the coming, the arrival. Outside it is the end of the fall season and the beginning of winter. The days grow shorter and the darkness falls upon us before we can gethome from our work. Even at noon the sun hangs low in the sky. The damp streets reflect the reds and greens of the stop-lights, as symbols of the Christmas season. It is the time of breathless anticipation, with the lights at half-bright, and the curtain about to go up. For three Sundays in December the lessons will be taken from Luke's description of the birth of Jesus, and the 4th Sunday we move to Matt for the coming of the wise men from the east. But today we have the announcement. Lk 1:26-38. It was an old and a deep longing among the Hebr people that Messiah should come to live with them. The prophets spoke of it, and the psalmist sang about it. It would be the culmination of that history which began with the promise to Abraham and the liberation of the enslaved from Egypt. Every passover ended w/prayer that next time it would be in the presence of God's anointed, and every Jewish maid wished that she would be the one to give birth to the blessed one. Isa 9 is the backgr to the annunciation; it tells not of the coming of a military hero, nor of a political power. Instead it speaks of a baby. To us a child is born, to us a son is given, and then he will be head of govt and chunsellor and the presence of God himself. Can you imagine the excitement, the anticipation, the fear, that came to that young girl when the msgr appeared to her? It was the 6th month,and that refers to what has gone before in the account--the appearance of Gabriel to Zechariah and Elizabeth that despite their advanced age they would become parents of a boy-child whose name would be John. So momentous was that birth that Zechariah was stricken dumb, unable to speak until the dhild was born. And so it came about. In the 6th month the same chief messenger appeared to a young girl in Nazareth, with a spl delivery message for her. Note first that we are given no description of the messenger. The Grk word is angelos, from which we get angel; it could fit any sort of message-bearer, human/or in nature/or divine. But we are told nothing about this one. We see no wings, or halo, or white robe, or harp. That is because it is not the messenger but the message that is important. That is as it should be. When we hear the speaker instead of the message we lose something. Any trick, of lighting, or music, or costuming, is acceptable if it points to the message; it becomes charlatanism when it focuses upon itself. Gabriel means the hero of God. The name has been given to divine messengers for a long time before this chapter; he appears in the Bk of Daniel and twice in Lk 1. Each time he brought an important word. This time it was of ultimate significance. He came to the city of Nazareth, in Galilee, a location that was necessary for those of Lk's readers who did not know the geography of Palestine. There he found Mary, a virgin betroth to a man whose name was Joseph. It was important to the authors of the story that Mary was not yet married, and was virginal. Matt quoted Isa as proof of prophecy fulfilled; here Lk merely asserts Mary's marital state. She was espoused, betrothed, which means that she had entered into a marriage contract/with the carpenter of the town. Among those Palestinians betrothal was serious business. It was considered to be about the same as married; for a person to be unfaithful after taking the betrothal vows it was under the Deutero- code a crime punishable by death. So we can see the scene; it has been painted hundreds of times; every major art collection has at least one annunciation. The archangel stands before a girl, of Nazareth, and/~~xxxx~~ of the house and lineage of David. As we watch, the messenger speaks. What (betrothed to marry a man)) he said is important, for it became the origin of the most familiar prayer in the Xn ritual, the Ave Maria, in the Latin translat, and also of the place of Mary in the faith & practice of many among us. The more recent version is the more accurate; Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with thee. The phrase in the older reading is not found in the best of the ancient Mss, including the one in the Vatican--blessed art thou among women. Some of the old records include it, so if you like it, you may keep it. Whatever the messenger said, and however he looked, the immediate reaction was fright. She was troubled at what he said, and began quickly to think what these words might mean. I can imagine it, for often I have heard or read something, and ran it thru my mind, trying to get the sense of it. It says

something wholesome and human about this young lady that she was disquieted when the voice told her she had found favor with God. Some of us would regard that as a compliment, or perhaps only our due. This woman found it troubling. Some of us would be troubled if we heard a voice saying that God was dis pleased with us in some way. It's like an employee in a company, hearing compliments on his work from the boss--I like the way you do your job, I favor what you do--andthen getting worried. Why should he say that to me. Does he plan to fire me? Or a student, getting an A on a test, and calling home in panic, trying to find out what itmight mean. The tradition is that Luke found Mary & got directly from the stories and the poems of the natifity he recorded here. So it is possible that we have Mary's recollections 40 years after the event, when she knew the end as well as the beginning. You are the favored one, the angel had said, the Lord is with thee. Words she could never forget. But what could they have meant to her in those lateryaars? She knew the sorrows that would be hers--her name Mary means bitterness, trouble, sadness. She would be with him as he hung on the cross, when nearly all others had run away. But in time she came to understand. It turns upon our understandingof God's favor. To take itas most of us would, it was ~~an empty thing~~ not favor of God, it led not to a party but to an execution after a trumped-up trial. But the favor of God is something other than superficial things--wealth, or pleasures, or power selfishly used. There IS gain in relig faith; we read that last month in the Timothy letter; but that is not its real offer. God's favor is his presence, which is pleasure and plenty enough. It comes as inner peace even th those whose flesh is bruised in the conflict. So the angel spoke to comfort her. Do notbe afraid, Mary, woman of sorrows, for--and here the msgr said it a second time--you have found favor with God. You will conceive (note the future tense; later a tradit arose that it was with these words from Gabriel that the conception ofcurred) you will conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebr Joshua, which means Jehovah is salvation; Matt's versio explains the meaning of the name. When we say Jesus we are saying savior, when we say Xr we are saying the chosen one of God. But now notice the four stages thru which MarY's response moves. 1) v.29, she was moved to the point of fear. Awe is a part of our awareness of the immensity and the power of God; we shake in our shoes to sense an infinitesimal atom of its totality. Fear also in giving up of self and giving over to God our talents and our time. Then, v.34, confusion that we have been chosen as an agent of God's purpose. How can this be? we ask. Why us? of all people. We cannot, we don't know how, we'd rather do something else. Then comes the third level, v. 37--for with God nothing is impossible. It is a line that reminded all those who knew their Hebrew bible of the words in Genesis 18. There Abraham has just learned that in his old age he will father a son. Sarah laughed, but ~~Abraham~~ said, why does Sarah laugh? is anything too difficult for God? Here a similar objection is answered with a similar line. It is the basis of faith, by which we live and move and have our being. Nothing is impossible to God. This is the conviction that comes with faith, after fear and confusion have left us, calmed by the understanding that God's purposes are beyond man's limits, but they will be done. And with that comprehension comes obedience (v.38)--let it be to me according to your word. It does not matter that she did not understand what she had just heard. We may not understand what we are called upon to do either. But faith is the willingness to obey. So Mary moved in a short time from fear and confusion to awareness of God's lordship andthen to obedience to it. That is the course all of us need to travel.

There is one major point in these lines that remains to us, and that is the doctrine of the virgin birth. It is a stumbling block for many of us. Should it be? or what can we say of it. First, it is essential to understand that it is not necessary to the Xn faith and life. There is no evidence in these scriptures that J ever mentioned it, or demanded faith in it of his folwrs; it is not clear that Peter or Paul knew of it. Next, it should be noted that if we remove 9 words from Lk we have erased it from the record. These are in 1:34--since I have no husband, and 3:23 being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph. V.34 is lacking in some ancient Mss, and the words in Chap 3 are in parentheses in the version I use. So it is possible that the original Luke text does not have it atall. But then, there is the other hand. There is no reason to doubt that Luke accepted the miraculous conception of J, or that it was already the general view accepted as a fundamental of the faith. What we have, indeed what the people of the 1st Cen had, was the probl of expressing a truth that we cannot understand. The meaning of the virgin birth is theological, not biological; people who knew J saw in him something marvellous, something superhumah, something in fact of God. At the same time they knew him to be completely human. Now, the probl was to express that in an unscientific age. The doctrine of the virgin birth tells us that God had entered human life for our salvation, that in human frame was very God, true God, God to the uttermost. It was Emmanuel, God with us, not up there somewhere, or out there, but here. It was love that passed all understanding, it was the greatest gift the human race had gotten since life itself. That is the meaning of the annunciation; it is the meaning of Advent. As we prepare for the coming, may we all see in a baby and his mother the purposes and the nature of God revealed in all their glory, to a world that needs desperately to know the presence of the Almighty.

12-8-85. Birth. There is an old joke that sophomores tell about the German language. Its word order is different from that of English, for it agrees with Latin in demanding that the verb go at the end of the sentence. Germans want to know who did it, and to whom was it done, and what was the temp and the wind-direction at the time, and how old was she, and what color her dress, before they want to know what it was that she did. In his whimsical essay on the subj Mark Twain told of reading a newspaper sentence. It takes up a quarter of a column, he said; it contains all ten parts of speech; it contains compounded words constructed by the writer on the spot, words which cannot be located in the most erudite of dictionaries; it treats of 15 subjects, after which comes the verb, and you find out for the first time what the man has been talking about. But the story I want to use today is about Bismarck, and is very likely apochryphal. When he was the iron chancellor in Berlin he had an Amer visitor; he provided her with guide-interpreter and two tickets to hear him speak in the Reichstag, the imperial parliament. She attended, the great leader arose to speak. He spoke with great force and at some length; he was interrupted with loud cheering, and laughter, and some groans. The visitor wished to know what he was saying, but got no information from the interpreter. She began to nudge him, and implore him in heavy whispers; what is he saying, she asked. Patience, madam, the interpreter replied; I am waiting for the verb. And that is the subject for our lesson for today, texts Matt 1 and Lk 2. Today is 2d Sunday in Advent, that part of the church calendar set aside for prepare ourselves mentally & spiritually for the celebration of the birth of a baby. It was the answer to the prayers of generations, it brought a new revelation of God and a new division of the calendar, and it came to a people who were waiting for the verb, waiting for the action, waiting to be taght and touched and lifted out of the ordinary. And according to the records which have come down to us, it was an extraordinary event, it was a miracle, it broke the rules of the human and of the divine. Everything about that event was above and beyond the natural order of things. Last week we read of the announcement to a young girl named Mary, child of sorrows and troubles, that she would become a mother. How can this be, she asked, since I have no husband? And the messenger replied, in words that echoed the words of the Lord to Abraham, back at the beginning, in Gen 18--isanything too difficult for God to do? And then Mary accepted the will of God for her--let it be to me according to your word. Now today we have the second act in the mystery play, and this time Joseph the espoused husband is at the center of the action. He, poor man, had an enormous and an embarrassing problem. The one he loved and had chosen ~~xxi~~ for bride was to all appearances unfaithful to him. So there had to be for Joseph also an announcement, an annunciation, a verb at the end of the paragraph. Matt 1: 18-25. We have two accounts of the birth of Jesus, one here and the other in Lk, a portion of which we shall read today. They are closely similar while differing in detail. Matt begins his account with a lengthy genealogy, beginning w/Abraham and concluding w/Joseph, which is of little value to us in understanding the relatshp of J to David and to Abraham. For after tracing the lineage to Joseph, Matt then tells us that Joseph was not related to Jesus, It was that fact that presented Joseph his dilemma. Let us look at the record. Now the birth o the Messiah --the oldest MSS omit the name Jesus--came about like this. When Mary his mother had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child. Last time we talked about the Jewish practice of betrothal, but it might not be amiss to remind us all of its importance. It was an engagement, and it was binding upon both parties. It could be broken only if the man gave the woman a bill of divorcement, according to the law of Moses. So binding was the agreemt that if the man died before their marriage she was considered a widow. Still, it was different from marriage; the two did not live together, nor was the marriage consummated until the groom took his bride in a noisy and happy parade to his home and there installed her as his wife. Before that, if she were to be unfaithful, under the law of Deuteronomy she could be stoned to death And that is what Joseph assumed to be the case here. His chosen bride was found to be w/child--a delicate way of expressing what must have been a crushing blow to him. We are told in this sentence what he found out only by a spl messenger, that she was with child of the Holy Ghost. That means that her son was not conceived by human means, but by the creative power of God. There are stories throughout the Bible of births which came about by miraculous means, but the others have to do with an elderly couple's becoming parents after the time. This account is different in that the parents are young and in their vigor, but there is no human father. Matt agrees w/Lk in emphasizing the doctrine of the vifgin birth. As we saw last time, that presents a stumbling block to many people. Two things need be said about it: 1) it is not necessary to a fully-developed faith in J as the Xr of God, as the promised one, as the ultimate revelation of the nature of God. Jesus himself did not demand it of any one he taught; the writer of the 4th Gospel developed a lofty view of J, the word that was present before the creation, without mention of it; Paul was a thorough-going Xn who knew that J was God incarnate, but did not speak of the virgin birth. But then there ~~thar~~ is that other hand, 2) there is no reason to question it, or to throw it out. It is a beautiful story, told with grace and delicacy, of the creative pwr of God. It was the way

a simple, pre-scientific people expàained the unexplainable. J, they knew, was more than human, in his miracles and signs, in his teachings, in his knowledge of the end of this age, and in his death and resurrection. How explain that? the virgin birth was one answer. But in this version it is her husband Joseph who fears, who doubts, who thinks he must have been betrayed. But he was an unusual person. We overlook that man, and we should not. He is the unsung hero of the story. God put the verb at the end of the column, but Joseph had to have the patience to wait for it. He was the first among humankind who had to have the faith to accept what was not immediately apparent or believable. Mary knew she was innocent; she could accept the word of the messenger that the child was conceived divinely, in a miraculous manner. But what must Joseph think? Without being misunderstood, and without shocking any one of us, letus put ourselves in his place. How many of us would respond with, oh, come now, do you expect me to believe that? Why could you not keep your pledged word? We read that he was a just man, which in this context means that he observed the Jewish law. Under that law he had two options. He could expose her to the community as an impure woman who had broken her contract, make a public example of her, as the old translat reads. He could bring her to trial and to punishmt, and all would support him. He had been defrauded, he had been held up to ridicule. The other choice was to divorce her privately, without any outcry. He could give her a writing of divorce in the presence of two witnesses, usually male members of her family, and that would be the end of it. Let her illicit partner take responsibility for the child. That would likely be the human reaction, wouldn't it? But then to him came the message, in a dream. Mary, your espoused, is telling the truth; the child she bears is indeed conceived of the Holy Spirit and it is of God. Joseph heard the voice, and he had the faith to take the leap of acceptance. We too can sense the presence of God, and the word of God, and we too can have the faith and the courage to accept it, even when it means opening ourself to ridicule and misunderstanding. Joseph had the faith and the patience to wait for the word, for the verb. Then came the rest of the prophecy: she will bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus; this is the Grk form of the Hebr name Joshua, and in this line there is a play on words that we miss. Jesus, or Joshua, Yeshua, means Yahweh is salvation. Call him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. Call him what he is, and what he will be, to all mankind. Call him savior, not in the military sense, nor yet in the political world, ofthrones and armies and palaces; call him savior for he will redeem sinners and replace evil with holiness. Matt included the passage from Isa as proof of the immaculate birth, and even transl the Hebr Emmanu-el into Grk, God with us. Then we read the miracàà of Joseph's faihh: he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife. But until she had borne a son he did not live with her as husband. On her side Mary said, I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be to me according to thy word. And we exalt Mary, rightly; but Joseph had a much more embarrassing fact to accept. He had the greatness of soul to take it, and run with it, and be human father to a child begotten of God. Together the two journeyed to the city of David, to be countedin the census. LK 2: 1-7. This is the birth story that is familiar to all of us, whatever our age. The earliest memory many of us have is of that scene, of the enrollmt and Bethlehem crowded with people commanded to be counted in the city of their family, and that stable with its animals and manger because there was no room for them in the inn. We can talk about the impersonal cruelty of a govt that compels people to obey its orders, whatever be their condition; Rome needed to know how many there were, for tax purposes; what did it matter that one insignificant person was heavy with child, that a journey of three days would be torture? We can talk about the lack of space for the couple, as people have done in the 19 centuries since these lines werewritten. We can sing that lovely carol about the little town of Bethlehem that Phillips Brooks wrote a century ago, about the quiet streets and the hush of anticipation. We can make the tableau of the stable room, with living sheep and cattle, and we can see the feed-trough for them that the mother used for cradle, and the phrase swaddling clothes is a part of that memory. And again Joseph is the central figure in the journey. It was Joseph who went from Nazareth to Bethlehem, for he was of the house and lineage of David. Now we know that he not only shielded Mary from what might have been shame, but he has taken her as wife; else she would not have travelled with him. Bethlehem means the house of bread, because it was in a region rich in grain fields; how symbolic, for bread was central to the imagery J later used; he was the bread of life, and he offered bread to his disciples as a reminder of his broken body. In it all is the heroic figure of Joseph. When the baby was born, and was old enough, and when it was safe enough, they returned to the carpenter-shop in Nazareth. Joseph took the boy with his own, and earned the family's livelihood, and taught him, and loved him. The greatest tribute J paid that faithful man was in the model prayer he gave to us. Our father, who art in heaven. To invite people into the family of God, and to liken the heavenly provider of all our needs to the father who feeds and shelters and guides us, is to make a beautiful image by which we can live not only in this season of candles and carols, but in all of the days of our lives. It is also to pay a glowing tribute to the man who had faith enough, and patience enough, to wait for the verb before ending the sentence.

12-15-85. Announcemt Shepherds. A week or two ago there was a piano recital broadcast over the very same radio station we are using this morning. In the intermission, there was, as there often is, an interfiew with the artist, thepianist who was performing. He said something that caught my notice. He said the music he was playing on the program was familiar to all who love good piano music, and yet he played it anyway. He said people sometimes asked him if it were difficult to play the old familiar sonatas so that they sounded new and fresh, and his answer was that that was not the objective. It is not necessary to add a trill or a grace-note, or play a piece at a different tempo, or to do anything that was not in the score just to make the old sound new. The objective was to play itas well as it had ever been played, and let people enjoy the familiar in all its familiarity. That is the way we need to approach the story of the birth of a babe in Bethlehem, the event that makes the Advent season meaningful. It is familiar to all of us, and yet it is warm and appealing because it is familiar. Every year, at this season, as the days grow shorter and the air comes wilder and fiercer, we go back to that stable at the inn, we return to that manger, because in it is food for our bruised spirits and comfort for our tired blood. So today we read and hear again the song and the story, and we know it every word by heart, and yet it is forever new & exciting. Text Lk 2. This IS the month of Advent, the time in the church calendar when we prepare ourselves for the coming of the chosen one of God, the man who was God, the innocent who took upon himself the punishmt that we deserved to get, the lamb of God who became thesacrifice that makes us safe from the midnight passage of the Angel of Death. Love is the motive, for love is the nature of God, love to the uttermost, love even for sinners, love even forthe world that is a stumbling-block to many of us. In the birth of the infant who is the expression of that love we have the gift of God to us, not a stocking-full of goodies, but a person in whom we can have faith. Around that birth, in the soft glow of the light in that stable, wondering people experienced beautiful miracles, and remembered them all their lives. Matt & Lk collected the stories, and wrote them for us, and we set them to music and put them into rhyme. And all of it is familiar, and therefore beloved. Let us hear again the words, and imagine that we are once again small children, for in God's sight we are new-borns, and let our eyes sparkle with wonder and our hearts grow warmand full with memory. Lk 2: 8-20. How would the social secretary to the White House announce that a prince & princess were coming to visit? And who would get the gilt-edged invitations, so understated, so correct? Here we have the report on an announcemt of good news, and there is no TV coverage, no goodyear blimp, no ads at $300,000 for 30 seconds; we also have no social register on the invitat list. The word came to the simplest of people. Shepherds in those days had no social standing; their lives were lonely and boring, sometimes dangerous, but always they were scorned by townsfolk. Today it would be like announcing the arrival of the prince to a gang of migrant workers in the fresh produce-fields, orto the street people in the town who have nowhere to live. And from that wonder--Miss Manners would say social gaffe, God you should know better--we hear the song of the messengers, the first Xmas carol ever sung, and then we see what came of it. There are five things in these verses that we need to think about, in the time we have. First, there is the proclamat, in v.10. The shepherds were filledw/fear, but the messengers put them at ease--have no fear, for, look, I bring you good news. The Grk is ev-angelos, highest or best message, therefore good news, and the source of the Engl word evangelism, -ist. And it is good news indeed, the best news anyone ever heard. Itshall be good news of a great joy, and best of all, it shall be to all people. First we need to remember, and to ponder, that the gospel begins w/note of joy. Joy is happiness stretched beyond all reason. I am happy when things go to suit me; ~~it~~ I am happy when I am well-fed, and warm, and doing the kind of work I enjoy. But joy; joy is something that makes me feel good ~~about~~ even, when there is no reason to feel good aboutanything. Joy is from within, it bubbles up even on a half-filled stomach, or in themidst of a job I detest, or when people do not like me, or the job I am doing. The good news is the sense of wonder at the presence of God where we least expect him, it is understanding the mystery of life, it is seeing the fingerprint of the divine upon all creation, and upon all human relatshps. The good news is of a great joy, and it shall be to all people. Not to Herod in his fortress-castle, fearful of a competitor, so fearful that he would order the massacre of the innocents in that region. Not to Caesar Augustus, in Rome, on the Capitoline hill; he could command the census and all the world obeyed, but the good news the angels sang was not to him. Nor to the chief priests and the scribes in Jerus. No, the word came to the simple folk watching their sheep. Let us not get so rich, so sophisticated, or so arrogant in our education or our wisdom that we miss the good news when it comes to our neighborhood. Because, the proclamat is to all; because all of us need to hear it. First, there is the proclamat, of great joy, which shall be to all people. Second, there is the paradox ofthe divine expressed in helpless weakness. Vv.11-12 tell us of the incarnation; a savior, who is Xr the Lord, which represents the infinite pwr of the creator, now a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger. Should the one sent from the most high God be born in a stable, and then be placed in such an unlikely cradle? Is that not a contradiction? But no, it is not, for it is the wisdom of God that passes our understanding. To the humble came the pronouncemt, and now the gift of God comes to

the rough and lowly. It tells us that God comes into our world, and to those who are able to know him. Some of us are assured when we believe that God is in control of the universe, the comet, the volcano, the earthquake, the flood--isn't it striking that all these come upon us in one package, along with famine and disease--but under control of God. Some are assured to know that the strength of God is greater than any temptat or force we will ever confront. But far more is it to know that God is almighty in strength, and that God is all-sufficient for our needs, and then to know in addit that he is near to us. Not too far above us so we have to go thru channels to speak to him, not on a flow-chart some administrator posts in his office, but with us, like us, caring for us. We need not make a pilgrimage to a special place, to find God near; we need not wear a special garment, or speak a special language, or eat a special food, or recite a special formulary. The incarnation is a paradox, in that the all-powerful comes to us in the form of a baby; it is also an assuring fact that he is near. People try to make things complex, and magical, and fenced it; God simply comes as innocence, as a gift, and to quite ordinary folk. I have heard people argue that if God had anything to say to the present generation he would speak it thru this group, or that, of holy people. They need to hear again the angel-chorus--good news, to all people, the Xr of God, a baby lying in a stable where the beasts find shelter. But then there is another striking thing about that old familiar story, and that is the priority God sets upon what is important, an order of things that we sometimes try to turn about for ourselves. V. 14, glory to God in the highest, & on earth peace, and the ending differs because the ancient MSS also differ. The scholars tell me that the newer version is the more accurate--peace among men with whom he is pleased. Moffatt reads it peace for men whom he favors. But the point is that glory to God must always come before peace on earth. Note that there are two parts to the proclamat--glory, and then peace. Glory is anything that shows the presence of God, and peace is a condition that mortals are incapable of reaching on their own. Peace is not something we get from the united nations, or treaties, or summits, or arms control agreemts; peace comes from giving God preeminence. Whenever we put anything ahead of the manifestat of the presence of God it is idolatry and it will fail. When we seek first the dominance of God in all things, then all these things that we want will be added to us. Nowhere in all the record does it say, seek peace and then you will know the glory of God. Or feed the hungry, or clothe the naked, or find yourselves, even though every bit of that is part of the judgment--when we shelter the homeless and put socks on the feet of the sockless and heal the sick we are doing it unto the least of them, and also unto God. But let us not lose sight of the priority. The grace of God is there for us, when we feel the need, and ask for it. When we do, there will be peace, and good will among men, and no more bigotry or segregation or thievery or traffic in drugs. But we are bound by the proper order; we cannot exalt man til we put God uppermost. But when we do, and we know that all men are children of God, then can there is something worth saving in all of us. And so proclamation, and then paradox, and after that the priority. The procession is next, vv.15-18; the shepherds said, let us go to Bethlehem, to see for ourselves. And they went with haste. Do you know that no amount of carol-singing will make any difference unless we get up and go to see what has happened? The shepherds did not know until they heard the message; hearing it was necessary, but not enough. They had to go to that stable. To those of us who come later, it is not the stabl in Bethlehem that we proceed to; it is wherever there is something for us to do, something to wonder about, something exciting. It may be the work we are given, and that may be dull and routine; but when we go to it on a tiptoe of anticipation it becomes a blessing to life. Work is worship, going to the wonderful is a happy trip. And seeing the presence of God in the lowly is the gift of advent. Then comes the pondering, and the parting, vv.18-20. The shepherds told everyone they met about the singing they had heard, out there in the fields, and all who heard it wondered at what had happened. Mary kept all these memories, and pondered over them. And the shepherds parted, and returned to their lowly calling. Now, I know that the scholars see more poetry than fact in these lines; if these things happened as we have them here, then there would have been later no problem in seeing in J the Xr, the Lord, and the parents would not have been mystified at his behavior. But the poetry is too beautiful, too meaningful, to cast aside. Mary felt her responsibility to God, as all mothers, and fathers too, must do; each child is a gift of God, and an obligation. So we ponder the meaning of it. But then we have to go back to where we started from. However high we reach, however far we see, there is always the return. Not as we came, sure; but there are sheep to be watched and protected, there are things of the world crying out for our attention. There is a letdown after Christmas, that is the test of our faith, and of the extent of our experience with the divine. We do not know what happened to those shepherds in the years that followd. Were they parents of children who heard J preach, who became his disciples; did the memory of their holy night remain vivid and effective? They went, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. In this season of the year, every one of us can join that chorus, and be among the shepherds. For we, too, have seen and heard, and can glorify God because of it.

12-22-85. Magi. One of the most familiar parts of the Xmas story is the part of the wise men who came from the east...oras the old and very bad joke has it, they must have been firemen because the Bible says they came from afar. It is a story that only works in isolated regions among us, and is very likely unkind to some very good people. But the wise men are part of the manger scene and we would not be pleased if they werenot there. There they are, with their plywood camels kneeling, in their bathrobes and wearing pajamas, their jewelled crowns, their cotton beards. Slowly they march to the stable, while the choir sings we three kings of Orient are. It is tradition that they were three; nowhere in the record is any number given. But the tradition is strong and beautiful. Henry vanDyke wrote a parable about the other wise man, the one who never did get there; Gian-Carlo Menotti composed a lovely opera about, the small crippled boy named Amahl and the night those travelling pilgrims passed by his house. My favorite offshoot of the tradition is the short story by O.Henry, that tells of two newly-weds, deeply in love, who have as treasures only her long and golden hair, and his watch, inherited from father and grandfa ther before him. What they gave each other on that magical Noel is part of our literary heritage; the concluding paragraph goes like this: the magi, as you know, were wise men who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Xmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were not doubt wise ones...and the writer told us of two foolish children who sacrificed to each other their greatest treasures. But in a last word to the wise of these days, let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi. And they complete the tableau of significant events around the birth of Jesus. Text Matt 2. This is the final lesson in a unit of four that fills the season of Advent. Next week we continue the story with what happened after. But for today, and for this coming week, we have the climax of the story of the great gift of God to human beings everywhere, the gift of a baby who became Jesus, the Savior, and Christ, the Messiah of God. This month we have returned to the scenes of that miracle, to remember, and to prepare ourselves to receive the gift. We heard the announcemt to Mary, and then to Joseph, and then to the shepherds in the fields at night. Now we see the visitors, the PhD scholars of their time, who came to offer their homage to a king. Matt 2: 1-12. I do not know for a fact whether this familiar story is truth or fiction. Matt is the only writer who told it. You will note that he and Lk gave us the details, and the angel-messages, and the chorus that sang on the hillsides; but you will also note that their accounts do not copy each other. Lk tells us about the birth, as we saw last wk, in Lk 2; Matt skips over the birth altogether. After Joseph heard the voice of God in his dream,at the end of Chap 1, then the child was born in Bethlehem, but where, or how, is not told. What we do have is this beautiful story of these strangers, men of great learning, the research scientists of their day. Some say it is a parable that was intended to dramatize the fact that the Christ was to be for all people everywhere. If those three kings of Orient in fact brought treasures to the infant Jesus, then his family would be wealthy beyond all com pare; they would not have worked in a carpenter shop in a small Galilean village. What happened to the gold? people ask; how much was the incense and the balm sold for? There are those who reply, the treasure paid the costs of travelling to Egypt and back, and for living their until it was safe to return. But there can be no resolution to the debate, for we have no reliable evidence at all. So let us assume the factual nature of the royal visit, for it has a purpose and a meaning for us, whether it happened or not. This purpose, and this meaning, I would like to discuss under four headings, or in answer to four questions. For in this story of the magi we get to the core, to the heart, of the meaning of Advent. First, who are these people? The word translated wise men is the GRk word Magoi, which becomes Magi as we spell the plural of the Latin word magus. Jerome's Vulgate retains the Latin, Magi. The magi were members of a Persian and Medean priestly order, whose teachings were similar to those of the Zoroastrians; some of them were magicians, in a bad sense of the word. Some were astrologers, who noted the passage of the sun thru the zodiac and from its position predicted the future; others were scholars who copied and preserved the wisdom of the past. Part of their relig was belief in the advent of a savior who would rescue the human race from its ills. Because they saw messages in the positions of the heavenly bodies they recognized something that suggested to them that the expected savior had come. What exactly Matt wanted us to see in that star is another mystery of the birth of Jesus. The simplest story is that it was a supernova that blazed forth for some months, or longer, and gave them a message. But there are naturalistic answers; Jupiter and Saturn Mars werein close conjunction 3 times in 7 BC, and in that part of the heavens the astrologers called the house of David. It could have been Halley's comet, which appeared about the right time. Whatever it was, it started them on their pilgrimage. Because they are introduced here as wise men, we can ask, not only who are these people, but also who is wise? There is so much phony sophistication inour world that we need to know what wisdom really is. Wise does not mean knowing a collection of fact, even if it is not disconnected and not superficial. Wise comes with understanding, with perspective, withdiscriminat between what is passing and what is permanent. It is more interested in meaning than in ways of expression, and more concerned with character than w/

James I is the wisest fool in Xendom.

appearance. Students often tell me how disappointed they are when the art course emphasizes the brush strokes of a painting, but ignores the painting itself; or how the rime-scheme or the meter of a poem takes precedence over its meaning. These people were wise in Matt's view because they dropped everything they were doing and came to pay homage to this unusual baby. They were intellectuals, im our day supposedly cold and unemotional, govd by reason, (which they accept by faith) and then scorning faith as backward and childish. Everywhere we need to understand the coming of these wise men to the birthplace, and especially do we need to ponder it long and deeply on a university campus. Mankind cannot make a worm, or explain the origin of a living cell, and yet the smarter we get the more we think we know. All we can do is to think God's thoughts after God, and stand in awe of a creator who could make it all, and then make mankind witha mind to comprehend the greatness of it all. And then, they were foreigners, and that too is part of Matt's meaning. The angels sang of the savior which shall be to all people everywhere; the inclusion of these three kings symbolizes the bended knee and the confessing tongue of all people, in all languages and in all lands.//The 2d question is Where is he? These people were not just travelling to see what the world looked like. They were seeking a savior and they were willing to go to any expreme to find him. God expects us every one to get up and walk, and knock on the door, and look for the lost coin, or treasure. The promised savior did not come to the city where these professors lived and taught. God is too much the gentleman to drop down our chimneys and intrude where he is not wanted. We must feel the need for cleansing and power and life, and we must get up out of the pigsties where we have been living and go to the father. Where is he, we must ask, even if it happens only within our minds and hearts. I do not think we need take an actual pilgrimage to this place, or that, to know forgiveness and the new life of faith; but we do need to seek. When we do, we shall find, in brightness and newness and in an inner peace that no material gain can ever confer. And then the 3d question, Which King? That may be the real reason Matt has included this story of the magi. In the days of Herod the Kg there came scholars who asked, where is he that is born King? That they should ask of one who thot himself King, for instructions on how to find him who is in fact King, is the point of the story, and themeaning of Advent to us. That we should see in Herod all the king we would ever need is the demand of the world around us. Herod had all of the advantages--he had magnificence, Jesus lay in a borrowed feeding trough, among the beasts. Herod had the strength of adulthood, Jsus was a helpless baby. Herod had pwr to kill all the newborns, Jesus had compassion and taught a commitmt to love even the unlovely, even the ones who kill all the newborns. Herod, we read in v.3, had all Jerus on his side, Jesus went unnoticed. This is the crucial contrast of Advent. The wise men discerned in the crowned king of the Jews, no one of importance; but in the baby born to the poor they saw the ultimate truth of God. Every one of us needs to ask, which King are we going to honor? Are we going to bet our faith on the one with the sword, or the one who loves? The basic question of history is how goodness can survive when evil is cunning and has the power to kill. Wrong continually on the throne, right forever on the scaffold, as the hymn goes; but in the shadows standeth God, keeping watch above his own, still the master of history, still guiding his creation. The crafty, the powerful, those who ride in the royal carriages of this world, may seem to be winners; see how people jump to anticipate their desires, see how they feast and frolic. But then comes the voice of the wise among man, and it asks, where is the King? The definition of wise is wrapped up in that question. They saw the spleddour of the palace, and they saw evidences of the powr of the man who wore the crown. But they saw its sham, its play-acting, its vanity and its end. No gifts had they for the impermanent; they sought the eternal. In that is wisdom. Not everything that is visibly pwrful is real; not everything that is real strength is visibly pwrful. May every one of us, in this holy season, stop for a few minutes of quiet to ask, amid the joys of the material, where is the king? The final question concerns what they brought; what offering did they make? First, they fell down and worshipped at the cradle of a new-born baby. That is the first gift we bring, we too. Sensing the great power that resides in the appearance of total weakness, seeing by faith what is to be, they worshipped, they paid homage, they accepted the baby for who and what he was. And then they opened their treasure chests, and put gifts beside the manger. Gold, which is the greatest source of human strife unless it is dedicated to God; our wealth represents our talents, and our time, and our very selves, so we offer it in worship. Frankincense was a rare and compelling aroma that made beautiful to the nose the homes of the great. It is the gum of a tree that grows chiefly in West Africa, a favorite scent of all time. Myrrh is also the gum of an Afr-Arabian tree, and was used as a perfume and also in embalming the dead. All three are symbolic--gold stands for our material gain, frankincense for that which perfumes our lives--learning, devotions, the good, the true, and the beautiful; myrrh represents our sorrows and griefs. All we bring with us when we come. We give of our best, as our confession that all we have is a gift to us. Here is the beginning, as the O.Henry story tells us, of the practice of gift-giving. It is joyous and generous, to give, because it is more blessed, and because God has given of himself to us. Wise men and women are those who know that and who pour out of their full souls all that they can give, as a token of their knowledge of all that has been given to them.

12-29-85. Kgdm of God. Nearly everybody's favorite comic strip is the one called Peanuts. I hate it, of course, because its cast of characters is made up altogether of small children; the only adult in it is the teacher, whose voice comes over as a meaningless squawk. But the reason for the popularity of Chas Shultz' funny-paper world is its theological base; thru the medium of a set of pictures with balloon talk there are deep and significant subjects. One I remember showed Lucy van Pelt standing in the outfield in a baseball game. Everybody knows that the Peanuts team is the world's worst, and has never won a game.. Lucy called to Charlie Brown, on the pitcher's mound--Hey, Manager! Ask your catcher if he still loves me. Obediently, Charlie Brown turns to the catcher & repeats the question. She wants to know if you still love her. Then Charlie Br. turns to the outfield and calls to Lucy, He says No. Then Lucy wants to know why he doesn't love her any more, and once again Charlie Brown relays the question, and then the answer: he says there are so many reasons he can't remember them. Lucy was upset; she said, Really? That's depressing. At that, Charlie Brown gets exasperated. Do you mind if we get on with the game? he asks Lucy. And she said, Game? What game? Charlie Brown, frustrated as he always is, patiently replied, the baseball game. Oh, that is right, Lucy said; I was wondering why I was standing out here. Very likely Charlie Br gave up, with a good grief. It's just a comic strip, and it's just about a gang of small kids, and it's the world's worst baseball team. But many of us may be wondering what we are doing, standing here, why we are even living. Christmas is past, the excitement wound down to untidy wrapping paper and gifts whose satisfaction may have disappeared before the day was out. What now? we may ask. Well, for the next 9 weeks weshall seek answers to those questions. And today we begin w/lesson on the Kgdm of God, texts Mk 4, Matt 22, Lk 18. In these lessons, In Jan/Feb, we shall be taking a look at what J taught about the Xn life, what does it mean, how is it different, why are we standing here. And the focus shall be upon the idea of the Kgdm of God, the ancient dream of the Messiah who would make possible the sovereignty of God on earth, as it is in heaven. That was the core of the model prayer J taught us to pray--that God's will be done here, as it is where God reigns. The point seems clear; the purpose of Messiah, and the birth of the babe of Bethlehem, was to bring heaven in all its spiritual conditions to earth. The Hebr prophets saw the needs, and called for it--a time will come, said Jeremiah, when God would make a new covenant, one that put the law on the inside of man, not something imposed upon them from outside. No longer will there be need for missionaries, or seminaries, or bible classes, for all will know of God, and all will bow the knee to him, and confess his dominance in their lives. What does all that mean? How shall it be accomplished? Those are the kinds of questions we shall deal with, in these coming weeks. Any who would like a list of topics and texts...Now for today we have one of those assignmts I am not comfortable with. We have a little snippet from each of three gospels, because the subject is not a scripture, but a topic. So let us get to it, and see what there is in it. We have three short parables about the Kgdm of God. All of them are familiar to us. What they ask us to think about is the nature of the Kgdm. First, the certainty of its growth. Mk 4: 26-29. This story is part of a pair that only Mark tells. The others omit this one, but they all include the one that folws, the grain of mustard seed, smallest of seeds, but the plant it produces is so large that birds nest on its branches. Together the two seed parables tell us something fundamental about the Kgdm of God. To take this one literally is to confront problems; v.28 has those troublesome words about the automatic earth, that produces of itself, as if it were apart from cause and effect, or even outside the will of God. But this is a command that we live in faith and in trust, knowing in spite of all the evidence that the rule of God in human affairs is certain, it is even inevitable. It is an answer to our worries and our impatience. We want to see things happening; we want instant results. In our career we are impatient to get to the top, in personal relations we want armies of friends who fill our hours with merriment, in our growth we want to be made mature and complete between now and tomorrow. So also do we demand the instant conversion ofthe entire human race. When it does not happen, when the multitudes turn away to their private pursuits, paying no homage and little attn to the rule of God, we are angry, we are frustrated, and impatient. Two thousand yrs of evangelism and the human race is still mired in corruption; we spend an even larger sum for military preparedness than did the ancient Romans, and still do not feel secure; why should it take so long. At that point comes the parable of the scattered seed. A man sowed his seed, and his life went on; he slept and arose, and all the while the seed sprouted, he knew not how. That is one key to the parable; we do our part, & when we see results we do not know how it came about. So put aside impatience. God is at work, & his hand is sure. No human hand can stop the certain triumph of God, however far it appears to go from the path of humble confession. Our faith is not limited to this day, or this year, or even this century. Depend upon the certainty of God's purpose, and not upon the appearance of failure. In another few days we shall welcome another year; I expect to forget to use the right number on my letters and checks for at least a week. Some of us will make resolutions of things we intend to do, or to change; and some of us may be discouraged that we are another year older and still far from what we want to do or be. This little story comes directly to that attitude. Discouragement is an understandable response, but the antidote is awareness of the unstoppable power of God.

We can sow the seed; there is a place for the human hand in the purposes of the divine. But after that the pwr of God takes over. We may not be able to see the growth, or measure it, but in trust we wait upon God. It is his kgdm after all, and not ours. That is the central assertion of the Xn faith, one we are perpetually tempted to forget, or to deny. To trust in the timetable of God is the starting point for our journey. Love is the fuel that motives it. Matt 22: 34-40. Now we are in a different scene, and at a different time. It was a popular activity among the students of the law to try to summarize all of it in a few words. Somewhere I read that in J8s day there were 613 comdmts, 365 negative--things not to be done, the rest positive--things we must do. Surely there is too great a variety for anyone ever to state it all in a sentence. That is the problem of a relig of rules, and every one of us, however lawless we appear, still has a respect for them. The lawyer in this version seeks to entrap J by getting him to summarize, and then to criticise his effort. What is the great comdmt? he asks. In answr J recited two lines from the Torah, one from Deut, the other from Levit. There is no evidence that anybne before had put them together until this encounter. The first is the familiar Shema, hear, O Isr, the Lord your God is one God, and the rest folws. Love to God is the beginning of wisdom and also of faith. But it is easier to say than it is to do, for it means so much more than the few words would say. It means giving one's entire nature to continual devotion to God; practicing the presence of God in every corner of our lives. It is spiritual devotion, it arisés in the willing part of me; it is also mental devotion, for there is that word mind. Many of us measure our dedication by the extent to which we banish mind from our faith. Lewis Carroll, in his fantasies about Alice in wonderland, which modern scholars tell me is a major attack upon the Xn faith and ethic, pokes fun a people who, in his words, believea great number of impossible things before breakfast. Of course they are impossible on the human level; that is why we must believe. But love to God is the beginning point of the Kgdm. And we show it by our love for fellow man. Walt Whitman said that anyone who walks a furlong w/o sympathy walks to his own funeral dressed in his shroud. Care for neighbor is the outlet by which we pour the love we have for God. For the second comdmt is a new way of loving ourselves. Here is a mirror we hold up to our beings. Do you see how you love yourself? the ancient law asked. And when we look into our inner beings, and see how we cherish ourselves, how we wish to live long and avoid pain and have great prosperityand many friends, then we are to underst that other people have the same natures. If we do not enjoy beinghungry, then we can go to the aid of a hungry neighbor wherever he lives. If we do not enjoy being denied freedom, to speak our minds, to live where we please and do the work we enjoy, then we do not demand restrictions upon other people. The msg is abundantly clear in Bibl, that if we refuse to love fellow man we are denying love to God, for they go together. This is the royal law, the law of love, and it is the governing commitment in the Kgdm of God. Trust is the beginning, love is the fuel, and now humility as the understanding of self. Lk 18: 9-14. This is another parable, an example story of the proper attitude for prayer. We must first remind ourselves that these are fictitious characters, for there were many humble Pharisees, and many very arrogant tax collectors. Note also the editorial introduction Lk provides, so we will know how we are to read the little story. It was intended, he said, for those who trusted themselves that they were righteous far above all others, so that they despised them. Lk did not hear the story when it was first told, but it was his tradition, or his conviction, that this was its purpose. Look at me, God, the self-righteous man was saying; I am not like other people. I fast, I tithe, I never miss a service in my church, I go and I do far above all others. Look at that poor publican over there, thinks he is praying, when his entire life is a disgrace. Isn't that a familiar sound among religious people? Let every one of us look into ourselves; what is there that we think meritorious, above the standards of those around us? When we look, we may hear the echo of that fictitious holy man. It sets up a standardso low that anyone can attain it if he wishes. I can be just, if I put my mind to it; I can refuse to extort what others have, I can fast, and show up every time the church doors open, and have everyone notice my presence. That's easy. But it is unattractive, and destructive. Because it puts me at the center of my devotion, and not God. It becomes idolatry because it is based upon the notion that I can command the devotion of God by making points in the way I live. But the tax collector in the story was brutally and crushingly aware of his shortcomings. He did not approach God with a list of his assets; he came knowing his liabilities. He was bankrupt, his checking acct w/God was in arrears, so that he stood afar off, away from the altar. He deserved only condemnation. Because he knew that, he went away justified before God. For God is merciful and quick to forgive the humble and contrite who come to him in humility. It is not the point of the story to condone the tax-collector's work, nor is the point to condemn the religious life of the Pharisee. Instead, it is to go to the exposed nerve in every one of us; what is the motive for what we do? Those who would live in the presence of God must wait upon him, in trust; they must love God and man; and they must ask in lowliness; for humility is exalted and lowliness is lifted up.

Inward morality
MK 7:1-23; Matt 5:21-2

1-5-86. Indiv. Some time ago I bought an item in a local store. It was not available in the shop, but was on order, and was promised one week later. I proposed to pay the bill by writing a check, which to my mild surprise was contrary to the custom of customers in that shop, they mostly managing their finances by small plastic cards w/numbers on them. I offered the usual indentificats, but the nice young lady asked for more proof that I was who I claimed to be. Ignoring the metaphysical implications of that question, which would keep us up nights for some time to come--who am I, indeed!--I said, Lady, how much do you want? I'm not taking anything, and the check will clear before I do take something. And she said, the population has grown too much and too rapidly; we no longer know who people are, and we get too many bad checks. I left the shop, and I have been chewing on that bone ever since. For some time I have noted that the individual has lost, or is fast losing, his place at the head of society's line. Now one must be a member of a group to be recognized. A group at the workplace, a group for health insurance, a group for retirement, mutual funds and housing and buying, a group for those who drive automobiles. Faceless and nameless desk-sitters make decisions which affect our lives, our thoughts, our freedom, our property. My students sometimes ask me what can an individual do to change the way the world is managed. Clear it is that we have come a long way from Walt Whitman, who said that everything in the universe comes down to one individual, namely you; or Arthur Hugh Clough, who ridiculed those who tried to say that the struggle availed naught, that you might as well give up and drown in the syrupy mass of conformity. Say not so, he cried, and people applauded. But how about now? There is a paradox in the Genesis acct of creation which has before been kept in delicate balance; there the contradictory meaning is that we were made of ashes, and dust of the field, but then, in spite of our humble beginnings, we are also told that for us the world was made. The place of the individual in the divine scheme of things is our subject for today, and in it is much to think about; texts Matt 10, Mk 2 & 3. As most of you know, we are in a two-month series of lessons on the theme of what J taught about Xn living. We began last wk w/some words about the nature of the sovereignty of God. Now we have 8 sessions on what J told about the practice of the faith. For today the subject is the worth of the individual. Always there is the friction between the institution and the individual, between order and freedom, between classical reverence for rules, and romantic rejection of restraint. And in religion, too, there has appeared the same conflict. What is the place of the community of faith, and what is that of the believer? Should each person pursue his/her private vision of truth, or is there a list of musts for every one of us? And is there time, in the divine hourglass, for God to care for the individual? Let us listen to the teachings of J on that topic, and learn from him who is our great teacher. First, a few words from Matt about the necessity of holding to the faith whatever happens. Matt 10: 26-31. This is from a teaching about facing persecution, for it was to be expected of all who folwd J. Have no fear, J said, for his teaching will be open to all, it will not be a mystery, or a secret, something decided behind locked doors. And remember, he said, that there is something much worse than being put to death, and that is to deny the faith and lose one's place in the family of God. Have no fear of those who kill the body, he said; for there is an immprtal being which is stronger than death. Instead, fear him who can condemn to the region beyond the family in which God is Father. That means God, of course; Satan may tempt us to break with God and his love, but Satan has no power to commit anything or anyone to punishmt. The sentence is another teaching that God is all-pwrful, and that his judgmt is eternal. Martyrdom is preferable to the spiritual death which follows the expulsion from God's family. And then, to illustrate the value of the indiv, there is the saying about the sparrows. Small things they are, the kind of creature nobody pays any attn to, unless it is to remark upon the nuisance they are. One sparrow more or less is about as far from the important things of life as we can get. The poor ate them for food, for they were sold cheaply. Nobody cares about them. Not so, said J; not one sparrow falls to the ground without the father's will--there is a suggestion that the original saying was even stronger, that not one sparrow alights on the ground without the father's knowing of it. The smallest things come within God's sight. There is a beautiful spiritual about that--his eye is on the sparrow, I know he watches me. But the point here is the worth of the individual. Fear not the persecutor, J said, for God is over all; he knows of every sparrow that falls to earth, he counts the hairs of every head; surely you are of greater worth than a sparrow, than many sparrows. Not that God counts sparrows as worthless; but that by comparison, people are worth more. There is a lesson in those lines for people who have lost their sense of self-worth. I am appalled at the extent of suicide among us, particularly among the young, who might be expected to have so much to live for. But even among their elders, the complaint that I am unimportant, is commonly heard. No body loves me, I hear many saying; family divided and apart, homeless children, unwanted people, the cast-out and the cast-down, make up a large number. To all of the lonely, the separated, the ones who think themselves unloved, come the words of the master-teacher whose only text was love. Do not fear the tormentors, he said, for God knows who you are, and how much you are worth. You are priceless in his sight. Human self-worth must begin with confession and reverence to God, for when we admit our dependence we know forgiveness, and in that is the evidence that God

cares. If God cares, then we matter, we are important, we have worth, we are worthy. While we were yet sinners, Xr died for us. There is no greater testimony to God's estimate of our worth than that. But there are two other stories we must examine in our study of individual worth. Mark 2: 23 - 3:6. At first hearing, these two stories seem to be unrelated; you might even wonder why Mk put them together as he did. The chapter break between them is, hwvr, an artificial division of 2 closely connected events. Both have to do with the place of the institution, and how much devotion we owe it; and where is the indiv's place. Which came first, the institut or the person who needs guidance and shelter? In whose name is the community created? Old John Adams said there was faith in the land before there was orthodoxy, while other scholars, equally as crusty and as brillia nt, see community as preceeding the members of it. The sociologists talk about the social organism, the fascists talk of the state as a living entity in whose enfolding arms every person finds his existence, and nearly 700 yrs ago the head of the Xn Ch declared that there was only one holy church, outside of which there was no salvation. In all that discord there is the teaching of J in these and other instances. It is likely that what we have are representative sayings that are to be considered typical of many others. First is the incident of the sabbath law about harvesting grain. As the witnesses recalled it, the disciples were walking along, and got hungry, so they reached for a few grains of the ripening wheat (if your version says corn, that is the Engl/German word for grain of all kinds) and with their fingers rubbed off the hulls, and ate the raw berries. It was bad enough that they ignored the restrictions upon travel on the sabbath; it was to be a day of rest, in commemoration of the 7th day of creation, when God rested...shabat is Hebr verb To Rest. But more, they were harvesting grain, which was strictly forbidden on that day. It was perplexing to the defenders of the law that one who was popularly taken to be the messiah of God, to bring the reign of God to earth, would so blatantly break the law of God. It was perplexing, it was also contradictory. God's anointed should call all mankind to obedience, he should not set the example of lawlessness. And then there was the other example, another incident selected to go with the grain-field story, to make the point clear. A man with a withered hand was there; it was an embarrassmt to him, it may have hindered his work. And the defenders of God's law watched him, with care they watched him, for they needed an excuse, a case against him, lest he stir up a rebellion against Roman rule that would mean the end of the reign of Herod Antipas. And would it not be possible for J to tell the man, you come back here tomorrow morning and I'll heal your hand? He'd had that condition for years, probably from birth. Another day would not matter, would it? For it was unlawful to heal the sick on the day of rest. In both cases J emphasized the worth of the individ over tradition, over instituts, over the cherished gift of a day of rest. Two sentences make the case, and teach us the proper perspective. One in 2:27, the other in 3:4. The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath...is it lawful on the sabbath day to do good, to save life? And we are back to those sparrows. It is not the end of the day of rest; it is not to be taken lightly, or abolished. It is the covenant in the calendar. But by comparison the day is less important than is man's hunger, or man's hurt. In a sense these two sentences mark the end of the division of the week into sacred and secular, in the same way that the rending of the veil in the temple when Xr died on the cross ended the idea that one place was holier than another. That one day should be set aside, or that one place should be holier than another, was necessary, is still necessary, to people growing in understanding. The 8th Cen Hebr prophets began the attack upon the form, in favor of the content; they knew, and made clear, that God would not accept a sacrifice, however costly, or properly performed, while injustice prevailed, or human needs went unmet. But the words of the prophets must be endlessly repeated, for it is human to seek the routine rather than the inspired, it is easier to say the same words each morning than to speak out of a full heart. Xns who make a ritual of the lord's prayer, which we REPEAT, should understand the appeal of law over love. Three things need saying here. One is that in these teachings we see the reduction of the institution in size and in authority. The sabbath must give way to man's needs. I think we have gone far beyond what was intended in these words, but I also think that Monday, or Thursday, should be as much dedicated to God as is Sunday. If there is a social organism, or a state, or a church, or a university, it exists to serve human needs; when it takes on a life of its own, and considers its own survival as the only thing that matters, then it errs, and cannot live. Second, it matters how the institution is used. It is not the day, or the place, or the authority, that matters, it is whether we use them for good or ill. We can make heaven into hell by misusing it; we can make sabbath a day of pain and suffering instead of a glad time. Dedicated to God, nothing is unlawful; dedicated to self, everything is unlawful. And then the third thing, the theme of these sayings. The purpose of the drama of the divine revelation of God in Xr is the individual. That should make every one of us stand up and shout Hosannah, and jubilee, and glory to God. Man is the measure of God's love, and God's intervention, and God's creation. We are, all of us, worth the whole world, worth the life of God's son, worth all of God's love. What God has ennobled with his own presence, let no one spurn, or denigrate, or belittle. The world was made for man, the Sabbath was made for man. With that, who can count himself/herself as nothing?

1-12-86. Morality. In this life, one of man's continuing struggles is to overcome the temptation to seem to be, rather than to be. Acting a part is so much easier than being something real, that every one of us has to fight off the silken voice of the tempter whispering to us to pretend to be what we are not. The TV personality David Frost wrote a book or two, to teach cultural barbarians how to fake a love of great literature, or fine music, or exotic foods. No one need waste the too brief hours of life reading the best of human creatitity when there are digests of books, and tales from Shakespeare, and synopses for students to use. The motto of the state of N. C. points to the problem of the pretanded good; and because it is in Latin we understand that the ancient Romans also knew of the distinction. Esse quam videri; to be, rather than to seem to be, or to appear to be,or to be seen to besomething that one is not. To be in fact what one appeared to be to the public was oneof the goals of classical morality. It is also a primary lesson in the teaching of J about the religious life. This morning we have before us an incident ~~in the life of Xn~~ that emphasizes the source of evil among us, and also that ancient confrontation between the appearance and the reality, between the tradition and human need. Text Mark 7. This is the 3d in a two-month series on the teaching of J on the Xn life; we read about the Kgdm of God, and then about the worth of the individual, and now today we have a session about morality. It is to many of us a perplexing subject. In it is a great paradox. If I read St. Paul aright, morality is extremely important to the people of faith, but it is faith that is primary, and not obedience. It was Paul's great insight that none of us can obey a moral law--the good we want to do we don't do, the evil we do not want to do is what we do. O miserable wretch that we are, is our cry. It was Paul's contention that every one of us is driven to recognize our failure, and to throw ourselves by faith upon the mercy of God. And Martin Luther also wrestled with the problem; morality cannot save us, and yet we must be moral. Luther even thought morality was man's attempt to escape his obligation to God--morality, he said, is the last bastion of sin. If that is even partially true, then morality is a perplexing problem that many of us would ignore. Since we have banished hell-fire, and made punishmt a subject of comedy instead of tragedy. Love God, and do as you please, has become, do as you please and pay no attn to God. And so we are sick people, we are bundles of nerves, and guilt, and fear, and we drink to excess and drug our brains in an effort to escape the mess we have made. And all the time there is the answer, the solution, right before us. The mission of the Ch is to make clear that there is an alternative. So let us make the proclamat, and read the teaching, and point the way. Ours is not to condemn, or to berate, but simply and stubbornly to hold up the signpost to another way. And so we come to the incident of the tradition of the elders. Mark 7: 1-5, [redacted]. This is one of those familiar episodes that we find so diffic to remember. It may even be that we do not even believe it, so wedded are we to the morality of tradition, and of externals, and of what we eat and drink and do. But it is an idea we must remind ourselves of, for it is fundamental and basic. It is an issue that the Hebr prophets made central, and now the teacherof Nazareth is saying it again. The immediate argument concerned hand-washing, but back of that surface issue were absolutely inescapable questions of devotion and worship. It was a part of the Jewish practice that people washed their hands before they ate anything. The purpose was not cleanliness, any more than the purpose of baptism is to take a bath; in fact it is ofsome interest that the Grk word for wash in this sentence is baptize, or dip, or immerse, in water. The purpose was not cleanliness, but was ceremonial, sacerdotal. It was an acted prayer of thanksgiving for the food, much as we say grace before partaking of a meal. It had meaning, and it was significant, that Jews dipped hands into water, & the rule was sometimes stated, up to the knuckles; but like any other ceremony that is repeated, it could easily become form without meaning, something we hurry through in order to fulfill our obligations with little cost to ourselves. How many people, would you care to guess, say grace before a meal as ceremony rather than as the giving of thanks? I cannot look behind the closed eyes of a person praying, and do not intend to try; but I know myself, and so I have my wonderings about the rest of us. Handwashing was a part of the tradit; it marked the reverent person, it was important. Surely, if God gave the law and the tradition, he would not send Messiah to set aside the law and to spurn the tradition. It was a thing that bothered many people, and led J to make a statemt that he had not come to overthrow, but instead to fulfill, the law. So there came relig ldrs, and they noted the defilemt of the disciples; they ate without the ritual of handwashing. Vv 3,4 are an aside, an editorial footnote inserted by Mk or by someone later, and in my version is placed in parentheses, to explain to non-Jewish readers what was going on. Pious Jews were a people of traditions; they observed the tradition of the elders, not only in handwashing, but in many other things, cups and pots and bronze vessels, were washed, dipped, ceremonially, as a symbol of devotion. But the pupils of J felt themselves liberated from the shackles of the past. The Pharisees, with the best of motives, demanded to know why they did not live according to the tradition of the elders, and the Grk word means Walk, in the sense of observe, or obey, according to tradition. There were interpretats of the law that had been handed down for generations, there were extensive commentaries, and there were explanations and discussions of what it all meant. ThAT was the tradition, and it

mattered to those good people that it be preserved and respected. It is important to me, too. I am an historian, which means that I have a professional commitment to that which has been handed down to us out of the past. It meant something to somebody, once, and we owe respect to them and to the idea, or practice, which they gave us. If we treat the past as of no significance, as somebody said, we are encouraging those who come after us to treat us with the same contempt. Universities exist, in part at least, to preserve and spread the best that the race has thought or done, the good the true and the beautiful. And, yes, the holy. Who are we, to look down our noses at that which once guided men's thoughts and souls, and relegate it all to the ash heap? That was the issue in this confrontation. Why, if you Jesus, are a teacher of the ancient faith, do you students throw away the old wineskins, and banish the old ways, and ridicule the elders? Doesn't it sound modern, put like that? Imagine the child of one of those hell-fire puritan preachers, rejecting the notion of inbred sin, and judgmt, and eternal condemnation; imagine the present generation, going thru the same motions, poking fun at the deacon's wonderful one-hoss shay, because we travel by other means in these latter days; and we make pleasure our god, and self our kingdom. But now we need to turn to the answer Jesus gave to the defenders of the olden ways. Mk 7: 14-23. You will note that we have omitted a section of the response, one in which Jesus attacked the critics because they themselves dishonored tradition in the way they treated their elderly parents. Read it, and consider those who would take social security from retired persons. But what we have is a revelation. Jesus called the people; in Mk the people are always nearby, and come when summoned. It is a literary device by which the author explains and teaches. And then he told a parable--so it is called in v.17--that should make us all sit up and start thinking. There is nothing outside a person which by going into that person can defile him/her. Strictly speaking, this evades the question the Pharisees put to him. They were not questioning what they ate; they were objecting to the pagan practice of eating w/unwashed hands. But it did not evade the meaning. This is one of J's most profound contributions to the life of mankind. It demands that we be within what we appear to be without. It insists upon an inward religion rather than a ceremonial but meaningless one. Hear me, all of you, he says, and understand; you are no longer subject to the tyranny of the external. What you eat, or drink, does not defile, because it goes into the stomach, not the heart, & it is evacuated. It is a declarat of spiritual indep. How many of us spend our energies trying to outlaw, or prevent, the eating or drinking or smoking of something that is external? That, J says, is not what defiles. That is what comes out of the heart, out of the spiritual. Note that there are two parts to the parable in v. 15--1)there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; and 2)the things which come out of a man are what defile him. So there are two parts to the meaning of the parable. 18, 19, explain the first part; all foods are clean, so there is no further need for the kosher eat practices of the past. Of course there are harmful things that we can take into our bodies--poisons, and chemicals, even excess of the healful can kill the life. But that is not the subject; that is the life of the spirit, and eating or drinking cannot affect it. But then comes the second part of the explanation, vv. 20-23. What defiles is what comes out of a person. Out of the heart come the issues of life. Ceremonial purity, meaning that which is external, is only skin deep, and not at all pure. Real purity is within, for there is the place of our decisions. If we eat too much, or drink to excess, it is because there is defilement within that we are trying to escape. When the will is made new, and whole, and healthy, there is no need for prhibitions and rules and ritual washings. And look at the list of evils which come out of an unclean heart. It is the same kind of list that the Grk philosophers would make, but they would not emphasize the inward uncleanness in explaining them. They were wrong choices, that looked attractive but which invariably led to self-disgust and unhappiness. Note that the list is given in a different order in the KJV and the RSV, and in Matt's telling of this event the thirteen evils are reduced to seven, but are not yet the seven deadly sins. Mk's list begins w/evil thoughts and ends with foolishness. I approve the inclusion of foolishness in the gallery of evils, for I am myself sometimes foolish, and I watch with amusement others who are foolish. Note also that slander, pride, and foolishness, are held equally as destructive as fornication, murder, adultery. They are not minor vices, or simple faults, at all. They are major, and betray a darkness within the inner person that is sick unto death. --Now there are two things to emphasize in this story, two things to think about and to take seriously. One is the inner source of our conduct. That is a realm we should be able to control so that we can do what we know to be constructive and productive. That Italian Renaissance scholar who spoke of human nature said that man was the only animal who could choose what he would be, whether angel or pig. But left to itself it is as unruly and as dominant as if it were subject to external forces. The answer of course is faith which makes of us new persons, within and without. The other thing to emphasize is the necessity of our being on the outside what we are on the inside, and on the inside what we want to be considered on the outside. Seeming to be cannot substitute for really being. Morality is not outward behavior, it is inner cleanliness that comes when the will is made obedient to God.

1-19-86 Bees

L*L(*'_. Others. One of the continuing debates among the students of nature is whether life is a jungle in which every individual plant or animal is at war with every other, or whether//knowing or not knowing, all life forms live in a state of cooperation and coexistence. Charles Darwin saw a battlefield in which the instinct was violent. In one of those classic statemts that life scientists love to cite, he said: no animal performs any action for the exclusive good of another species ...each tries to take advantage of the instincts of others. More recently other students have disagreed; Ashley Montagu is but one of many who see what they call symbiosis, life together, in harmony. There are many stories, some of them all but unbelievable, of animals that lost their lives to save another creature. ^We human types have the same problem, of self, or of service. This generation has been called the Me-group, because they seem to show so little concern for anybody but themselves. Career choices are based not upon service but upon the return, and to many the career is not the center of life. Some yrs ago there was a book about the Narcissus cult as if it had not been always present, Narcissus being the person who gazed upon his image in a pond until he rooted and became a flower. Later the students of personality would use the idea to describe those who look out upon the world as if it were a mirror, in which all they see is their own reflection. As one of those narcissistic youngsters put it a few yrs ago, somewhere in the universe sounds the true mystic note: Me. Against all that self-centered half-existence have spoken philosophers and prophets. And it is the theme of today's lesson, text Matt 25. We are in the middle of a unit of lessons on the subject of what J had to say about living, and today the topic is the concern for other people. If Chas Darwin is right, that is a subject that flies in the face of human nature, even animal nature, as if we were not made that way. In which case, it is like saying that the call of God runs contrary to the creaturehood within us, and we must deny our real natures in order to obey the ethical teachings of our relig. And if that is true, then you may expect that most people will either change the ethical demands of their relig to fit their natures, or they will abandon their relig in search of another and more convenient one. In thelast 2000 yrs we have seen both evasions taken. Some would have you believe that since you have the poor with you always you should ignore the needy and the hungry. Or thatthere will always be wars and rumors of wars, so you should incur an enormous deficit to build up the military, while abolishing human services. When the word Christian is used to describe a political party, or a military force, then we see how the moral content of the faith has been cut and patched to meet a present need. J could say that if his kgdm were of this world, then would his servants fight; which is to say, that if we think we must fight for our faith then it is indeed earth-bound. But we have an important parable before us this morning, and I must hasten to read it. Matt 25: 31-46. This is a story that is familiar to all of us. It has been called the most perfectly crafted writing in the whole of Matt, and if it indeed has its origins in the remembered words of J then we must all regret that he lived before there were tape recorders, or he would be numbered among the world's most gifted literary fighres. This is writing at its best, and the truth it expresses is important, and a bit surprising. It is also another piece of evidence that the highest spirit of Judaism was strong in the thinking and teaching of J. Some commentators on Matt argue that the story was remembered and repeated by those Jewish Xns, whose ldr may have been the James who was J's brother, and hadd of the Jerus church, and author of the ltr that bears his name. It expresses the meaning of the gospel as they understood it. Note that it is a parable, a fictionalized description of a fundamental truth, and not a categorical teaching. But that does not detract from its impact or its authority. The prodigal son story is a parable, and yet I have heard many people say that if they only knew one thing about God they would want it to be that story. So he told them a parable to explain the last judgment. When the son of man comes in his glory; note that it is not an if clause, not hypothetical; it is a certainty. This is the glorified son of man who comes to judge mankind; only in this verse is the expression son of man used; in the other sentences the subject is the Kg. The original probably referred to King Messiah, who would come to rule the Kgdom where God is supreme. Before him all the nations will be gathered,v.32. That sentence has caused alengthy and continuing argument over what it means. The Grk words is the one we translate gentiles, peoples, so that some hold that the judgmt is only for those who are not of the family of God; they are judged not upon obedience to the intricate and complicated revealed law, but upon concern for the welfare of humanity. Others reply that this judgmt is for all people, and especially for thosewho know God but who serve him in ways that ignore human need. It may be well to consider both positions, for Matt wants his readers to underst that J is Kg of the whole world, whenhe comes in glory and surrounded by angels, and sitting on a throne. There he separates people into two groups, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The animals that people herded at that time were easily distinguished; the sheep were white, or what passes for white among sheep; and the goats were black. There is no racial or ethnic division intended or implied, altho there have always been misguided people who tried to impose one. So esily were the animals separated by color that they could be parted even after sunset. Sheep are favored over goats, which is a familiar biblical image; lambs and sheep often represent the people of God. Also right hand is the honored position, to which the blessed

are lead. I do not think the story supports the opinion that God is right-handed, though my left-handed friends sometimes complain that this world was not built for them. Then come the two statemts,,first of reward andthen of condemnation. What sets this story apart from the ideas most of us have of relig is the basis upon which the division was made. Notice very clearly that nobody was asked to recite a creed, nobody was asked how long they had been saved, or how often they attended public worship, or how much they put into the plate. I could go on and on, pointing to the great gulf between the criterion for judgmt given in this story, and what many of us think important. One Xn community has just completed a world gathering in which were discussed matters of the language of worship, and whether women should conduct worship; just to the north of us a leading TV preacher changed the name of his organizat so he could expand from moral issues to more definitely secular and political matters. I heard an observer say that the relig right can now control about 1 in 5 of the country's votes; they emphasize prayer in the schools, abortion, and a strong military. Our own denom has seen its mission impulse weakened by quarrels over the verbal inspiration of the written scriptures. I would guess it is still possible to find an argumt somewhere about creationism and natural process, or whether you attend your worship on a Saturday or a Sunday, or whether you dance or go to a movie. But look what is here. The blessed are selected not because they walked an aisle and signed a card, but because they fed the hungry, they gave drink to the thirsty, they greeted strangers, they clothed the naked and visited the sick and the imprisoned. And the condemned were excluded not because they had strange ideas about the Genesis account of creation, or about infallibility or inerrancy or the real presence, but because they did NOT feed the hungry or give drink to the thirsty, they did not greet strangers into their midst, they did not clothe the naked or visit the sick or ever go to the jail to visit the inmates. That's one surprising thing about this little story of the judgmt day. But immediately we notice the other one, even more surprising. The people who were blessed because they comforted the afflicted DID NoT know they were serving God when they did, and those who were condemned because they did not serve the least of these, did not know they were missing a chance to serve God. The parable thus becomes an extension of the great comdmt which we read in the lesson a few weeks ago. Love God with all that you are, was the first and greatest commmt, J said; love neighbor as your self, is the second, and like unto it. And here it is again. In doing a service of the least person in the community, we do service to God.// And another thing. It is not sodifficult that the selfish were unaware of the connection between people in need and the God who is father to us all. But, the sharpest point to this story is that the righteous were also unaware of what they were doing. The saint loses self in service to people, and is astounded when told it was service to God. General Wm Booth founded the Salvation Army a century ago; on the wall of his office there was a sign that read: Some want to live and work within the sound of a chapel bell; I want to run a rescue ship within a yard of hell.// Inasmuch is the good old 17th Cen word of the older version, and it is the key to the story--as you did it not to the least of these my brethren, you did it not to me. When did we see King Jesus hungry, or a stranger, or sick? That is the question, and we have it in advance. Students think they can do better on their exams if they have the questions in advance.Then they can do their reading, and preparation, so they do better. Here, within the framework of this suggestive parable, every one of us has the questions in advance. And about them are some things we need to emphasize, and think about. One is a disclaimer. It is superficial, and unfair, to reduce the teachings of J to limit the relig life to this kind of doing good, with nothing else added. There is much more, and we should not forget it. Doing is always deceptive, for there are things that only God can do, and some things we can do that we should take our time about doing, as in the story of the tares in the grainfield. Relig that has no cross in it cannot save us. But the other side of loving God is caring for others. But there are other points to ponder. One is that each of us will be a part of that division of humanity into sheep and goats, blessed and cursed. We cannot drop the course, or miss the test. Another is that there is a relationshp between this life & the life to come, between the choices we make in this world and the treatmt we receive in the judgmt. And then, there is a connection between the Kg who rules and the least person in need. A continuing Bibl assertion is the identity between God and the underdog; God is not on the side of those who strike others on one cheek, or take their coats, or make them carry the load a mile. Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me. Inherit the Kgdm prepared for you from the very beginning of time; it was a part of the creation and the divine purpose. But the me-people, those who took no thought of the hungry and the naked, did not feel the need to help, for they saw no link between Jesus and those unfortunates. In that blindness is their sin. It was not blasphemy or gross immorality, that condemned them; it was seeing nothing Godly in the weak and the hurting, and it was rejecting the connection between behavior in this life and what comes after. We know God not in the strong, but in the weak; not in the comfortable but in the pained; not in the clean and washed, but in the dirty; not in the rich but in the bankrupt. And we can live only as we love, and have inner peace when concern for others is more important than worry about self. Are we sheep, or are we goats?

1-26-86. Forgiving. Isn't it mystifying the way the human memory works, and doesn't work? Some things we remember, and other things equally as important we forget. It was on one afternoon in the 1590s, in London, the exact date, or year, no one can assert; but on that long-forgotten afternoon there was presented for the first time the play by Wm Shakespeare about the merchant of Venice. One of its themes is the need we all have for mercy, and one speech by the lawyer on that subject is in every way unforgettable. The date no one can remember; the speech everyone memorises and recites, even makes parodies of. It goes like this, and I wish I could do it for you in rolling Stratford measures--the quality of mercy is not strain'd, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes: 'tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes the throned monarch better than his crown; his sceptre shows the force of temporal power, the attribute to awe and majesty, wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings; but mercy is above this sceptred sway, it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute to God himself, and earthly pwr doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew, though justice be thy plea, consider this, that in the course of justice none of us should see salvation: we do pray for mercy, and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy. // That is the theme of an unforgettable dramatic work; it is also the theme of the lesson we have before us this morning, text Matt 18. This winter we are studying a unit on the teachings of J about the Xn life, and today we begin a 5-lesson series on the directions the master teacher gave to his disciples, to those who came to learn of him. The lessons are more practical than theoretical, for they address us where we live and the way we think about life. They amplify and explain the meaning of the shorter summaries of teachings in the sermon on the Mt and in the model prayer that is a part of that collection. We begin with one of the most difficult of all J's instructions, the need to forgive in order to be forgiven. Matt 18: 21-35. Only Matt included this rather lengthy teaching, though Lk 17 may give the original form of the lesson. As we have it here, it should be connected to what is before, when the disciples were quarreling among themselves over who should be first when the movemt we are in shall come into power, much as a political party might dispute the allocation of the spoils when the election is over and we have won. They even thought their discussion so important, and so necessary, that they ventured to refer the matter to the teacher himself for a policy statemt. And, as often happens when we take our petty and earth-bound ambitions to higher authority, they were dismayed and unsettled by what answer they got. The greatest in the Kgdm shall be as little children, they are to be humble, they are not to give offence; // but even if they are given offence they are to consider themselves not hurt, but the offender who has hurt them, or thought to hurt them, has injured himself far more. Evil-doing, in the acct books of God, always bounces back to the doer. Peter must have thought that a difficult course of action, so he put a question about the limits of one's willingness to accept an offence. I have no doubt that he considered himself the very paragon of amiability; the rabbinical code required four forgivenesses before taking offence and taking action. He asked if perhaps seven times wouldn't be about right, seven being the magic number among those people. And, again, he was taken aback by the teaching. The result is that we have another of those perfectly-written short stories, a gem of literary art, about the unforgiving servant. How often shall my brother offend me, and buffet me, and use me for his own purposes?? Peter asked. The question itself means that he did not understand what forgiveness is. What he wanted to do was to keep a little book in which he recorded the number of times someone cast aspersions upon him, or his character, or his abilities; and put a limit upon the number of them that each of his acquaintances would be permitted. The telephone company does that with our calls for directory assistance; (each subscriber gets a certain number,) after which comes the judgmt. Peter, too, wanted to keep a record. How many times should I smile bravely, thru gritted teeth, counting on my fingers the number of times, as I say I forgive you? That is what he wanted to know. He generously offered to forgive, up to a certain point, and he regarded seven as extremely expansive. He no doubt expected to be praised for his kindness and tolerance. But forgiving which is tied to remembering is not forgiveness at all. To say that we forgive someone, & to remember how many times we have done it, is to say, in effect, that we have not forgiven because we have not forgotten. And that is why this saying is so diffic for us. There is deeply embedded in human nature a yearning to forgive slights and insults, but to treasure the memory of our forgiveness. Like the miser and his bag of gold coins, we take our our forgivnesses, and we count them lovingly, we caress them and polish them until they glitter, for our burden and our forgiving nature are proof of our moral superiority. So we clutter our memory-banks with the record of our forgiveness, and we take inordinate pride in our obedient spirit. In his answer to Peter, J cut through all the contractual vocabulary to get to the heart of Xn living. Do not think of setting limits to forgiveness, he said; do not remember how many times a brother or sister has offended you. Not 7 times, but--and here the original Grk can be read two ways, either "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven;" the number could also be read, 77 times. However read, the meaning is clear; the two perfect numbers 10 and 7 are multiplied together, and then multiplied that number again by 7. Despite the restrictions of a mechanical mathematics, the result is not 490, but

He who seeks revenge must dig two graves.

rather it is infinity, it is immeasurability, it is limitless. Just to forgive someone 490 times, is not the goal of Xn living; for that would mean once again that we are clenching our fists, and forgiving but still remembering, adding up the figures, being sullen and filled with ill-will, and just waiting until the self-centered neighbor offends us for the four hundred and ninety-first time, so we can strike him a mighty blow, and think ourselves to be commended. We say we should count to ten before we give free rein to our temper; this little story tells us not even to start counting, that never is the right time to stop forgiving and turn to retaliation. Martin Luther King Jr said that old law about an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. There is no limit to our obligation to forgive and forget. There never comes for us a time when we can in truth say that now you've gone too far, that was the last straw, I have taken all I intend to take, so now I can strike back. Whether it is the first slur upon our behavior, or the 490th, or the 10,000th, we act upon the principle that the person who tries to hurt us will, in the long run, hurt himself. In the short run, where we all have to live, it takes patience and strength of will, for attacks upon us hurt. If we remember them, and perhaps even cherish them, as proof of our ability--for no one hurts the incompetent, but all pity them; in the child's game of king of the hill it is always the person on top who is the target of the mob--if we remember them, then they fester within us, so that they even deprive us of the very ability that occasioned the jealousy in the first place. It was Richard Nixon, in the depths of his humiliation, who said, those who hate you can't win unless you hate them--and then you destroy yourself. That is the meaning of the little story of the need for unlimited forgiving. But then it became the occasion for the parable of the unforgiving servant, and that is a beautifully crafted bit of literary grace. It expresses the principle of the Lord's prayer, when we are instructed to pray for forgiveness, even as we forgive those who trespass against us; and it illustrates the teaching that we should not spend our time trying to get the tiny mote out of another's eye, when we have an entire builder's beam sticking out of our own. As we need forgiveness, so we forgive. As Shakespear put it, in the course of justice none of us should see salvation: we do pray for mercy, and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy. There is a hymn we love to sing, about the rock of ages that has a place in it to shield us from the storm; could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone. We owe too much to hold others to accountability for the pittance they owe to us. There was a king who had servants; in the language of the parables the king often represented God, and the servants act the part of us all. This servant must have been especially trusted, for he owed his king an enormous debt. Ten thousand talents, to be exact. It is all but impossible to translate that into today's devalued currency, for a talent was not a coin, it was a weight of precious metal; it is enough to say that it was an enormous sum. The servant could not pay it, but was pardoned and not sold into slavery, with his family, to punish him for his run of bad luck. Every one of us is heavily indebted to God, for every sin is an enormity beyond our capacity ever to make restitution for. Sin is rebellion against God, and putting ourselves on the throne of our lives as rivals to God, and thinking ourselves victorious over God, who lost the fight with us, and no longer matters; God might as well be dead to many of us, for we face the temptation to live as if God were not, and that God did not rule history and also our insignificant selves. In the story the king forgave the heavily indebted servant. He then went out and found a peasant who was indebted to him. Again the amount cannot be computed, but it is piddling in comparison to ten thousand talents. Someone estimated that 100 denarii, or pence, was 1/600,000th of the debt the servant owed. Pay me what you owe, he commanded, and when that servant fell on his knees and prayed for mercy he found none. The lordling above him had just come through a similar experance that should have taught him to be merciful; he has just had an enormous debt cancelled; he had received a blessing that should have made him overflow with good will. But not even hearing his own words repeated to him--have patience with me, and I will pay you--made any impression upon the skin-flint of his person. Every one of us stands in that same witness-box; we too have been forgiven much, for we too owe much. And there are those we meet who put themselves into our debt, but hurting us, by pulling us down from our place of service and duty, by holding us to scorn. How shall we handle that? The lesson here is that we are forgiven only as we forgive. Of course there is no limit to God's pwr, or love, or mercy. But as we fail to see our own shortcomings, and our own need to be forgiven anew with each passing day, so we show that blindness in the way we store away the slights we receive, and withhold forgiveness from those who sin against us. The thrust of the story is at its end, in v.35, and it should stop us short, and set us to thinking. The forgiven servant is returned to the status of unforgiven, the pardoned one is sent away to punishment, his crime once again held against him, and that because he did not himself forgive. It is therefore a parable of great and important truth; it tells us that there may be memories, and grudges, and stored-up wrath, within us, that can cancell the cancelled debts, and hold us accountable for them again. If we forget that we have been forgiven of debt owed to God, if we forget that we have received mercy, we must expect ourselves to be forgotten unless we give mercy. The beatitude says it clearly: blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

2-2-86. Samaritan. One of the greatest thrills that can come to a teacher is to have someone show enough interest to ask a question. In theseddays it is also a rare and unexpected event. Last month in the Doonesbury cartoon a prof was lecturing, when a student broke in to make an apt and thoughtful statement. In amazement we saw the prof stop, and say, A response. I got a response. And to the student he said, who are you, lad? Where have you been. Don't be afraid.// Much of what every one of us does is like firing arrows into a dark forest, never knowing where they fall to earth, of what their effect. Maria Tallchief, the Osage Indian princess who became prima ballerina and founder of the Chicago Ballet, said that she hated faces that have no questioning in them, no quest for wanting to learn more, look at more, see more, be more. We do not need to hate the lack of curiosity wesee about us, but we cannot avoid pityingthat person who is content today to know nothing more than he/she knew yesterday, or last year. So it is a thrill to hear a serious, thoughtful question. Today we have two of them, and the answrs to them are worthy of our attention and our thought. Text Lk 10. This winter we are in the midst of a series of lessons on what Jesus had to say about living the Xn life, and today we have the second of five lessons in a unit on directives to disciples. Last wk it was on the fact that there can be no limit placed upon forgiveness; to day it is the teaching that there can be no limit placed upon neighborliness. We have this teaching because a man learned in the law put two questions to a person he probably thought unqualified to teach an expert anything. Lk 10: 25-37. Now, there are a great number of things we can say about this familiar and pointed story. It is, like others we have read in the past weeks, another gemof the story-teller's art, a short story without a single wasted word, that compactly paints a picture, puts in characters, and enables us to see ourselves, and our real beings, and our world, in a way we had never before seen them. That is what great literature does to us. First, we should notice the diffs between the way Lk reports the incident of the summation of the law, and the way Matt wrote it, in Chap 22. It was just a month ago that we read and discussed the Matt account. There the question came from a lawyer to Jesus, not, as here, from Jesus to the lawyer. In Matt, it was Jesus who put together two familiar commandmts from the Hebrew scriptures in a way no one before had done. The lawyer put him to the test, remember. What is the great comdmt in the law? he asked, and J replied w/words from the Shema, the most familiarof all Hebrew scriptures--Hear, O Isr, the Lor our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. To that thundering command he added words from the Levitical code--you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Together these two phrases comprise the foundat upon whic all the law & the prophets depend. The same story of the lawyer's question to Jesus about the first among all the laws is given in Mk 12. There the lawyer commended the answer as the correct one. But here we have the question and the answer turned around. Some say this is another version of the same incident; others, that it an entirely different encounter. Here we can read between the lines without doing immeasurable injury to the scripture to guess that the lawyer was sincere, that he really wanted to know, that even though it was his job in his society to know the intricacies and fine points of the law, he was still willing to learn. We are told, in an editorial introduction, that it was his purpose to put Jesus to the test--old version, tempted him. We should read this not as sneering, or belittling, but rather to sound him out to the full. The question he asked, the first of two, to excite any teacher worth his chalk dust, revealed the great gulf between where he was and what the good news of God in Christ revealed. What must I DO to inherit eternal life? he asked. Notice that here the question is not what is the first, or the greatest, comdmt--a matter of surpassing interest to a Jew that might not strike a Gentile as worth the ink to write it. Here it is of much more universal concern. One of the most frequently-asked questions in the ancient world was that very one. Is there any way in which we can escape the inevitable end of life as we understand it? There were mystery religions that claimed to know the secret, there were magic words and incantations people guarded and related to novices in whispers. All testify to the over-riding concern among the ancient people for some answer to the haunting fear of the unknown. Did the young rabbi Jesus know of some formula that would work a stronger miracle, did he know the right words of some occult cabala or strong mantra, or some way of offering sacrifice that would permit the knowing one to survive the shock of death? Notice, too, what he asked. Eternal life does not mean that in this life we continue forever; it is not a time, but a quality, of life. The eternal was another name for God; eternity is that realm where God lives. Time is our dimension, eternal is God's realm. To inherit eternal life means to live life to the fullest dimension, to know, even in a secularworld the calm confidence of the eternal life. In means life without limitation, life that is broad and deep, and rich and full, life lived prudently but unafraid. And it is the Xn proclamat that eternal life, in its entirety, is available to those who in faith ask God's mercy. Inner peace is not something we have to earn by something we do; it is the gift of God to all who believe, who become children of God by faith. None of us can ever do enough to earn God's favor; what we can do is to accept as small children what has already been done for us, take it as an unearned & unexpected gift. But here J chose to ignore the fact that the question was the wrong one. What was even more important

to him was the attitude behind it. What was it like? So he asked the lawyer what his law books taught him. Note that he did not ask what was in the law; instead he asked how he read it. That means, how did he underst it. His answer was the same as that J had himself given, as recorded in Matt & Mk. We have no way of knowing whether the lawyer replied as he did because he had heard J give the declarat of the law of love, or had heard people talking about the authority w/which he summarized the essence of the law. Or, what is also possible, that he had arrived by himself, independently, at the same clarity of vision. That, if valid, means that J was not alone in his day in recognizing the soul of God's revelat to the Hebrew people; that man could be fully human, and his life be rich and satisfying, only when he fulfilled his obligat to love his creator with all that he was, and then to show that love in the respect he showed his neighbor. Thus the lawyer spoke. The teacher marked him an A. Very good indeed, J responded; do this, and you will live. Notice again that the subject is living and not living, and the key to living is faith that flows out into love for fellow man. But the lawyer must not have believed his own reading of the law, or was painfully aware that he was not living it. We are told that he attempted to justify himself by asking yet another question. You have agreed with me that eternal life comes with love for God and love for neighbor. But who is my neighbor? how far away from myself does my obligation go? Where can I draw a line & stop loving and begin to hate, or to call evil, or flaky? How little do I have to do to show my kinship with mankind and my love for God? Isn't it disturbing that many of us do not think of pouring out what abilities we have, without limit and without recompense? Peter, as we saw last week, wanted to know how many times he should forgive before be began to crack heads. The lawyer wants to know how large must his village be. Students want to know how little they must read, or learn, to pass the course. Profs want to be sure they do not have too many courses, or more than a handful of students. Everywhere people seem anxious, not about where is the greatest extent, but where is the least, to concern them. And in answer J gave no rule, no direct answer at all. Instead, he told one of the most familiar of humankind's stories. What a shame that we still do not understand it, or accept it. A man went down from Jerus to Jericho. It was a main east-west highway; it was 17 miles long, and it went down from the mountaintop to the Jordan river, a drop of more than 3000 feet. He was mugged, as happens even now; he was stripped of whatever clothing he wore. In that day anyone could identify anyone else by the robes he wore, and the way the tassels were tied on its fringes. But this man could not be identified. Was he pious or pagan, native or alien, fair skinned or dark, one of us or one of them? It is the point of the story that no one knew. He was unconscious, so we could not know what language he spoke, or what accent was on his tongue. Past him came first a priest, and then a Levite, both leaders in the community. Today we would say President of the College, perhaps, or Mayor of the Town, or Senator. Both went by, for their own reasons not willing to get involved, or to get their hands messy, or to miss a worship service. But there passed a Samaritan, a member of the hated race, one outside the narrow confines of orthodox Judaism. He treated the wounds, and bound them, and then took the wounded man to an inn, paid for three weeks lodging, and promised to pay for treatment. That was the story, and like the master teacher that he was, J then drew the man into it by asking his judgmt. Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among robbers? The lawyer was still unable to say the name Samaritan; instead, he said it was the one who showed mercy to him. And J closed the incident; go and do likewise. Now we need to do some thinking about this little story and what it means. First, very definitely J changed the question to another, and deeper one. He did not ans the question the lawyer put. That was, who is my neighbor. His answer was to a vastly different question: to whom can I be a neighbor? The lawyer was looking for a limit to his love for fellows. J drew a neighborhood without limits. The extent of our neighborhood is determined by the way we see ourselves. If we think of ourselves in a restrictive way, then isour neighborhood a small one. Does it require our language, or our relig preference, or our race, or our economic grouping? When is our neighbor easily recognized. We will befriend the most bigoted of racists, or the most oppressive of tyrants, or the most selfish of rulers, if they fit our definition of our selves. But J was stressing the widest definition of humanity. The wounded man was nobody who could be identified and categorized. He might be priest, or Levite, or even Samaritan; no one could say. But he was clearly human, and that is essential. All other tags we put on people are unimportant. Not economic status, or philosophy; not race, not nation; not relig denom. The world we live in presses us to see ourselves in narrow slots--worker or manager, American or Libyan, law-abiding or criminal, immigrant or native, hundreds of slots. But humanity is really one family, the world is one neighborhood. When we find ourselves at the deepest level of our existence we will no longer segregate, or terrorize, or embargo, or ridicule, anyone. Human we are, said the Grk playwrite; when humanity hurts, we go to help. An injustice done to any becomes an injustice done to all. Who is my neighbor? we ask. And from God comes the answer: who is in need? to whom can you bea neighbor? for your neighbor is anyone who needs your help. Show mercy, therefore, to make neighbors of all of humanity

include only

are only males my kind? or only women or blk or white? Or is it humanity that is my nature?

2-9-86. Possessions. Many yrs ago, half a lifetime, or so it seems, there was a basketball coach by the name of Bones McKinney who worked for the college in which I work. He was a bundle of color and originality; he spilled over with personality. One day, after his team had played a miserable game, he began a practice session by showing them a basketball and pointing to a hoop. This is the ball, he told them, and the object of the game is to make it go through that hoop. Sarcasm is not always gentle, but there are times when every one of us needs to get back to the fundamentals, of life, of profession, of faith. Again, many yrs ago, more than half-a-lifetime now, when I was much younger, still given to games, and ideas, and questioning the verities by which the earth turned// A friend and I enjoyed an indoor sport that gave us much juvenile pleasure. At the worship hour on Sunday mornings we went to hear a local preacher, and we pretended we were heathens from another continent, or aliens from Mars (we read Edgar Rice Burroughs in those simpler days). From what the preacher said we tried to construct the essence of Xty. And it was not easy. Could a stranger discover the good news of God in Xr by hearing us talk, or watching us live? That is the theme of the lessons we have in these winter weeks, and the back-to-the-basics is our subject for today, text Luke 12. Some would argue that it is not necessary to re-state the basic proclamation of Xty in every worship service. I have heard contentions that worship is possible only to the family of God, and that evangelism is a different endeavor and should be done only outside the temple. However, this term we are considering a series of lessons on what J taught his disciples about the Xn life. It takes us back to the ABCs of the faith, back to the basketball and the hoop. There were sessions on individual worth, on inward versus external morality, on forgiveness// and on the good Samaritan & his neighbor. Now today we have another of the fundamentals, and it concerns possessions. It is a matter that must be important, for some word-counters with nothing better to do have reported that in the Gospel record of J's words, almost 1 in 4 have to do with the things of this world. One of the 10 Comdmts tells us to have no other gods before the Lord our God, and that is the foundation-stone of the house in which lives peace and contentmt. It is when we try to put any other thing or being// first in our scale of values// that we start down the path that leads us to something less than we were created to be. One of the most popular of substitutes for God are things, possessions, titles to property. One of the most seductive attractive of human activities is storing up treasures more than we can ever use, or enjoy, for whatever reason, and for whatever reward. But it is a fundamental of the faith that spiritual growth rewards us, while amassing things does not ultimately satisfy our needs. It is a truth that must be repeated not seven times, but 70 times 7 times, for it constantly eludes us in this life. We cannot avoid being bound to the world, for we are a part of it; but we also cannot avoid rejecting the clocks by which the world measures time, and the scales upon which it weighs out values. We must live in time, but we must always do that// with our eyes fixed firmly upon the eternal. Nothing that is visible or tangible in this world is forever; that is the lesson we must proclaim, and repeat, for it is fundamental. But let us listen to a teaching, and another in a series of classic stories, from the master teacher. Lk 12: 13-21. There are two brothers in this scene; one of them is present, and is heard to make a complaint; the other may or may not be present. We do not know. The passage begins in the middle of a longer and perhaps much more important discussion. Note the beginning lines of Lk 12--in the meantime, which means that something els was going on at the same time. But while that was taking place--and it was the plot of the relig ldrs, the convention presidents, the president of the vestrymen, to trap him--while they were setting their petty traps, he Jesus began to teach his disciples about the real presence of malice in the hearts of the outwardly pious. Beware them, he said; and have no fear of them, he told them, even if they kill the body, that is the end of their power. And there are things much worse than that. It was an important, even crucial class session. The disciples would very soon need to know what he was teaching, because their examination was not far off. When they bring you before the courts--of relig authority, or political power--do not be anxious about what to say, he told them, for the Holy Spirit would tell them in that very hour what they ought to say. And then, right in the midst of that teaching session, there came an interruption. One of the multitude rudely broke in with a private concern of his own.// It is one of the burdens of the teaching profession to be interrupted with a distraction in the middle of a seriouslecture. A loud & persistent noise outside the room, someone opens the door thinking the room empty, a student is suddenly afflicted with a thunderous coughing spell. (X) The most irritating, of course, is the unthinking student. Just when the teacher is making a significant point, it has been known to happen that a student would raise a hand to ask what is the assignmt for tomorrow,;or when will we have the next test. Bang--goes the fragile construction put together with such care. The antidote is not, as some class conveners would have it, I cannot in truth call them teachers; it is not to forbid all questions. It is to keep one's patience and try to make a truth out of the uncaring student's intrustion. That is what happened here. // Master, Teacher, a nameless man broke in, bid my brother divide the inheritance w/ me. His mind was not on the subject of the teaching at all; it was off brooding over a wrong done him. He was like those students who go to an important game but do not watch it; they are waving

one man in the crowd did not care about the lesson. (X) It breaks a magic spell some time in the making, that cannot be recaptured.

signs before the TV cameras--dear Dad, send money. J was talking about the coming persecution, abou the dark night of the soul, and that good man was thinking only about his father's estate. And he may well have been wronged; it was not an uncommon thing. Jewish law required the older of two brothers to divide the inheritance so that the younger brother would have a share--usually not a half, But but some. And he wanted his. He had a grievance that weighed more heavily upon him than the coming storm of executions and persecutions. It is impossible to read J's response to him without hearing a note of sternness, even of anger. Man, he called him, reducing him to the lowest denominator of our existence, and at the same time exalting him to the greatness of our common humanity. Man, who made me a judge of such trifles as that? It was a trivial pursuit; however important to the lawyers, the dividing of inherited property is in the long view of eternity extremely small potatoes. And then, like the master teacher that he was, he did not lose his temper, but turned the undoubtedly irritating intrusion to good use. He turned to the entire crowd, and he spoke using plural pronouns // for he was speaking not to that rude hillbilly but to all of mankind. Take heed, and beware of all coveteousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. Here I prefer the older translat, the one I grew up with--a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And I like it because it has in it that word things. But both readings remind us of the comdmt about coveteousness. It is the most difficult to obey, for it is within us all to try to keep up with the Joneses, or to have the neighbor's car, or A-frame cabin on the blue ridge. Paul in the Roman letter said that it was the law against coveting that made him first aware of sin; all the other comdmts he could keep; he was found blameless, until he came to coveting, and that undid him. There he needed forgiveness, for he was guilty, as indeed we all are. But see how J pointed unerringly to the core of the problem: a man's life does not consist of the things he possesses. He leaped two light-years beyond the squabble between brothers over the division of the property, to get to the contents of real living. He did not say what that is; he made it very clear that what most of us define as important in life is not living at all. There is a proverb in many languages; the form in which I have it comes from 11th Cen Rabbi--when told of a person who had acquired great wealth, a wise person replied: has he also acquired the days in which to spend it? We all need things; we cannot live without them. We pray for our daily bread, and that means plows and threshers, it means grinding mills and something to catch the flour in, it means mixing bowls and oil and leavening and loaf pans and ovens, maybe even a knife to cut the bread with. We need shelter, and at least a minimum of clothing. J took bread and blessed it and broke it to show us how God intended to restore the relatshp w/mankind. We need things. But to make them the purpose of living is to die before we even start. We need markets and packaging and retail shops; we may even need cash registers and pocket calculators. But they are important because they make possible what IS important. If the businesses in my town are more interested in accumulating property than in serving people who need, then the aim is off. If the college commits millions to a sports center but not one dime to a classroom, then it betrays its mission. If a // (ed church thinks more of its stained-glass or its spire than of the human soul, then it stands condemn This verse 15 of Lk 12 is one of those major statemts that define the essentials of relig living; note that it was the result of a boorish and selfish interruption. But that was not the end of it. J then told an unforgettable parable of misplaced values and distorted views. There was a rich man whose land brought forth plentiful harvests. There is a strong temptat here for an historian to relate this to the agricultural programs in this country in the past half-century; I shall stoutly, if regretfully, resist it. His barns were inadquate for the glut of cheese and grains that he produced. Listen to the possessive pronouns: MY crops, MY barns, MY grain, and MY goods, MY fruits. Where, in all this boasting, is any awareness of God? He did not deny the existence of God. Nor do we, most of us. But he simply ignored God, as do we, many of us. In his acct book there was no place for God, and in his thinking, no need for God. And, he reasoned to himself, when he had stored all HIS goods, then he could say to his soul, take your ease, eat, drink, be merry. His whole life consisted in the things which he possessed. But God said to him. Notice that God entered the story after a conjunction, and in that is the tragedy. He had no need to give thanks to God; he was master of his affairs. BUT God always has the last word. The infinite can always outlast the finite; eternity is imperishable. Things rust, and rot, and spoil. And there is a virtue in finitude, of things, and of life itself. It is that, for those who can see, the visible is not the real; time, like a river, bears all her sons away, and with them the things they lost health and peace and life to obtain. But God called him Fool, and that is the judgmt. He anchored his being on shifting sands, and not on the rock. This night your soul is required of you. Dr. Faustus, you made your contract with the prince of this world, and now the debt falls due. So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. For where our treasure is, there will be our hearts also. Treasure does not follow hearts; hearts follow treasure. That is the way the world works. Back to basketballs and hoops. Back to basics. Only God can fill empty shells with the richness and the joy and the peace of life lived to the full.

2-16-86. Peace. Today is something of a special occasion, for we have before us a lesson based upon a text from the sermon on the mount. For reasons I cannot understand, but must guess at, we spend much of our time avoiding that marvellous collection of teachings about the Xn life. It could be that we think it so familiar that it would be valuable time wasted to make it a series. Or it may be that we do not like it because we do not understand it, or even worse, because we do. 30 or 40 yrs ago, when I was your age, it was a common thing to have a study group in the church to do the sermon on the mount, line by line and word for word. And because its teaching puts pressure upon us where we live, at that time the great debate among us was whether it was intended to be the life-style for the Kgdm when it made its appearance, or was it the ethic of the interim, a time not now, to be sure, but at some future time between two events, both of which I have now forgotten. And there was another group, small, and generally suspect as subversive, who took it for the here and now. And in the yrs since, as I have aged beyond all recofery, I have been saddened to move into a world in which even confirmed believers do not know the sermon, and in which even those who do know it write it off as a visionary dream not to be taken literally. The collection itself deserves careful study, for in it are the basic texts that are expanded and explained more fully in everything else that was recorded of J's teachings. It has been a long time since anyone accepted these sayings as one sermon, delivered only once. Instead, it is clear that these are adages and maxims and proverbs and illustrative stories that were told many times, to every crossroads crowd that gathered. Instant electronic communications are destructive of creative teaching. But in a day when very few could read, and there was no printing, a teacher, or teller of tales, could repeat materials with little fear that anyone would say, you said that once already. Out of many discourses, and teaching sessions, what we have here are the best loved and treasured of those teachings. While every parable and teaching have their roots in this library of wisdom, wehave 2 versions of it, in 3 chapters of Matt beginning with chap 5, and in Lk 6, with parallel passages scattered all around. As both versions are organized, they begin with a series of secrets of happiness, which we call beatitudes from the Latin word for blessed. Blessed means happy in its deepest and truest sense; we could read the sentences to say Happy are you if you are poor in spirit, the way to be happy is to be capable of grieving, and so on. Another reading would be congratulations to you, for you have discovered the keys to the kgdm, you have hit upon the mystery of the ages, for you know how to live. Some say Matt intended 10 of them, which is a bit hard to find, for they say he was providing a new version of the comdmts; others count 8, and call them the new musical octave to sound the harmony of the universe; others list 7, the sacred number of completeness. And occasionally the gospel writers included a beatitude saying at some other point in the story, which suggests to us that these are in fact collections of teachings and not one lecture once delivered. Many yrs ago I heard a preacher deliver a series of vespers sermons on the theme, the lost beatitudes, based on texts not in the sermon but beginning with the word blessed, or happy. If happiness be our goal in life, then we should devote ourselves to study and thought on these brief lines. About 400 yrs earlier Aristotle wrote a book about how to be happy, and a comparison of the two sets of instructions is worth the time it takes. What makes J's word startling and new is that he seems to turn traditional human values on their heads, and say just the opposite of what we would say if asked. One other thing about them before I proceed to the one we are assigned, and that is that they are so short and so simple that commentary upon them seems superfluous, an unnecessary load placed upon their clarity and incisiveness. For today we have 7th Beatit together with comment upon it from another part of the sermon. Matt 5: 9; 38-48. The fondest and most persistent dream of mankind is for peace. Most of the ancients, and many of the moderns, greet each other each day with a prayer for peace--pax vobiscum, namaste, shalom. To the Hebr, peace meant much more than the absence of armed conflict. It meant health in its widest sense, it meant well-being, it meant a harmony between the created order and the creator, and a harmony between God's creatures and nature, and each other. It applies just as much to families, and to neighborhoods, and towns, as it does to the Pentagon or the air force. A jarring disruption between husband and wife, or between parents and children, is as great a shock to that harmony as is the used of organized warfare between countries. The probl is that peace constantly eludes us even tho warfare has become so horrible that mankind may not survive another major war. Most of the troubled spots of earth today involve a tiny minority of favored people who are trying to hold on to power and wealth against the claims of an enormous majority in numbers. In Afghanistan, in S. Africa, in Ireland, in Ethiopia, in the regions abound Israel, and other places, that is the case. And some of those embattled minorities, and one or two of the aggrieved majorities, there are atom weapons. That terrifies me. War is a way of life among those peoples, and it is a profitable business to the merchants of weapons. My president amazed me a week or so ago when he said in a news conference that he wanted to send military aid to a crowd of rebels in east Africa, but he wanted it to be covert rather than overt. I have great admiration for that kind of logic. There is in Washington a Center for Defense Information that keeps records on warfare in the world. Between

1980 and 1984 six new wars began, with over 4 million people involved in combat. 45 of the world's 164 nations were in some way connected with these wars. The number of killins can only be estimated between 1 - 5 millions. Of longer-term hostilities, 10 are in the Mid-East/Persian Gulf, 10 more in Afr/Asia, 7 in Latin Amer, 3 in Europe. Five are conventional wars--a phrase that has a giddy sound to it--while 35 are internal guerrilla uprisings. A rough estimate is that these wars consume $100 bill each yr, while half the human race goes hungry every day. It is not a pretty picture, and I am sure I do not need to tell you that. In spite of the ugliness we pay homage to the leaders who direct that violence. Who was it who said you can no more win a war than you can win an earthquake? Or what French leader said that war is a series of blunders, and the winner has by accident made one fewer than has the loser? To that kind of world come the words of J--happy are you if you are a peacemaker, for they shall be called sons of God. Peace was central to J's teachings--my peace I give unto you, not as the world knoweth; it was the prophecy of the angel chorus that sang to announce his birth; we call J the prince of Peace. But we continue to study war, and to beat plowshares into spears, and to impoverish the earth with destruction rather than construction. How could it be that the peacemakers stand higher in J's estimation than the managers of bombing raids? And how shall we exert any influence upon the way of the world? In the 2d part of the text, Matt 5:38f, we have some practical advice. First is the condemnat of the law of retaliation. It was a giant step out of primitive barbarity when Hammurabi's code, and the Mosaic code, restricted revenge to the damage sustained. Before, people who had lost an eye to an enemy thought it proper to kill him. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, put limits upon retaliation. But here the entire process is cancelled. An old proverb says, he who seeks revenge must dig two graves; Martin L.King said, that old law about an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. The old underst had it that we love neighbor and hate enemy--a touchy matter even yet to the rabbis, who find no sanction for hating in all their Law; perhaps it means not to love, or to be indifferent to their fate. But the new law requires us to show love to all alike. It is not for us to judge, even those who are doing us harm. There is no more startling sentence in all this book than v.39--do not resist one who is evil. Nearly every aspect of our communities is devoted to resisting the evil one, the mugger, the thief, the aggressor. But when we are slapped we turn the other cheek; when we are commanded to carry the pack a 1000 steps, we go the second mile; if one takes our coat, the long undergarment the ancients wore, we offer him our cloak as well. God in his trdatment in this life does not take sides; he makes rain to fall on all alike, and the sun shines upon the field of saint and also vice lord. Our love must be unlimited and must reach out to all, not just to those who appear to be kind to us. If we say Good morning only to those who say it to us, we are no better than those pagans who expend the precious minutes of their lives only in projects that they find profitable. But God loved the world, as it was, not as he wished it, and sent his only begotten Son, as a solution to the human problem. His death on the cross is our salvation, but his teaching is the word of heaven to a perishing generation. Two or three things we need to note in this. One is that it was clearly intended for a way of life for a people who were oppressed, militarily occupied, insulted without provocation. It does not say that we should not strike another person on the one cheek; it is a rule-book for the one who is so attacked. It does not say, do not ask a weaker person than you to take your load a mile down the road. It does not say, treat those under you as your equals in the human race. What it does say is that we should treat the violent, the demanding, those who live by force and relish dominance, as members of the human race, who are like they are because they have never seen another way. So, insofar as it with you lies, he said, live at peace with all people. Better to lose cloak than get down on the level of the thief; better to turn cheek than respond to violence with violence. Terrorism is the only weapon left to the weak, but it is ultimately defeating; they claim the right to control a part of earth as civilized people; but in making that claim they behave as lawbreakers. J was asking us to think seriously about the nature of the Roman soldier. He has a better nature, and we can appeal to it by being stronger than he. We are more likely to win over them by love than by hatred. Violence is the language of the weak and uncivilized; when we attempt to civilize violence and call it conventional or lawful warfare we make a mockery of civilization itself. Another thing we need to think about is that peace is the oldest unrealized dream of mankind because 98% of us have no vote in the matter. Those who must lose lives and fortunes and loved ones are swept up in panic and emotion; reason is the first casualty in any conflict; wars always create more scoundrels than they kill, as someone said. So how do we respond? One, we do not lose our cool in crisis. Kadaffi may be flaky but he is a God-fearing leader who prays five times a day; the little people in Nicaragua are members of our race. If conscience dictates, we refuse service; that gets sticky, for it is one thing for me to turn my cheek, but evil strikes children // and above all I find happiness in inner peace that passes all understanding. Whatever storms rage about me, I retain my calling to be a maker of peace, for I am a child of God. And if I welcome with open arms an invader, and offer to feed him and carry for him, it may affect his own behavior. And if it does not, then I have demonstrated my nature. Happy are the peacemakers.

2-23-86. Greatness. For centuries it has been one of mankind's most troubling characteristics that there is in every one of us the desire to get something for nothing. Some of us get excited about it, and want to go out and do something; others of us know it to be a fact, not only of other but also of self, and we allow for it and make the best of it we can. Albert Jay Nock, a classical scholar of note, wrote an essay about it. It is easier to seize wealth than to produce it, & many of us are willing to offer greater praise to the thief than to the genius, so there is some incentive for seizure. Nock called it the law of least resistance--man tends always to satisfy his needs and desires with the least possible exertion of time and energy. He called it the Greshamms law of culture, and he saw it operating as inexorably in human relatshps as the law of gravity works in the physical realm. In ancient Athens, Plato reported the promise of one of that city's most famous teachers, one Protagoras, who sent his catalog to a prospective freshman named Hippocrates--sophists in those simpler days set out to market their school, for it was not enough that they have quality. He promised, did Protagoras, that if Hippocrates comes to me for his learning, he will not experience the sort of drudgery with which other teachers are in the habit of insulting their pupils. That, you will discern, is that same law of least resistance, put into anO other setting. But let us leave the classical examples of bad academic judgmt to those best equipped to understand them, and take up the last in a short series of most important teachings of J. Text Mark 10. With this session we come to the end of that which is both shortest and longest month in the yr, and also to the end of a series of lessons in this class. Beginning w/final Sunday of 1985 wehave spent two months discussing the lessons J taught his disciples about Xn living. Most of the lessons were centered on some of those unforgettable parables, the telling of which makes J rank among the greatest of this world's story-tellers. For today we have an incident instead of a parable; an embarrassing question that comes right out of the core of human nature, that became the occasion for a lengthy series of teachings about life and what it has to offer, and at what cost to us. Can we in fact get thru life and know real happiness by obeying the laws of self-preservation and exploitation? Will the rules by which the most of us wish to live bring us to joy and peace, or will they lead us to the trap of present gain and ultimate loss? Is there a secret, or are there secrets, to real living, that we need to understand, and to accept, lest we wake up to discover that we have served out our allotted hours and minutes but have not even begun to live? Those are the issues, and they are fundamental and crucial. Today we have the question of greatness in mind and soul, and in the opinion of those around us. We have two passages, strangely similar in subject, and both occurred after J had told his students of his approaching death. First the beginnings of the revolution. Mk 9: 33-37. If you look back one paragr, to the one at v.30, you will see the first of the 3 passion prophecies Mark included. J told them he would soon be killed, and after 3 days he would rise // and they did not underst, but were afraid to ask him to explain. And they came to the Galilee city of Capernaum. He asked them what they were talking about as they walked; they refused to answer, because they were ashamed. They had been discussing which of them was the greatest. To J that was not a matter for upbraiding; it was a teaching opportunity. He sat down; rabbis sat as they taught. And what he said to them is nothing less than revolution, for he turned human experience, and the world's wisdom, upon its head. If any one would be first, he must be last; and more than that, he must be servant of all. This sets at naught all that flesh and blood have to say to us; it turns upside down all the measures humans use. We might say that the greatest among us ought to wear silks, and walk upon red carpets, and have trumpets sounded when they approach. Balloons might ascend in colorful array just as they arise to speak to us. The greatest are the comdrs, the presidents, the leaders of the academic processional, the one with the Carolina blue carpet on the floor, inches deep, the expensive panelling on the walls, doorknobs too rich for commoners to touch, a small army of servants to anticipate every need. But J blew the whistle on the whole shabby procedure, and turned it around to go in the opposite direction. The pomp that had led humanity's parade is now the tattered tail of the march; the servant, the dish washer, the floor scrubber, they take preeminence. Do not ever let anybody convince you that J did not rock the boat, or accepted the world as he found it, or kept tongue firmly bitten in cheek. This is so astounding a turn-about that it makes heads reel and breath come in pantings. God's measure is just exactly the opposite of what our own attitude would be. Who would head our lists of leading citizens, or leading church-members, top of the class? Surely not the one who brings the mail, or opens and closes rooms, or makes the coffee for the crew. But there it is; greatness is measured by lastness, and by servanthood. The reason for that is clear and simple // people who busy themselves making certain that their dignity is not compromised do not have time left over to be great. Greatness comes not in leisurely isolation, but in shaking hands with the sick and infected and defeated of this world. But that did not end the lesson. In the crowd was a mother with her baby; J took it and put it in the midst of them. And then he said a truly remarkable thing. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives him who sent me. There has been great debate thru the centuries over that saying; some

feel certain that something important has been left out of the sentence. But as it stands, it says that the measure of the health and happiness of a society is the way it treats its children, and to receive a child as a member of J's family is to show the proper attitude of humilitythat is the ultimate mark of greatness. More than that, to receive a child in that attitude is to receive J himself, and whoever receives J receives God. How are children treated in our town, and in our land? Some are abandoned, some run away from unacceptable home situations, some live with mother and poverty, not mother and papa. It may be important to us to find out about the children, and maybe even do something about it. // Now here are two statemts about the great of this world; one of them is a teaching, the other is an acted parable, a small dramatic presentation. Together they illustrate that there is something new under the sun. So Now the question comes, are we still living before the new dispensation, in the way we define and honor greatness, or have we moved into the new itself? This incident began a series of teachings on the nature of greatness that extends thru chap 10. We are assigned the climax of the discussion. Mk 10: 35-45. Again, as before, if you look to the paragr just prior to this, you see the 2d of 3 passion prophecies, which they do not comprehend. ~~But~~ Mk wants us to consider that the prophecy of suffering and death and resurrection inspired a debate among the disciples about greatness. This time James & John came to him, to ask that they be given honored places in the kgdm; in Matt it is their mother who makes the request. In Mk itmust have been embarrassing to J to tell them of his approaching pain & death, & have them quarrel over the peripherals. Teacher, we want you to do for us anything that we ask. That is the most selfish prayer ever uttered, and yet it is the kind of prayer many of us still use. It was sincere, it was fervent, and it was wrong. Would it not have better pleased J, after he told them of his coming ~~words~~ woes, if they had said, Master, what would you have us do for you? Instead, they Wanted him promise to do their bidding, whatever they ask. The model prayer has it, THY kgdm come, thy will be done. These would say, MY kgdm come, MY will be done. It is childish to demand of the universe that it bend its ways to us, to get down on the floor and throw a tantrum, to get our way. But J asked them what it was they wanted; it was to have the favored seats when that kgdm comes. They heard the passion story--suffer, death, rise again. They Imagined the glory, and wanted a part of it. And J told them, you do not know what you are asking. You want to sit in glory, one on the right and the other on the left. Do you have any idea what it costs to sit in glory? The question he put is in symbolism, of cup and of baptism. Can you drink of the cup that I must drink, or be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised? It is important for ~~every one of~~ us to understand the meaning of that symbolism. To drink of cup, to accept bapt were already familiar terms in the old covenant; here he looked to the last supper, and the washing of the spirit, when all was made new. We cannot look upon cup and baptism as allegorical. The truth is that something very ugly, and hurtful, was going to happen to J, and to his disciples. But what these two young men wanted was to get the glory without the pain, to sit in the seat of the mighty without paying the cost, to follow the line of least resistance. Far too much of our relig is like that. Salvat was made free to the human race, but the price was paid in blood, there was scourging and hurting, and yet some of us take it as a polite after-dinner mint, a matter of witticism and brittle conversation over a snow-white tablecloth. The president of the S. Bapt Conv ignores the rules he has agreed to enforce, so that ill-will and ugliness replace the love of the brethren, and law-suits come out of the dispute. Something for nothing, the right-hand of J at no cost in cup and baptism. In that generation many of J's folwrs did drink of the cup that he drank up; they gave their lives before denying their faith. Today it does not call for such a sacrifice, and that, I think, because we moderns have stopped being intolerant and are now successfully indifferent to the errors of others. Once again we need a faith that will speak truth to power, that will take seriously the life of the community and family of God, and then will make a witness to that commitment. If our faith does not meet resistance then it may very well be irrelevant. Do you think people in J's day whipped him, and crucified him, for telling people to consider the lilies, how they grow? No, it was for saying, consider the thieves in the temple, or at General Dynamics, or how even a Samaritan can be a good man, maybe even how a watered-down happy faith is a millstone about the necks of the innocent ones, that causes them to stumble. No, there is a cost. There is also a reward that is beyond all others. To pray God's will be done means an inner peace that is beyond all understanding; it means that we can sleep well at night, for we are not called upon to defend an immoral judgmt, or to act as if eternity did not always have the last vote. What is greatness? It means humility, it means servanthood, it means receiving a child in the name of Xr. It also means paying the cost, out of Gratitude to God who paid the cost; it means knowing that less is more, and that to be the end of the parade is to be the head of it. Most of all it means taking seriously the plan of God for the ordering of history. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.