Book 3

Sunday October 21, 1973

"THE PROBLEM OF BEING SPECIFIC"

Do you know what often got Jesus into trouble? He got specific about things. All of us love generalizations and abstract words, but get specific and we have another kind of problem. Now let me be more specific!

Jesus had come back to his home town church. And on that particular Sabbath day, he read the scripture in the synagogue service. The passage was from the prophet Isaiah--these words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has annointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Well, the people in that synagogue, as well as Jews all over the world, had heard that beautiful passage read many times before. Everybody could nod politely in agreement with them in general. But on that day, Jesus got specific about the meaning of those words. He said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." But that wasn't yet specific enough and the people probably smiled and thought to themselves, "What a nice young man. We know his father Joseph and his mother Mary." But Jesus continued and got more specific.

He went on to talk about them in particular. He noted that church people like those in the synagogue on that day tended to keep their religious privileges to themselves and he suggested that there were other people who were not necessarily religious Jews, but who also received God's favor. This was not a very popular thing to say. He also suggested that the people in that sunagogue ought to be more concerned about those who were not of that synagogue, and he gave some examples. That however was getting too specific, and it got Jesus into trouble.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that when the people heard what Jesus said, they were angry and they rose up and threw him out of the synagogue. In fact they threw him out of town and would've killed him, but he escaped.

And this is just one instance of Jesus getting into trouble because he got too specific. If he would've stayed with nice generalizations; if he would've talked only about love

in general and truth in general and forgiveness in general, everything would've been fine.

In another place in the Bible, we are told how one day a man asked Jesus what he must do to obtain eternal life and Jesus got very specific. First, Jesus said that he should love God and neighbor, and then the man asked, "Who is my neighbor?" And as an answer Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan, which says very specifically that any person in need is your neighbor, and we are to act as did the good Samaritan.

In another instance a man asked Jesus what he must do to find life and Jesus answered very specifically, "Go, sell what you have and give the proceeds to the poor, and then come and follow me."

Jesus always dealt with specifics. He used verbs, not abstract nouns -- "Go, "Come," "Follow me!" "Give!" "Sell!" "Pick up your bed and walk." "Go and sin no more!"

All through his life and teachings, Jesus emphasized that saying nice words is not enough; have great over-all principles is not enough, having nice thoughts is not enough. Jesus always wanted to know what a person was going to do in a specific situation. That's what counts, he said.

The story is told about a man who arrived in St. Louis, just as a political campaign was ending, and the cab driver not being above the battle, volunteered his testimony. "I and may father and my grandfater before me, and their fathers, have always been straight-ticket Republicans," he said. "Ah," said the passenger who was himself a life-long Republican, "I take it that means you will vote for Senator so and so." "No," said the cab driver, "There are times when a person has to push his principles aside and do the right thing."

Well, that's exactly what Jesus talked about and did. He said, "If a man falls in a ditch on the Sabbath, then one has to push aside the principle of not working on the Sabbath, and do the right thing and get the man out of the ditch." And Jesus did exactly that. He dealt in specifics and he wanted others to do the same. He was concerned with more than just nice pious thought and generalizations.

It is usually easier to draft broad blueprints for a great society than to execute a single enterprise that will

brighten the lives of a few thousand people in a squalid corner of a city and perhaps inspire imitation.

This kind of emphasis on specific actions goes all the way through the Bible. Abraham Heschel put it this way; "The insistence upon generalization at the price of a total disregard of the particular and concrete is something that is alien to prophetic thinking in the Bible. Prophetic words are never detached from the concrete historical situation. There is not a timeless abstract message; it always refers to an actual particular situation."

Jesus followed right along in this kind of prophetic word and action. And it's what continually got him into trouble. That's part of the problem of being specific.

There was a preacher who usually preached in abstractions. One Sunday when he was trying to talk about the need for money to support the church, he said, "This church is going to walk, it's going to walk, it's going to walk," and the congregation responded with "amen, amen." Then warming to his subject he said, "This church is going to run, it's going to run, it's going to run." And again the congregation could respond to this generalization with loud Amens. Then he continued, "This church is going to fly, it's going to fly, it's going to fly!" But then for once he got specific and said and that's going to take money, money, money. Now the congregation forgot about the "amens," and instead responded, "let it walk, let it walk, let it walk!"

But what about us? In our time too, we find that almost everybody is for the church in general, is for love in general and in principle, but get specific about what that means and requires in a particular situation and we're not too sure. It's safer to have religion in general and in the abstract. Nothing is required of us.

It is this yearning after generalized and abstract religion which accounts in large part, I am sure, for the popularity of such books as Gibran's "The Prophet." For here we have the language of things spiritual manipulated poetically in a historical vacuum. Gibran's "Prophet" speaks to mankind without ever having to address himself to particular men and women in specific historical circumstances. He seems always to be preaching to disembodied minds, never to demented bodies.

It's the problem of being specific. Every aspect of the Christian life involves us in the same dilemma. On all sides the lofty structures of our theology are besieged by the specific clamor of particular people, for tangible benefits. Just as I was preparing this particular part of the sermon, I was interrupted by a phone call from a man who needed money for food for his family.

In many respects this problem of being specific appears in all areas of human existence. People always find it hard to establish complete rapport between the world of ideas and the cunning realities of every day lives. There is always a disturbing discrepancy between theory and practice. We are able to conceive magnificently and bring to pass only a shabby imitation of that conception.

But in religion the problem is always more difficult. The idea of God becomes so vague and abstract that we miss God in the specific in human life. In a similar way, love is not a principle or an abstraction. It is not something we have or are. It is something we do in a specific situation. We cannot really say that love is good unless we are specific about what we are loving and when and where. Thus the writer of I John in the New Testament gets very specific and says--"If any one says "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar."

In a similar way there is no such thing as justice in general. The concept of justice is meaningless unless we are talking about justice in a particular place and time, unless we are quite specific.

Thus you see, almost everyone everywhere in principle is for loving one's neighbor and for liberty and justice for all, as the pledge of allegiance puts it. But now get specific as Jesus did and go on to say that loving one's neighbor means seeking justice for that black family or Indian family that moves into your neighborhood and then we find people backing off with excuses. They in effect say--love in general is fine, I'm all for it, but don't get specific!

The priest and the levite who came along the road where the man lay in the ditch in the parable of the good samaritan believed in love and justice in principle. but when it got down to specifics, then they didn't act.

Don't you get tired of generalizations? Whenever I hear a person blithely announce that the whole trouble with the world is that people don't follow the Golden Rule, I start to slither to the other side of the room. Or I want to ask, "What specifically do you mean and in what situation?"

Being for the Golden Rule or for God sounds so good and righteous, but what does it mean in each particular situation? or - "I believe in the Bible -

In a similar way, people use the word faith. As long as you have faith, I heard a person say recently, it doesn't matter what you believe in. But it really does matter if you get specific. If I have faith in a God of mercy and forgiveness and non-violence, my behavior will be quite different than if I have faith in raw violence and the barrel of a gun.

I remember in a little town some years ago, the preacher there preached regularly and eloquently on the issue of civil rights and loving your neighbor. Of course there were no black people or other minority people in that vicinity and everybody in the congregation nodded their heads in solemn agreement. Certainly Christians should love their neighbors, even Jesus said that. And then one day a black family moved into town and some of the good church people burned a cross on that families' lawn. Something much too specific had happened.

Yet God's love for the world became very specific in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. That love and suffering became very specific in Jesus' suffering and death upon the cross. That love became very specific as Jesus daily dealt with suffering individuals, helping them, healing them.

I once knew a devout Christian woman who went to her minister and told him she was troubled because she didn't feel that she loved Jesus enough. Her minister responded, "My dear Miss So and So, loving Jesus is not just a matter of feeling, it is a matter of character. Loving Jesus is not sensation, it is living; not internal emotion only, but objective action as well.

It's the problem of being specific again. This Jesus is no mythic abstraction, no glorified pin-up boy. He is the one who was displayed in agony upon a bloody cross. We cannot say we love Jesus and mean it fully unless we face up to its implications.

Some weeks ago a national magazine carried an account of a California couple who took in six growing boys as foster children. All of the boys were somewhat retarded, and the family tried to move into a complacent, middle-class neighborhood. In the hell that broke loose, passions ran riot and a solid block of citizens tried to have the courts forbid the family to live among them. The family's rights were finally vindicated only because a small counter group of citizens banded together to help and support them in their struggle.

If you had been in that neighborhood, what would you have done? Where would you have stood. What you did--where you stood would speak volumes very specifically about your Christian faith and your love for Christ.

We cannot say that we love God in general and then be indifferent to the suffering of our brothers and sisters in the human race. It's as specific and simple and straightforward as that. One of the wickedest tricks the devil every plays is telling a person that to be a Christian all one has to do is love Jesus in his heart; because he never goes on to specifically say what loving Jesus in one's heart really stands for.

Love is not controversial until we get specific and start talking about cases, about where and when and how; about what the love of God and Jesus requires in a particular situation.

Do you want to get in trouble like Jesus did, then get specific about your religion. And ask the next person you meet who uses the word democracy or freedom to tell you what the Bill of Rights is and to enumerate those rights.

Or ask the next person you meet who says that religion ought not to interfere with politics and economics to be specific and tell you why, and to tell you more about what religion should deal with.

Ask the next person who says he believes in the church how much of his money he is willing to commit or does commit to the support of his local church. In a few weeks in this congregation, we are going to ask all of you to get very specific about your Christian faith. We're going to ask you to make a very specific pledge of dollars for the work of this church and the church around the world. You

can't get much more specific than that!

Our religion is one of high ideals and specific actions. We human beings are creators of profound thoughts, high hopes, and bright dreams; but we also have to face hunger, pain, lust and fear. And since our faith deals in specifics, we know that God is with us in both instances. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Amen.