Sunday, July 18, 1982
THE BOTTOM LINE
Genesis 1:1,31; John 1:1,14; I John 4:7-12,19-21

A common question and expression in our time is “What’s the bottom line?” It’s a way of asking, “What’s the ultimate conclusion?” or “get to the main point,” or “How much will it really cost?” Or “will there be a profit or a loss?” To ask for the “bottom line” is to ask for the basic fundamentals.

I suppose if someone had asked Einstein, “What’s the bottom line in physics?” He would’ve replied, “E=mc2.”

Some years ago, one of Charles Beard’s students asked him,” Can you sum up everything you’ve learned from your study of history in five minutes, or in other words, what’s the bottom line from all your study?” The historian said he could do better than that, he could sum it all up in just four lines. They were: 1. Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad with power. 2. The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine. 3. The bee fertilizes the flower it robs, 4. When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.”

What’s the bottom line in your life? How would you sum up what you’ve learned from life? How would you state your basic beliefs, your convictions about God?

Most people in our world are leaking for constants, for beliefs that they can rely on in the midst of life’s changes and uncertainties. Millions of Americans are having difficulty coping with the loss of certainty that is present in our culture. As economics, family relationships and political structures move toward greater and greater complexity and inconstancy, people are looking for the bottom line.

Also, in the midst of tragedy, people look for certainties, things they can rely on.

Ten years ago, a man named Dean M, Kelley, wrote a book, entitled, “Why Conservative Churches Are Growing.” Part of his argument was that people are dazed by the modern world’s uncertainties, its ambiguities, its rapid changes and are looking desperately for direction and for simple answers. The conservative churches offered such answers. We human beings tend to have a strong desire for certainty. When this desire turns into a lust is when we get into trouble.

Thus, the lust for certainty has caused some Christians to misuse the Bible by making it into a visible external authority, an answer book for every question without error. The lust for certainty has caused others to join religious cults which promise to take away all uncertainty. In political life. the lust for certainty causes people to blindly follow leaders who promise to provide all the answers and solve· all their problems. We human beings are always tempted to trade our· freedom for security.

The lust for certainty is a corruption of faith. But this does not mean that we should not search for answers.

How then do we as Christians deal with the uncertainties of life? What is the bottom line?

First, we can remember that uncertainty is built into all of life. Even in our everyday ordinary existence there is little that is truly certain. We remember the old cliche, “Nothing is certain except death and taxes.”

As far as our religious faith is concerned, the lack of certitude about the nature of God may actually represent a healthy respect for the dangers of substituting human forms for holy substance. God can never be totally described, defined, or understood. There is always more to God than we can see or experience. The element of mystery is always there. All of our attempts at description and certainty are inadequate.

But secondly, this does not mean that we have nothing to say. St. Paul said, “Now we see through a glass darkly,” but we do see. In other words, when we say that we do not have or know the whole truth about God, that must not be taken to mean that we have no truth about God.

It has been said that the difference between the conservatives and the liberals in the Christian faith is not that one group is certain and the other is not. Rather, it is that the conservatives are certain of too much. Liberals do not have all the answers, but we do have some. Or to borrow from Harry Emerson Fosdick a more poetic expression, “Astronomies change, but the stars abide.“

When people who know what they are doing explore caves, they tie one end of a rope to an object outside the opening of the cave. As they grope their way through the maze of passageways, they unwind the rope. They can explore and explore, but they are always tied to something firm, something they can count on when they seem lost. In a similar way, we Christians need to be tied to some basic answers or convictions while we explore and search for more truth.

We all need a bottom line, some certainties on which we stake our lives. We need to be firmly rooted in a few central values, commitments, and doctrinal themes while being open and exploratory at the edges.

Here then are my convictions, my bottom line about the Christian faith and life in this world. Here are 10 basics!

1. God created the universe and is still creating. God’s creation is good! How long it took the planet earth we live on to be created with all of its creatures and plants is a question which science rightly studies. Exactly how this planet and others came into being is another question for science.

2. God created us as interdependent creatures and we are meant to live in peace and harmony with one another. God’s creation is one. This is another way of saying that we need each other. Life without friendship, life without human relationships is like the sky without the sun. We are meant to live in community.

3. God loves me! God loves you! Each human being on earth is loved equally by God. This is another way of saying that we each have equal value in God’s eyes. The criminal on death row, the patient in the mental institution, the starving beggar in India or anywhere, the rich woman, all are loved by God. Thus, we are all brothers and siste.rs to each other. Because God loves us, we are to love each other.

To say that God loves us and cares for us means also that God is intimately involved in the world's struggles. God's relationship to humankind is a passionate love which reaches out to us in history. This love is never static. It is dynamic and can never simply be accepted without also being lived.

4. God is not mocked! The wheels of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine. God's justice will be done in the long run. Evil never has the upper hand in the long run.

5. God has the first word. God has the second word. God has the last word. God is the beginning and the end.

6. God speaks to us in many ways — in silence, in prayer, through other people — our friends and our enemies, through nature, through art and music, through life's experiences, through the Bible.

7. In the person of Jesus Christ, the love of God became flesh and lived among us. In Christ's life, teachings, death, and resurrection, we see God's love at work for us and for the whole world. We cannot outlove God.

8. The Christian community which we call the church exists to increase among people the love of God and neighbor.

9. The overall purpose of life is to "glorify God and enjoy God forever." This is another way of saying that the purpose of life is to grow in our love for God and in our love for each other. It is God's will to increase health and harmony among all living beings and in all of creation.

10. No matter what happens to us, God can bring good out of it. As St. Paul said, "All things work together for the good for those who love God." God never totally abandons us but rather continually seeks us out. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, not our sinning, our suffering, or our dying, not a cross or mushroom cloud.

These ten principles or statements form the bottom line. There is an additional one which applies to all our beliefs and convictions and that is that we hold all truth in earthen vessels. Our truth is always partial. It is always distorted by our language, our prejudices, and our culture.

What is the bottom line of your faith? This morning I challenge you to make out your own list. Make it as brief as possible.

Listen again to the words of the writer of the letter of First John.

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and the one who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his Son into the world, so that we might live through him. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another God abides in us, and God's love is perfected in us.

Amen.