Sunday, September 25, 1983
HOW TO DEAL WITH UNCERTAINTY
Matthew 25:31-45

Can one live a life of faith and, at the same time, be uncertain about a number of issues? Or is true religion a search for meaning and direction, rather than certainty? Most of us can remember the confidence we felt as children when it seemed at least that we had clear and certain answers. But the older a person grows, the more mysterious life becomes. We sometimes say to a young person that when she grows up, she will know more, but that is only a half truth. In general, an increasing experience of life only deepens the sense of mystery and uncertainty.

A professor at Harvard tells of receiving from one of his young students a manuscript with an accompanying letter in which the youth said that he intended to write several books and that this was only the first of them, in which, wrote the youth, “I have explained the universe.” You see what it would mean to tell such a young person that when he grows up, he will know more. It really means that when he grows up, he will know less. He will discover, if he gains any wisdom at all, that life is set in a limitless sea of mystery.

Surely, in every part of life, it seems the more we know, the more the mystery grows. Our ancient forefathers and mothers thought they lived upon a flat and stationary earth, and they were content with simple explanations, while we are on a planet flying 18 1/2 miles per second, with the nearest star 25 trillion miles away. There has been an increase of knowledge, but also an increase of mystery.

For example, at this same time we are exploring space beyond the earth, modern physicists are now discovering a world within worlds in the nucleus of the atom, which at one time was thought to be the smallest particle. As physicists now envision it, the invisible subatomic world is composed of particles dancing in fields of energy. Hundreds of subatomic particles have been identified. The energy that calls the tune is of four varieties that differ radically in character - gravitation, electromagnetism, the strong force and the weak force.

While the behavior of each of the four forces (more aptly called interactions) is reasonably well understood, nobody knows why there should be four of them, rather than some other number, nor does anyone know why there should be so many different sorts of subatomic particles. Beginning to emerge are unified and “grand” theories that appear to present a coherent account of how the various interactions may have evolved from simpler natural laws that obtained in the infancy of the universe.

Traditionally, physicists searching for a unified theory sought an ultimate particle out of which all the others were made. Once it had seemed that atoms were the fundamental building blocks. But, as I noted earlier, atoms proved to be composed of smaller particles — protons, neutrons, and electrons — and the protons and neutrons turned out to incorporate clouds of particles called mesons, and there are several sorts of mesons, each evidently composed of still smaller particles that scientists have named “quarks” (from a word coined by James Joyce in “Finnegan’s Wake.") Today the world of subatomic particles has become as jumbled as an acquisitor’s attic. The count of particles whose traces have been detected by ever more sophisticated accelerators, or whose existence has been postulated by physicists’ calculations, extends to more than 200 — so many that physicists are obliged to consult the 120-page Particle Properties Data Booklet just to keep track of their names and characteristics.

As I understand it, six varieties of quarks have now been postulated, and the names given them indicate the mystery surrounding them. There are “up” quarks, “down” quarks, “strange” quarks, “charmed” quarks, “bottom” quarks, and “top” quarks.

There is intense debate within the world of the physicists even about the validity of this system. Victor F. Weisskopf of M.I.T. compared the accelerator approach in particle physics to trying to decide how a Swiss watch works by smashing two of them together and examining the pieces.

One science writer recently wrote, “The new insights coming out of particle physics tend to disprove the myth that the cosmos is an inexorable machine. To see the universe as evolving like life, like thought, as subject to chance and uncertainty, just as our lives are subject to chance and uncertainty, is to deepen our sense that we have a rightful place in nature.”

The more we know, the more uncertainty there is. If these is uncertainty and mystery in the scientific world, even more so is there mystery and uncertainty present in the rest of our worlds, including, of course, the world of religion.

We succeed in getting along most of the time without bothering about this too much. We absorb ourselves in immediate tasks. We go to school, work in our vocations, fall in love, take care of our children, sometimes even improve our golf score, overcome illness — we take life as it comes most of the time and make the best of it. We are not always conscious of the mysteries and uncertainties of life, but they are always there. Then if a crisis or tragedy enters our lives, we begin to ask questions and become more aware of uncertainty and mystery.

One reason that tradition has played and still plays an important role in our lives is that it helps us deal with uncertainty. In the past this was even more true than it is today. In the musical, “Fiddler on the Roof,” Tevye sings about tradition. Everyone’s role in life was established by tradition. This meant there were less decisions to make, less concern about uncertainty. Tradition would be the guide. But Tevye discovers the world is always changing and that tradition no longer controls all decision making. He faces the difficult question, “How can one be certain which decision is right?” On the one hand, this is true, but on the other hand, the opposite is true. We all like the “certainty” of tradition at times. Even in our day when we have to make a decision, someone will ask, “What did we do last time or last year?” We are appealing to tradition to help us make our decision. It’s a valid questions to ask, as long as we realize there are other possibilities, as well.

The point is, we all have a desire for certainty in the midst of a world of uncertainty and mystery.

How, then, do we deal with uncertainty in our religious lives and in other parts of our lives, as well?

First, some things to beware of: Beware of those who are always certain they know exactly what God’s will is for all things. Another way to put it is to have a healthy distrust of dogmatism. Harry Emerson Fosdick put it this way: “Whenever you see anyone standing over against the mystery of life, whipping off finalities as though he or she could settle it, distrust that person. Indeed, let us make our distrust of dogmatism comprehensive so that it includes both dogmatic religionist and dogmatic irreligionist.”

The pursuit of absolute certitude is not genuinely religious search, but can be a temptation constantly besetting religious institutions and people.

One reason for the popularity of cults and their danger is their promise of complete certainty. “We will give you all the correct and infallible answers” is their message, “if you will just give yourself over completely to us and ask no more questions.”

Bew are of making the Bible into an absolute external infallible authority on every question. When that is done, we are making the Bible into something it was never meant to be, and worse still, we distort its overall message, as well.

Here’s an image that has been of tremendous help to me. Think of the Bible as a lamp, rather than a mirror. A mirror reflects reality as it is, and that kind of assertion underscores Biblical literalism. In contrast, a lamp gives light; it is directional; it illuminates, as well as it causes shadows. What we see and how we see it depends on where the lamp located. And different people point the light in different directions. Thus the Biblical writers were expressing the reality illuminated by their own interests and dispositions. The Apostle Paul used another metaphor. He said, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” The lust for certitude tends to make the treasure and the vessel the same.

Beware of any claim of infallibility. No set of words, no creed, no confession, can ever totally explain the mystery of God. God never has been and never can be exhaustively described in any set of human words.

Here are some other guidelines for dealing with uncertainty in a positive way.

1. There seems to be a degree of uncertainty built into all of life. What is needed is to delight in this fact, to see in it a guarantee that the world is open-ended, not fixed and determined, but inexhaustibly rich in meaning. We can even relax and begin to look on ultimate questions not just as problems to be solved, but as mysteries that save us from despair. “Life is not a series of problems,” said the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel; “it is a network of mysteries.” People who are always certain are not open to new ideas and do not grow in wisdom and knowledge.

Furthermore, a degree of uncertainty is often what adds spice and zest to life itself. Think of how dull life would be if there were no surprises, if all things were totally predictable. I’m not sure that we want to be absolutely certain about all things. Supposed a machine has been invented which could predict with absolute accuracy the date of a person’s death. Will you use it? Or suppose you could plus a device into your brain which would enable you to feel intense pleasure whenever you wanted it by the push of a button. Would you have it done? Or suppose an inexpensive device has been invented which can be implanted in your brain. You can turn it on to dream in color on any topic of your choice. Would you get this dream machine?

As far as our religious faith is concerned, a degree of uncertainty about that nature of God represents a healthy respect for the dangers of substituting human forms for Holy Substance. It represents a respect for a sense of mystery which always surrounds God as the Ultimate.

Furthermore, good religion as the search for the ultimate should rightly have the effect of helping us see through the forms of our society and should help us also see the tentativeness and limits of all human institutions and conceptual systems. Only God is the ultimate truth.

Throughout the gospels in the New Testament of the Bible we see Jesus Christ calling people to be open to the activity of God that is present in the world, even though that activity doesn't always fit our pre-conceived notions of what we think God is doing. In the scripture reading for today read earlier from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus reminds us with his parable of the sheep and the goats that there are many surprised in God's Kingdom. Those who are most certain that they have been doing God's will may find they have not been doing it at all, and those who have been quietly serving the needs to the forgotten individuals in our society will discover that they have been doing God's will without even being aware of it.

Remember, too, that it is not the purpose of religion to clear up all mysteries and have the answers to all questions. Why do we even assume that all questions have answers? On the contrary, at the center of the Christian faith is the deepest mystery of all, the cross, where love was nailed to a cross by hate. And through the death and resurrection of this love of God in the flesh, we are saved.

All this is very different from the claim that religion provides us with a set of absolute certainties concerning God, human beings, and the universe. An insistence upon absolute certitude misconceives religion and distorts it. True religion is a search for meaning, direction, and understanding.

Faith in the Christian sense is not simply personal self-assurance or the warding off of feelings of insecurity. It is a self-transcending, trustful love of God. To put it another way, faith is a basic trust in reality, an openness to mystery. It is also faith that motivates us to continue to search for more truth because we believe that in our search, our knowledge and understanding will increase and that we will find new and better direction and meaning for our lives.

One individual put it this way: "I am a Christian because the Christian faith and tradition, with its symbols, doctrines, and values, with its communities and institutions, gives me an experience of transcendent reality and has opened for me a level of consciousness and a way of living I recognize as valuable and liberating... At the same time, much in the Christian tradition raises questions in my mind to which I have only tentative answers, but the Christian faith and tradition is my religious starting point."

We can live with uncertainty because beneath it all is the final and ultimate saving love of God, and it is this love which undergirds and holds the universe together. Amen.