Sunday, November 25, 1984
DOGMATIC DANGERS
Matthew 23:1-12

"How can I absolutely be sure that God loves and accepts me?" All religions attempt to answer this question in one way or another. One of the deepest desires of human beings is to know that we are connected to the source of all being — that which we call "God." It's another way of wanting to know that life makes sense, that there is some higher purpose to living; more than just eating, sleeping, working, growing older and dying.

One way in which various religions have attempted to satisfy this yearning and to answer this question is to outline and promulgate certain rules and rituals for individuals to follow along with the promise — that if these rules are obeyed, that will satisfy God. Religions also develop elaborate belief systems or creeds or dogmas which they say must be believed if an individual is to be loved and accepted by God.

All of this is background for the gospel reading read earlier from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is speaking to the crowds around him and to his disciples, according to Matthew, and he tells them that the religious authorities of that time put heavy burdens on people's shoulders as far as religious rules and practices are concerned.

At the same time, Jesus acknowledges that the religious tradition they represent traditions the dogma can become so complicated, burdensome and rigid, that pretty soon the God behind the dogma is forgotten, or lost.

In other words, there are dangers in dogma. Now lest we think these dogmatic problems are only a danger for religion, it needs to be noted that dogma in any area can become stifling and too rigid.

Originally, dogma meant "What seems to be right." But over the years, dogma became "That which is resolved." Dogmatism is now understood to be a fixed and firmly held belief on any subject, usually resting on some kind of special authority. Anyone who questions or changes dogma, is regarded as a heretic meriting the strongest condemnation.

Each field of knowledge or discipline has its own form of dogmatism, and any change in a fixed area of belief is resisted. When, for example, the Copernican model of astronomy (planets revolve around the sun) replaced by Ptolemaic model (sun, moon and stars revolve around the earth), the change was resisted within and without the scientific community.

Another way of understanding how dogma works, both its usefulness and its dangers, is to use another word "paradigm."

A paradigm is a model or pattern. It is a shared set of assumptions. It's like a filter through which we see the world. It's a pattern we impose upon the world around us. As such, it becomes dogma!

I mentioned earlier the famous paradigm of the earth being the center of the universe. All else revolves around it, for as any fool can plainly see, the sun comes up in the east, moves overhead and sets in the west, and the stars move around the earth in predictable courses. That paradigm or dogma in its day explained the world better than any other view.

By the 16th century, however, some advanced astronomers were saying that this paradigm, this idea of how the universe is organized had too many discrepancies, too many inconsistencies. They saw things happening that did not fit the pattern. So, people like Copernicus began to look for a better way to explain the universe, a new paradigm. “The earth,” said Copernicus, “moves around the sun, as do the other planets in our solar system.”

Albert Einstein, years later, also found inconsistencies and discrepancies with the paradigms of his time and he proposed new ones. Later in life, he continued to search for the “grand paradigm", a theory into which everything would fit. But maybe there is no grand paradigm. Maybe everything is in process, is changing — so we will always need new paradigms.

In the field of politics, especially foreign relations, we can find other examples. For years, our country operated on the paradigm, or dogma or myth that all Communists were united in a world-wide conspiracy directed from Moscow and all were evil. Thus, we had great difficulty in finally recognizing Red China. In the 1950s, those who proposed recognizing Red China and who were for admitting this nation into membership in the United Nations were branded as traitors and communist sympathizers. They were proposing a new paradigm, a new pattern, a new way of seeing the world. We lived for years in the old paradigm that the Chinese on Formosa were the real Chinese nation and would someday recapture the mainland.

Today, one of our dogmas or paradigms in foreign relations is that every revolution in almost any country is directed by Moscow, and that we must therefore, as a Nation, oppose it. And so, we find ourselves supporting some extreme right-wing dictators. But maybe our paradigm, our way of seeing the world needs to change.

Obviously, paradigms and dogmas have great utility. They provided us with a ground for communication, so we don’t have to start over each time, and they make the world seem continuous and stable and somewhat predictable. In the same way in the field of religion, dogmas have a legitimate use. Their role is to express the meaning of belief in conceptual terms. All disciplines need this. So, dogmas can be a positive kind of thing.

However, dogmas have a way of becoming rigid. They become hard doctrine — nice boxes which attempt to explain everything that happens. So, they have their dangers as well as their usefulness.

1. Danger number one: Blindness to new ideas! Dogmas or paradigms limit our perception and our awareness. Our belief structures impose limits on what we perceive and experience. WE tend to see what we believe, not the other way around. (Galileo)

An example: The grand paradigm in which we now live is basically scientific and rational. Scientists measure a phenomenon, and try to set up an experiment that can be repeated by other scientists. What is measurable and repeatable becomes true.

All of us, scientists or not, share the assumptions of this paradigm. If something comes along that doesn’t fit it, we feel uncomfortable and it sounds bizarre or kooky.

This scientific-rational paradigm has produced the splendid technological achievements of western culture, but it leaves us with a problem. And that is, we have the tendency to consider as real or true only what which can be measured, repeated and experienced through one or more of the five senses, and less real or untrue that which cannot. Thus, the present paradigm

leaves no room for such things as extra-sensory perception, or no room for occurrence that might happen only once and be true, but cannot be repeated.

If someone experience somethings which is out of the ordinary (which means outside our paradigm) and which is unexplainable in our usual terms, we too easily conclude that he or she is dreaming or out of touch with reality.

In religion, this means that something which is outside traditional dogma or belief is considered heretical.

This is not to say that we have to believe every new idea that comes along — but we are to be open at least to new ideas and not let dogma or paradigms blind us.

2. Danger number two: Dogmas and paradigms when supported too fanatically lead to self-righteousness. We come to believe that we are right and anyone who challenges our paradigm is wrong and is a heretic. This is especially true in religion.

3. This leads to danger number three: exclusiveness. This is what Jesus Christ and later ST. Paul challenged more than any other danger. But they were not the first to challenge it. Exclusiveness is built on blindness and self-righteousness.

The book of Jonah of the Old Testament, for example, is a story told in a very careful fashion to protest against the Jews' religious pride and exclusiveness following the canonizing of the Law of Moses, which took place about 400 B.C.

It is a rebuke against their expectation that God would soon annihilate the Gentiles for their, the Jews, benefit. It says, in effect, that the Jews have a mission to the Gentiles, which they are not willing to accept, because they think God belongs to them alone. It is written in the form of a story because people, then and now, are more willing to listen to a story than they are to a rebuke. (The Prophet Nathan and King David)

But we Christian today have just as much of a tendency to be exclusive as the people in the time when the story of Jonah was written.

The story of Jonah breaks the paradigm of that day and of our day. The story proclaims what Jesus proclaimed — that god is the God of all people — that God loves all people — no matter what their ethnic origin; no matter what their sin.

In the Book of Jonah, the city of Nineveh where God sends Jonah and where Jonah does not want to go, that city is the symbol for the worst sin and evil in the world. It is the symbol of idolatry, of brutality and of blasphemy. It's the kind of place a good Hebrew and a good Christian would avoid at all costs.

The book of Jonah expresses radical hope for the Nineveh's of this world. God is passionately concerned with Nineveh, that great city whose wickedness stinks to high heaven. That's why in the story, God sends Jonah to preach to the people of that city.

The gospel rings out loud and clear from this story. The story of the ministry of Jesus takes up where the book of Jonah leaves off. Jesus said, "God so loved the world," not just Jerusalem, or Nineveh, but the whole world, that God gave the Son.

Therefore, we are not bound to any ideology, or 'ism, or dogma which claims that is must impose itself on the world to save the world, be it Capitalism, or Socialism, or Communism, or Nationalism, or Scientism, or anti-Scientism. Demons dwell in any attempt to impose an absolute order.

But it also means we are free to consider and embrace any idea or plan which wipes away one more tear, which does away with one more sorrow or sickness or famine, whatever its source. Did you read in the news where in the famine in Ethiopia, the United States and the Russians are now actually working together at least a little bit. Russian helicopters are or were delivering American grain.

There is no room for the kind of exclusism in our world which rigid dogma brings. There is no room for ideological blinders. We are not to lord it over anyone. As Jesus said in our scripture reading. "Those who would be greatest among you shall be your servants. Whoever exalt themselves shall be humbled and those who humble themselves shall be exalted."

Any labels which segregate anybody as being other than ourselves, be they religious or economic or social or political, are to be rejected. IN Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond or free, male or female. No one is God-forsaken or inferior to us.

So, dogma can lead to blindness, self-righteousness and exclusiveness — but it need not be so. We need to remember that dogmas or paradigms, have their limits, as well as their usefulness.

Although words and creeds about God are useful, remember that no set of words, no creed, no confession can ever totally explain the mystery of God. And that's true of many other things as well. For example, the word "Love" can never completely or adequately describe the experience of love. In religious language, the concept of the "Trinity" cannot explain completely what God is — although it points to God and God's expression. In the same way Einstein's equation $E=mc^2$ does not totally describe relativity in all of its aspects.

Let's go back to the original question in this sermon — "How can I be absolutely sure that God loves me and accepts me — that life makes sense — that there is some higher purpose to living; more than just eating, sleeping, working, growing older and dying?"

It takes more than dogma to satisfy this yearning — it takes more than following a set of religious rules and rituals — although religious concepts can help point the way.

As far as our Christian faith in God is concerned, it finally all boils down to a story — a story about a group of people called Hebrews who trusted God — and out of this long tradition of God-trusting was born a human being we know as Jesus. And this Jesus lived a life of self-giving love and claimed that God's spirit in him enabled him to do this. He went on to show and say that if we want our lives to have the deepest meaning possible, it is to be found in this kind of self-giving, serving love as we relate to others. Nothing can kill this love — his death on the cross followed by the resurrection is evidence of this. God's love, as it expresses itself in Jesus and in us, is eternal. It is the same love which undergirds and holds the universe together. We can trust in this love of God or not trust in it — it's up to you. Amen.