Sunday, October 27, 1985
WHAT IDEAS ARE USING YOU?
Acts 4:13-20

In his autobiography called “the living of these days,” Harry Emerson Fosdick’s last chapter has the title, “Ideas That Have Used Me,” Fosdick, one of this country’s greatest preachers, quotes Felix Adler who said toward the end of his life, “I am grateful for the idea that has used me,” Then Fosdick goes on to make the point that “despite our egotism, the fact remains that our personal arrival on earth was long antedated by varied ideas of life’s ultimate significance lies in our choice of the ideals which we use and which we allow to use us. In his own life as he looks back over it, he discovers that whatever satisfaction he can find springs primarily from some of the ideas that have used him.

Ideas that use us - it’s an intriguing way of looking at our lives and evaluating them. I believe Victor Hugo was correct when he said, “Nothing is so powerful in this world as an idea whose time has come.” Repeatedly in history that truth has been vindicated. The special people who happened to represent or restate an idea were often not remarkable in themselves, but because they let a great idea use them, their lives were changed and their contribution to the world was something that made a change for the better. They were the implements and instrumentalities of an idea whose time had come.

As an illustration of this, consider the story from the Book of Acts, read as our scripture lesson for today. Simon Peter and the disciple named John had been hauled into court in Jerusalem and were threatened with severe punishment if they did not cease preaching the good news of Jesus Christ.

Peter and John were, at that point, nothing extraordinary. They were Galileans, common people, fishermen by trade. In fact, the author of the Book of Acts, says that the people, in the court that day “perceived that they were uneducated, common men.” Yet here they were standing before the most powerful leaders of their religion and nation. To whom does the future belong? To Peter and Jon and the idea which they represented¸ Or those who had them on trial? We know the answer. The Good News of Jesus Christ which they represented is still alive and changing the world. They were being used by an idea of tremendous power.

On the other hand, there have been those in history and among us who have let ideas use them which were destructive, and which caused war and death. Some of the cruelest periods of history have come about because of the ideas which used the leaders in those times.

Take for example, the idea that one race of people is to be the master race and rule over all others. When that idea uses people — there is trouble. Or take the idea that God loves and cares for some people more than others. It’s a perversion of the idea of God’s love and what trouble it can cause when it uses people. Or take the idea that only men are to be in charge and women subservient — that idea has narrowed human life and brought misery and tragedy to many.

Some of these destructive ideas have been put forth in the name of Christ. Alfred North Whitehead once wrote— “Great ideas enter into reality with evil associates and disgusting alliances. But the greatness remains.”

So it is that the Christian faith has been and often is perverted and corrupted. Our faith when misused, has tried to give divine sanction to such evils as slavery, racial discrimination, antisemitism, war and religious persecution.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once wrote: “I grow weary at times with preachers who, without clarifying definition, set over against each other words like “Christianity” and “Secularism.” As though secularism were cursing the world and Christianity alone could save it. The fact that so — called “Christianity” at its worst has produced some of the most hideous persecutions, wars and fanaticisms in history, and that today it is sometimes bigoted, superstitious, intolerant, socially disruptive, while so called “Secularism” is sometimes humane, ethically minded and socially constructive.”

So, it is important that we continually ask, “What ideas are using us?” It can make all the difference in the world.

Take the idea of selfishness, for example — the idea that the purpose of life is to get all you can get for yourself and not worry about others — after all your number one. It’s not a new idea, although it comes out in new clothes from time to time. It is an idea around the world since the start of humanity. And what have been the results of that idea using people?

Homes ruined, rampant greed, friendships broken, wars waged, and all kinds of evil things that have made our human life together miserable. So, your selfishness is not such an individual matter as you might think. It is cosmic! Generation after generation, people come and go. They die. But ideas remain, waiting of our lives, therefore, lied in the ideas which we allow to use us.

Jesus Christ knew this. He also knew, as we know, that we each choose — we choose the ideals that will use us, and it is also true that no one can be used by a great idea without becoming greater himself or herself.

Think of the people who have helped our human race because of the great and constructive ideas which they allowed to use them. Christopher Columbus, Florence Nightingale, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Jr. One need not, in oneself, be very great to be used by a great idea. Even some of us who do not think much of ourselves may have this high distinction that the supreme ideas of our time use us.

Such was the case with Martin Luther, born November 10, 1483. Today, Reformation Sunday, we commemorate him because of the ideas which used him, and he becomes an example for us of what can happen when we let great and constructive ideas use us.

Until he was 34 years old, Martin Luter was relatively unknown. Because of a religious experience at age 22, Luther, who had planned to become a lawyer, entered a monastery to study for the priesthood instead.

Taking the medieval religious system at its word, Luther tried as a faithful Augustinian monk to gain the assurance of the grace of God through the performance of the prescribed works of penance, as then outlined by the church.

But for him it didn’t work. Instead of being assured of God’s love and forgiveness, Luther’s sense of unworthiness increased. Try as he would, nothing he did convinced him of God’s grace.

After several years of futile attempts, he re-discovered an idea in his study of the Bible which took hold of him and began to use him as nothing else had ever done. It was an idea who time again had come.

The idea or doctrine was simply this: God does not demand. God gives! God loves! God never stops loving! God's love cannot be earned! It is a free gift to anyone who accepts it. All we need to do is accept our acceptance by God. This was the supreme message of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was the same good news as proclaimed by the early church. But the idea had gotten covered up during the Middle Ages. And now Luther re-discovered it and let only him, but through him, much of the world of his time.

The more Luter studied, prayed and taught, the more the idea began to use him. His studies now brought him to a totally new understanding of the nature of God and God's grace. God was not an angry judge who all the time demanded more and more. God is a Gracious and forgiving God.

After this re-discovery of the central meaning of the Christian faith and as the idea began to use him more and more, Luther then began to work on some of the implications of this doctrine.

One corollary of Luther's recovery of the doctrine of justification by faith is especially relevant today. Luther recognized that even after the forgiveness of sins, the acceptance of God's grace, the sinner remains righteous and a sinner, at the same time.

This is in contrast to much of the talk we hear today about "Being Saved." Luther recognized the danger that is present with the most transforming moments of communion with God. We can come to believe that we are somehow better and more loved and accepted by God than others.

At the same time, Luther also knew, like you and I know, that many individuals may never have a deep emotional religious experience — an encounter with God or God's Spirit that is so overwhelming that we know it was from that moment on that our life was turned around. There are many individuals who may never be able to identify the specific moment that they came to know God. But that does not make them any worse or any better than the individuals who have mind-shattering conversion experiences.

A second corollary of the doctrine of justification by faith that began to use Luther is what he called "The Universal Priesthood of Believers." All of us, Luther emphasized have a direct relationship to God and as such, are individuals are ordained to the priesthood or ordained as ministers by the church, does not give them any special place as far as God is concerned.

The ideas that Martin Luther chose to let use him are what made him the great reformer. No one can be used by a great idea without becoming greater himself. The potential value of our lives, so often circumscribed and apparently unimportant, is that great ideas can use us.

What gives me hope these days is that powerful and world-changing ideas are in the air, and they will not be killed — the idea that war is wrong and stupid. The idea that the human race is one family, with more interconnections than we would have ever imagined, and that it is insane to try to evade the spiritual and political implications of that inter-connectedness.

We learn from Jesus Christ, from Peter and John, from Martin Luther and from countless others that in every generation the future has belonged to the great ideas that are always waiting to use you and me. Jesus Christ was crucified, but one thing they could not do — kill or even injure the powerful ideas he taught and lived and died for. Once a great idea is started, no one can stop it — not all the worldly power we can assemble — not guns, not nuclear bombs, not anything in this world. If you crucify it, you glorify it. If you put it in a tomb, you give it an Easter morning. If you postpone its victory, you only make the more overwhelming its victory when it comes.

I am not worried about the ultimate victory of good. My concern is that in our generation we should somehow miss being used by the great ideas that instead we let ourselves be used by ideas that are not worthy, but which narrow and limit us.

Return to our scripture reading for a moment to that court scene in Jerusalem. How typical it is of history. Almost all of the educated, well-born, worldly-wise, prosperous, establishment type people were on the wrong side of supreme issue of their time, and on the right side were two common people who in retrospect we still remember because they helped lead us around one of the most significant corners in history. It was because of that used them! Ask yourself not only this morning — but again and again as you go through life-" what ideas are using me?" Amen.