Sunday, January 25, 1987
IDEAS AND REALITY
Matthew 10:16-23

In the introduction to his book, “What’s Right with the Church,” William Willimon tells this parable:

A man from Iowa (although it could have been a man from Nebraska) got married. He had long been in love with the idea of marriage so that when he met the woman of his dreams, he proposed to her. Things went well at first. He told his friends that his new wife was “all I ever hoped for in a marriage partner.” She was beautiful, intelligent, and witty. His friends observed that here was “a marriage made in heaven.”

Unfortunately, this initial bliss was not to last. Gradually, in day-to-day living, he began to notice certain imperfections in his new wife. She was beautiful, but not always. Sometimes before nine in the morning, she was downright unattractive, even ugly. She could look stunning for great parties and social occasions, but marriage meant he had to look at her before she got her makeup on in the morning, and he couldn’t help thinking of that more than her beauty.

Yes, she was intelligent; you couldn’t take that from her. But there were gaps in her knowledge, rather large gaps. She knew a great deal about a few matters, but there were many areas of interest about which she was as ignorant as the day she was born. This displeased him greatly. He knew there would be a time when she would embarrass him by making some ill-considered statement in public, thus revealing to the whole world her intellectual imperfections. This bothered him.

Slowly but surely, he found himself growing cool to this woman. Marriage had proved different than he thought. It had been fun to be with her on a Saturday evening, to dance with her into the wee hours of the morning at a society ball. But marriage wasn’t like that at all. Marriage was cornflakes for breakfast and someone sleeping beside you with large curlers in her hair. It was disagreements over finances, visits from her Oklahoma relatives, and that grotesque lamp that she had selected for the living room. That was marriage.

He still believed in love more than ever. He still longed for the perfect partner. He continued to cling to the idea of marriage. The idea was fine; it was the particular experience of marriage that bothered him. The man who marries “the woman of my dreams,” the woman who marries “Mr. Right,” each will discover that the particular experience of this person is quite different from the ideal. The idea of a thing is frequently different from the thing itself. Our ideas and reality do not always match.

Certainly, that must have been the case with Jesus and his disciples. He had called them to follow him, and they had willingly accepted. They were attracted to him as a person and to his message. They saw in him the answer to many of their religious questions.

But the more they followed him, the more they realized that it wasn’t quite as simple as they had first imagined. There was strong opposition to his ministry from among the religious leaders. Not everyone accepted his way. And now, as he was about to send them out on their own, he gave them a warning: “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.”

And he had more to say. He advised them to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Jesus went on to tell them that they would be severely criticized and that physical harm would come to them. Suffering would be involved, and later Jesus himself would suffer and die. The disciples were discovering that there is a difference between ideas and reality. In some other places in the Gospel stories, there is evidence that the disciples had not thought of suffering. They had thought only of glory. They had argued as to which among them would be first. Their idea of what following Jesus meant and the reality were not the same.

There is a tendency in all of us with our ideas to universalize, to think only in the abstract and to forget the particulars. This is especially true in the area of our religious faith. We want to boil down Christianity to a set of abstract and high-sounding platitudes or grand concepts. It's easier to handle in this way and doesn't require much of us. Keep it in the realm of ideas or theories, but never get too specific, which means never having to apply it to one's daily life. Don't let it meddle!

So it's all right to talk about loving one's neighbor, as long as we don't very carefully define who one's neighbor is or what that implies. In my first parish, on the south side of Chicago, we talked about loving one's neighbor, and then the neighborhood began to change. It had previously been an all-white neighborhood, and some Black families moved in. One night, someone tried to set fire to one of the homes of one of these new neighbors. I suggested in a sermon that one way to love our neighbors specifically would be to help rebuild that house with volunteer labor, but that was getting too specific.

It's all right to talk in grand terms about Christians being giving persons as long as one doesn't get too specific and begin to suggest to someone what his or her gift might be — say $30 a week.

So it is that people will try to summarize the Christian life by saying it's about acceptance but never defining acceptance, or about serving others, or about liberation or about freedom or about forgiveness, or about personal salvation, but never getting specific. We do this because it makes following Jesus easier.

It's difficult to speak for other religions, but when it comes to Christianity, it's the scandal of particularity that bothers 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 Kahil Gibran's, "The Prophet," for here we have the language of things spiritual manipulated poetically in a historical vacuum. Gibran's prophet speaks to humankind without ever having to address himself to particular men and women in specific historical circumstances.

The gospel of Jesus Christ, on the other hand, challenges us and upsets us at times because it is more than being about love, peace, freedom, liberation, or any other lovable abstraction. The gospel is a complicated story of a young Jew from Nazareth, Jesus, who lived, taught, suffered, died, and rose.

Abstractions are appealing because they enable us to make Jesus anything we like. They are large empty baskets that we can fill with more agreeable contents. But there is little abstraction in the story of Jesus. It is the particularity of it that is so striking.

As you read the gospels, you can almost taste the dust along the roadside, smell the stable of the nativity, hear the thunder of the mob. Your sight falls, not only upon uplifting and inspiring visions, but upon mustard seeds, coins, lepers, spittle mixed with dirt, and a young prophet whose words will not let you go. This is the scandal of particularity. Jesus calls his followers to be a different kind of people in this world.

What is said of Jesus holds true for the church. It is the scandal of particularity that bothers us. Like the man in love from Iowa, fascinated by the idea of marriage, many approve of both the idea of following Christ and the concept of the church, but they are horrified by the particulars.

It is said that the comedian Groucho Marx once turned down an invitation to join an exclusive club with the words, "I wouldn't belong to a club that would take in a person like me." That's the way some people feel about the church.

So for some people, Jesus is best followed in the safe confines of their own living rooms through a religious program on television, or by thinking noble thoughts about God in the privacy of their library, or by pleasant conversation with someone else who sees things the same way. Jesus is fine. It's those people of Jesus, those church members, that bother them. Without those others, we can have Jesus on our own terms.

Other people have gotten involved with the church, but before they did, they had an idea of what the church is or should be, and then after a time, they find that it is not like that idea. They, therefore, become disillusioned and drop out, or try to find someone or something to blame.

Some even have the idea that the minister is perfect and then are shocked one day to discover that he too makes mistakes, is forgetful, has a temper, is sometimes depressed and is selfish. (This is not a confession.)

In his book, "The Screwtape Letters," by C. S. Lewis, a senior devil is giving advice to a junior devil who has been assigned to lead astray a new Christian. In one of these letters, Screwtape, the senior, writes to Wormwood, the junior, as follows:

"One of our greatest allies at present is the church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately, it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished sham Gothic erection of the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks around him, he sees just that selection of neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like 'Body of Christ' and the actual faces in the next pew."

The fact is, of course, that the real church, the body of Christ, is made up of people like you and me. The Bible reminds us that we "have this treasure in earthen vessels." It's okay to have grand ideas of what the church should be, and to have a vision of what it might become, but at the same time, we have to make allowances for the difference between the idea and the

reality. 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.

This is a problem in all of life, but more often than not we are able to come to terms with it. We realize that what we dream must finally be expressed within the limitations of time, regretting the elemental facts of life.

The problem is that within the realm of our Christian faith we often resist this knowledge with all the stubborn pride of the indignant mind. The very individual who is most determined to establish human relationships on the basis of a candid realism is the most tempted to insist that he or she can deal with God only while standing on holy ground.

To put it another way, some of us try to hold God at mind's length. We keep God in the realm of the ideal — maybe because we're a little bit afraid that the infinite God is not very much interested in our finite ventures, or maybe because we really don't want God messing around in our lives. Our terrible pride forces us to postulate a God who is beyond the reach of our terrible need.

But here is where the good news of the Christian gospel meets us head-on. The stories of Jesus tell us that God meets us where we are. There are no preconditions. God is in the middle of everyday life, not simply in abstract ideas or concepts. Ours is an incarnational faith, not a disembodied abstraction.

The story of Jesus is the story of a loving God and a suffering God, a God who bleeds and dies, a God who is with us at every moment of our existence. Once we have confronted a suffering God, then we begin to see ourselves in a new light. We see ourselves as we are — creators of profound thoughts, grand ideas, high hopes, but also people who suffer hunger, pain, lust, and fear, and we know that our hunger and fear and pain and need to be loved are as much parts of us as the most exalted imagination of our minds. The experience of the suffering God, as seen in Jesus, makes it possible for us to accept the unity of what we are.

Furthermore, the gospel reminds us that while we are in this life, no contact with God is ever perfect or complete. "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face." For a fleeting moment we might sense that it is — but then that moment is gone. Yet it is enough. God loves us where we are and in spite of our imperfect connections. That's good news for all of us. Amen.