Sunday, October 24, 1993
THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND GLOBAL ETHICS
Matthew 22:34-40

According to a news story last week, David Gergen, White House Advisor to President Clinton, was asked to list some of his fundamental values or ethics in a room full of cynical editorial writers. Mr. Gergen listed the following three without hesitation:

The value of the family unit, pointing to the number of children born to single mothers or growing up in single-parent families.

Thrift, noting that we are not saving enough, and that we are too wasteful and overly concerned with consumption.

A moral obligation to the next generation, emphasizing that adults have an obligation to give back, to turn over to the next generation a country that is better than what we found.

This last value or ethic reminded me of that well-loved poem, The Bridge Builder:

> An old man going a lone highway,
> Came at the evening, cold and gray,
> To a chasm, vast and deep and wide,
> Through which was flowing a sullen tide.
>
> The old man crossed in the twilight dim —
> That sullen stream had been naught to him;
> But he turned when he reached the other side,
> And built a bridge to span the tide.
>
> “Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim near,
> “You are wasting strength in building here.
> Your journey will end with the ending day;
> You never again must pass this way.
> You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide —
> Why build you the bridge at eventide?”
>
> The builder lifted his old gray head.
> “Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
> “There followeth after me today,
> A youth whose feet must pass this way.
> This chasm that has been naught to me,
> To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
> He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
> Good friend, I am building the bridge for him.”

For those of us who are members of a church like this one, we have an obligation to turn over to the next generation a church that is better and stronger than what we inherited. I also believe we have this obligation in the world at large — to turn over to the next generation a better world.

Now, suppose you had been asked the question that was asked of David Gergen. What would you list as some of your fundamental values or ethics — those which you believe are timeless and true in every age, culture, and religion?

Let's take the question one step further. Is there a global code of ethics? Are there some common principles we human beings can agree on all around the world, and what relation do they have to our Christian faith and to other living religions?

Earlier this year, The Institute for Global Ethics, an organization to which I belong, asked this question: Is there a global code of ethics? Are there basic values we can all agree on?

After numerous surveys and interviews, the answer was a resounding "yes." It came from the mountains of New Zealand and the heart of Tokyo, from an Indian reservation in Nebraska and a suburb of Stockholm. It came from Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims, women and men, liberals and conservatives. It came from people raised in Bangladesh, Mozambique, Costa Rica, Sri Lanka, Shanghai, and Lebanon.

The question put to each one of them was: If there could be a global code of ethics for the 21st century, what would be on it?

From the scores of moral values mentioned, eight of them came up so insistently that they surely belong on anyone's list of global basic ethics. All agreed that these are timeless ethics that do not change from century to century or culture to culture.

Love (which some called caring or compassion)
Truth (honesty or integrity)
Freedom (liberty)
Unity (a sense of wholeness or community)
Tolerance (respect for diversity)
Responsibility (accountability)
Respect for life (avoidance of killing)

These basic values have been in place within the human community around the world for centuries. A complete sermon, essay, or book could be written on each one of these values, their definitions, and their implications.

Why is it important that we have a common agreement on basic values or ethics? Because human history, including the Bible, reminds us that communities and nations, if they are to endure, depend on a common core of values. Furthermore, such core values cannot be imposed by raw power for very long. If a society or country is to endure, these morals and values need to be generally agreed upon and commonly held.

Why do we need common values to hold us together? Because the hostility of one tribe for another, or one group for another, is among the most instinctive human reactions. Unless a common purpose binds us together, tribal hostilities, ethnic loyalties, and other things that tend to separate us will drive us apart.

Look at what's happening today all over the globe. Ancient tribal and ethnic hostilities are creating havoc. In our own country, we are seeing a resurgence of ethnic suspicion and hostility, which frequently leads to violence.

Recently, I've been doing a lot of reading in the history of our nation to try to understand in a new way why we've succeeded as much as we have — because after all, we are a nation of immigrants from many different backgrounds. Many countries with this much diversity break apart because they fail to give ethnically diverse and economically diverse peoples compelling reasons to see themselves as part of the same nation. The United States has worked thus far because it has offered such reasons.

What is it, in the absence of a common ethnic origin, that has held the United States together for over 200 years?

In the beginning, the United States had a brilliant solution for the inherent fragility of a multi-ethnic society: the creation of a brand-new national identity, carried forward by individuals who, in forsaking old loyalties and joining to make new lives, were able to transcend their ethnic differences. Most of these European immigrants who had torn up roots to brave the wild Atlantic wanted to forget a horrid past and embrace a hopeful future. Their goals were escape, deliverance, and assimilation.

Added to this was the commitment of the citizens of the United States to democracy and self-government, in other words, civic participation.

Some years later, Abraham Lincoln declared in his Gettysburg Address an expansion of the same idea — that what holds us together, despite our differences, is our dedication to the proposition in the opening statement of the Declaration of Independence. Here's how Lincoln put it: "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Lincoln ended his brief two-minute speech with his vision for the future: "That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth." A common commitment to such high values as these, even though imperfectly realized, is what holds a community, a nation, or a world together.

It is possible for us to transcend our differences only when we agree that what binds us together is more important than the things that divide us.

For those of us who are Christians, it all begins with the one God who created and creates all human beings as equal — not in talent or ability, but in value. So from our point of view as Christians, we are to see all human beings as our brothers and sisters. We are members of the same family.

Our Christian faith even goes further and teaches that it is possible for us to affirm our basic values and unity while also celebrating our diversity.

For example, in this country, I believe that despite what their self-appointed leaders may claim, most American-born members of ethnic groups, whether white or non-white, may cherish particular heritages but still see themselves primarily as Americans — not primarily as Irish, Hungarians, Africans, Germans, or Asians.

Our Christian faith, then, is a major contributor to those basic and fundamental national and global ethics.

But as Christians, we are called to go even further. As I have said in previous sermons, Christians are called to set examples for others; called to model a way of life that goes beyond laws and rules.

Here's what Jesus had to say about it. One day, in an effort to test Jesus, one of the Pharisees, who also happened to be a lawyer, asked him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." And then, in another place, Jesus went on to say that not only are we all brothers and sisters, but we are to be neighbors to each other.

The highest value, the highest ethic, that which transcends all others and binds them together, is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. St. Augustine used to say, "Love God and do as you please," for he knew that if you truly love God, all other values will fall into place.

In another incident from the life of Jesus, the same point is made. A young man comes to Jesus and asks, "What must I do to have eternal life?" And Jesus answered, "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." The young man replied that he had kept all the commandments and wanted to know what he still lacked. Jesus said, "Go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me." But when the young man heard this, he went away grieving because he had many possessions. (Matthew 19:16-22)

A few weeks ago, there was a column in the Wall Street Journal about timeless moral values, and the writer quoted this story from the gospels. He was using the story to point out the importance of following the commandments, but he conveniently forgot to tell the rest of the story about Jesus telling the young man that in his case, if he really wanted to enjoy life, if he truly wanted to experience the pleasure that comes from goodness, he needed to sell all he had and give to the poor, and then come and follow him.

The point is that as Christians, we are always to go beyond the letter of the law. We are to go "the second mile," as Jesus said. We are to be good, not only because we know it's important to commit ourselves to God's commandments, but because to be good in the sense that Jesus describes goodness, is to be true to our basic God-given nature. God created us good. Therefore, the greatest pleasure and joy that can come from life is to be good — to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.