Sunday, October 2, 1994
CAN THERE BE UNITY AND DIVERSITY?
Psalm 8

I want to begin this sermon with several questions that have been on my mind for a long time, but lately these questions have been nagging at me more insistently. I wonder if these same questions have been bothering you.

Are there certain universal principles or natural laws that are operative in our world, no matter who we are, where we live, or what religious faith we claim to follow? Is there a moral glue that can bind us together as a world? To put it another way, are there some things that are always right or wrong in every culture and in every time? On that subject, Samuel Johnson is quoted as saying, “If you really don’t believe there’s a difference between good and bad, then I say to you that when you leave my table I’ll count my spoons.”

Assuming such laws or principles exist, how can we discover them? Where can they be found? What is their relationship to our religious beliefs? Specifically, what contribution does our Christian faith have to make?

Can we, as human beings with widely diversified ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs, agree on what these universal principles or natural laws are?

There are people in our world — how large the group is, I do not know — who would argue that no such core principles or natural laws exist, that there can be no unity in our diversity.

That’s one of the main reasons our public tax-supported educational institutions have such difficulty in teaching a set of common moral principles. The question is always raised, “Whose ethics or whose moral principles will you teach?” And if it can be shown even in a small way that a certain set of moral principles can be traced to a particular religion, then the fear is that by teaching this set of moral principles, one is favoring one religion over another.

Whose ethics or moral principles will you teach? As a new century approaches, that’s among the most important questions we face as a global community. Why? Because it speaks directly to our future, our willingness to help ourselves and our children create a world of effective and compassionate relationships, and our ability to sustain ourselves as a human community.

To answer the first question I asked at the beginning of this sermon, “Are there certain moral principles or natural laws that are operative in our world?” My answer is in the affirmative. I believe there are natural laws or “built-in” moral principles in our creation. They are there whether we recognize them or not. I also believe that we can discover those basic natural laws, those moral principles that are common to and no doubt have their origin in religious beliefs yet transcend them. Furthermore, as a Christian, I believe Jesus would affirm this process. He knew about the “wisdom” tradition in the Hebrew community. As I mentioned in the sermon several weeks ago, this “wisdom” tradition holds that there are a number of basic moral principles that are built into the creation, that are a part of the fabric of life. For those of us who believe in a loving God, we also believe that God put them there for our benefit. We also believe, as Psalm 8 reminds us, that God has given us the ability to live according to these principles.

It's also important to remember that each one of us is a teacher of moral principles, whether we are always aware of it or not. The examples we set, the choices we make, the lives we live broadcast clear ethical signals to the people around us. We cannot avoid responsibility for our moral atmosphere.

Of course, this is nothing new. Every generation has recognized that, intentionally or not, moral principles are being taught, either for better or for worse.

But there are some new elements in our world today that make it even more important that we discover and agree on what these common moral principles are. Without a common set of moral principles, communities become unstable collections of individuals co-existing uneasily within common boundaries.

The world is more heavily populated, which means people are living closer and closer together, and that creates its own problems. When we lived in separate communities and nations far apart from each other, each group could have a different set of moral principles, and they seldom came into conflict with others.

We are more connected and live more closely to each other because of technology. Transistor radios, television, cellular phones, fax machines, and computers tie us together in ways we could not have imagined many years ago. We are also more connected economically, as individuals and as nations.

As a result, in today's world, ethical and moral issues are not only different in scale from those of our ancestors, they are different in kind and far more complex.

Here are a few examples.

Nuclear technology, in addition to nuclear weapons, has spun off an array of issues concerning side effects and waste disposal.

Or think of the ethical dilemmas posed by genetic engineering. It is now possible to extract a single cell from a days-old human embryo and examine it for disease-promoting genes. Just over the horizon lies the capacity to reconstruct the genetic content of that same embryo to make it perform properly. But what does "perform properly" mean, and who decides? And based on what criteria? Should the technology be used only to repair bad embryos, or to make good ones better? Could it be perverted into efforts to create superior intellects among some children and a slave-race mentality among others?

I could go on and on with examples. I do not raise these issues to argue against technology. That would be futile. What we need, however, is ethical wisdom to match our technological ability.

We also need to talk about morality and ethics because there is evidence that we live in a time of confusion about such issues. In a July 1991 survey of almost sixteen thousand students at 31 top American universities, 76 percent of those pursuing graduate degrees in business admitted to having cheated at least once on a test while an undergraduate.

Another poll by the Louis Harris organization found that when you ask high schoolers in the United States, "Would you cheat to pass an important exam?" two-thirds say, "Yes." And still

another study of young adults between the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine found that nearly 40 percent felt that corruption and deceit were important ways of getting ahead in the world.

Clearly, there is a need for a common set of moral principles on which we can agree, despite our diversity of backgrounds, and these principles then need to be taught and lived.

In a book published earlier this year, entitled Shared Values for a Troubled World, Rushworth M. Kidder, a former senior columnist for the Christian Science Monitor and now the president of the Institute for Global Ethics in Camden, Maine, spells out eight universal human ethical principles or values that he believes can be agreed on by almost everyone. He arrived at this list of eight by extensive interviews with living philosophers and thinkers from around the world. People from a variety of religious backgrounds and ethnic groups were included.

Each interview began with a common question: If you could help create a global code of ethics, what would be on it? What moral values, in other words, would you bring to the table from your own culture and background? It's a good question for a discussion at any time. What would be on your list?

The eight principles they all agreed on, and which ranked the highest, are these (they are not ranked in any order of importance — they are equally valid):

1. Love (compassion)

2. Truthfulness (keep your promises)

3. Fairness (justice, fair play, even-handedness, equality before the law)

4. Freedom (liberty, equal opportunity)

5. Unity (cooperation)

6. Tolerance (respect for others)

7. Responsibility (you are responsible for your own behavior; too many people try to blame others or the environment in which they were raised for everything bad that happens to them)

8. Respect for life

This list of eight is not meant to be exhaustive, but its purpose is to begin the discussion.

Mr. Kidder believes these eight principles are common to all of the major religions of the world. For us who call ourselves Christians, we know that Jesus taught and lived every one of them. I believe it is possible to find unity in our diversity.

The good news is that according to our Christian faith, God has built into creation certain basic principles of life so that our lives — separately and together — will be more harmonious and more fulfilling.

As Christians, we need to continue to be part of the discussion and to make our contribution so that as a world community we can come to agree on those basic ethical principles that will provide the foundation for our living together in peace. Amen.