Sunday, October 23, 1994
BEING SPECIFIC IS THE PROBLEM
Luke 10:25-37

Several weeks ago, I delivered a sermon titled “Can There Be Unity and Diversity?” The central issue in that sermon was whether there are certain universal principles or spiritual guidelines that are operative in our world, no matter who we are, where we live, or what religious faith we claim to follow.

There are natural laws or spiritual principles built into creation, whether we recognize them or not. These universal spiritual principles can be found in all religious systems, especially in the Christian faith. They are included in the teachings of Jesus and are also found in the Old Testament and the religious tradition from which Jesus came.

For those of us who believe in God, these spiritual principles or natural laws originate in God. God has given them to us as a gift. They are here for our benefit, so that we can live joyful lives.

In that same sermon, I mentioned a new book published earlier this year, titled Shared Values for a Changing World. The author, Rushworth M. Kidder, after a great deal of research and interviewing leading philosophers and thinkers from around the world, discovered eight universal human ethical principles that he believes can be agreed upon by almost everyone.

This list of eight includes:

1. Love (compassion)

2. Truthfulness (keeping your promises)

3. 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

Last year, another book on virtues became a bestseller — The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories by William J. Bennett. The author compiled over 250 stories and illustrations of what he calls basic human virtues into a large book of 831 pages. There are ten chapters, each devoted to stories and other writings that illustrate a given virtue: self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty, and finally, faith. This list of virtues sounds remarkably close to St. Paul’s list of the gifts of God’s Spirit in the letter to the Galatians: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

The fact that such a book became a bestseller for non-fiction works means that a lot of us in this country are interested in talking about virtues. That's good news. The problem comes when we begin to get specific.

Putting all these virtues into practice in specific cases is not as easy as it sounds. It's easy to agree on basic moral principles in general. After all, who could quarrel with the desirability of self-control, compassion, courage, and the rest? The fact is that most virtues are uncontroversial as long as they are formulated at a fairly high level of abstraction. But virtues are not truly learned or practiced at this level. We learn how to be compassionate, for example, only through imitation of and reflection on specific examples of compassionate persons who show us how, in what circumstances, and why to be compassionate.

We can all agree that it is good to be compassionate, but it does not follow that we will agree on what it means to be compassionate here and now in a very specific situation. One person's courage is another person's rashness, and one person's prudence is another person's small-minded caution. When we translate general virtues into a set of specific actions, that is when it becomes more difficult. Being specific is the problem.

Jesus was often very specific about things. One day, a lawyer came to test Jesus. He asked Jesus what he had to do to gain eternal life. "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" asked Jesus in return. He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." That was the right answer. But then came the follow-up question, "If I am supposed to love my neighbor, who is my neighbor?" That's getting specific.

Jesus responded with the story of the "Good Samaritan." Anyone in need, even your most bitter enemy, is your neighbor. That makes loving your neighbor more difficult and even controversial. And how is "love" itself to be defined specifically? In another instance, an individual asked Jesus what he must do to find life, and Jesus again answered very specifically, "Go, sell what you have and give the proceeds to the poor, and then come and follow me."

All of Jesus' teachings are based on God-given spiritual principles, but he also became very specific in applying them. He emphasized that saying you believe in the basic virtues is not enough. Jesus always also wants to know what you are going to do in a specific situation.

The story is told about a man who arrived in St. Louis just as a political campaign was ending, and the cab driver, not being above the battle, volunteered his testimony. "My father and my grandfather before me and their fathers have always been straight-ticket Republicans," he said. "Ah," said the passenger, who was himself a lifelong Republican, "I take it that means you will vote for Senator so-and-so." "No," replied the driver, "there comes a time when a person has to push his principles aside and do the right thing."

That's exactly what Jesus talked about and did. He said, "If a man falls in a ditch on the Sabbath, then one has to push aside the principle of not working on the Sabbath and do the right thing and get the man out of the ditch." And Jesus did exactly that. He healed a man on the Sabbath and was criticized for it. The Good Samaritan went against a basic principle of his time — the principle that Samaritans and Jews are to have nothing at all to do with each other. But he also was true to a higher principle — according to the definition of Jesus, one's neighbor is anyone in need.

This kind of emphasis on specific action goes all the way through the Bible. Abraham Heschel put it this way: “The insistence upon generalization at the price of a total disregard of the particular and concrete is something that is alien to prophetic thinking in the Bible. Prophetic words are never detached from the concrete historical situation. There is not a timeless abstract message; it always refers to an actual particular situation.”

Jesus was always concerned with the connection between word and action. And that’s what continually got him into trouble.

There was a preacher who usually preached in abstractions. But one Sunday, he got more specific. He was talking about the need for money to support the church, and he said, “This church is going to walk, it’s going to walk.” And the congregation responded with “Amen, Amen.” Then, warming to the subject because of the congregation’s enthusiastic response, he said, “This church is going to run. This church is going to run.” Again, the congregation responded to this generalization with loud amens. He continued, “This church is going to fly, it’s going to fly.” And again, they responded with loud amens. Then he got specific and said, “It’s going to take money, money, money.”

Now the congregation forgot about the “amens” and instead responded to the specific, “Let it walk, let it walk, let it walk.”

It is this yearning after generalized and abstract religion that accounts in large part for the popularity of such books as Gibran’s The Prophet. Here we have the language of things spiritual manipulated poetically in a historical vacuum. Gibran’s “Prophet” speaks to humankind in general without ever having to address himself to particular men and women in specific historical circumstances. And we love the generalizations. They are so beautiful and poetic, but they never get specific.

Jesus did the opposite. When he talked about loving one’s neighbor, he got specific with his parables. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance, a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, while traveling, came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'”

As your minister, I can talk with you about the joy of giving week after week and about what your giving will do for you and this church, but if I get specific and suggest that you might consider giving 10% of your income, or if I suggest you consider a specific dollar amount of $30 per week, then it becomes a different matter.

This problem of being specific appears in all areas of human existence, and you can even have fun with it. A person says to you, “We’ve been thinking about having you over for dinner sometime.” And then you get specific. You get out your calendar and say, “That’s wonderful. Let’s set a date right now.”

Someone wrote, “We human beings always find it hard to establish a complete rapport between our ideals and the realities of everyday lives. 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.” Or we only dream and never get specific.

Many years ago, my wife and I lived in Connecticut, and one day we visited an old colonial house. It was occupied by the last surviving descendant of the original owner, a frail woman in her 70s.

In the main room, we noticed an old rifle hanging over the fireplace. I started to touch it, but as I reached out, she said, “Please don’t touch it. It’s loaded and might go off.” Then she went on to say, “My great, great, great-grandfather loaded that gun and put it there for the day when he might strike a blow for the freedom of the American colonies.” “What happened?” I asked. “Did he die before the revolution?” “Oh no,” she replied, “He lived to a ripe old age and died in 1817. But he never seemed to be able to generate much enthusiasm for General Washington’s rebellion.”

That story is an example of the problem with being specific. We can imagine what the old man thought when he put the gun there. Perhaps he spent many days and evenings dreaming of when he would strike a blow for freedom. As time passed, his concept of the revolution grew more and more glorious. Maybe he even dreamed that one day he would lead an army to victory on the field of honor.

But then one day, a group of his less affluent neighbors came by, and one of them said, “Ben, there’s been a hell of a scrap at Concord. Get your gun and let’s go.”

This is not what Ben had imagined. He could see no connection between his concept of freedom and a grubby gang of ruffians setting out for a fight somewhere in Massachusetts. The lawyer who came to question Jesus had trouble seeing the connection between his grand concept of love of God and neighbor and a Samaritan helping an injured Jew in a ditch.

Isn’t that the problem with much of our religion? Our idea of God or of love becomes so vague and abstract that we miss God in the specifics of human life. Love of neighbor is more than a principle or an abstraction. It is something we do in a specific situation.

To talk about justice only in general terms is not very helpful. We only begin to understand justice when we see it or apply it in a particular time and place. The priest and the Levite who came along the road where the man was in the ditch believed in love and justice in general, but when it got down to specifics, they didn’t act.

Don’t you get tired of generalizations? Whenever I hear a person blithely announce that the whole trouble with the world is that people don’t follow the Golden Rule, I start for the other side of the room. Or I want to ask, “What is the Golden Rule? What specifically do you mean?” The same goes for the generalization “traditional family values” that we hear bantered around so frequently. I want to ask, “Whose traditional family values? Be specific. What values are you talking about?” I’ve never heard of anyone who is against “traditional family values” in the abstract, but get specific, and then the discussion begins or stops.

Do you want to get into trouble like Jesus did? Then ask the next person who says they believe in the church and tells you how important the church is — get specific and ask how much they contribute to its work.

The good news of the Christian faith is that God's love for the world and for you and me became very specific in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

The Christian faith, following the way of Jesus, is one of high ideals and lofty spiritual principles, but it is also the way of specific actions and personal commitment. Amen.