Sunday October 23, 1994

BEING SPECIFIC IS THE PROBLEM Luke 10:25-37

Several weeks ago I did a sermon with the title, CAN THERE BE UNITY AND DIVERSITY? The basic issue in that sermon was: are there certain universal principles or spiritual guide-lines which are operative in our world, no matter who we are, or where we live, or what religious faith we claim to follow?

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

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

live together in harmony. They are guidelines for joyful living.

In that same sermon, I mentioned a new book published earlier this year, entitled SHARED VALUES FOR A CHANGING WORLD. The author, Rushworth M. Kidder, after a great deal of research and after interviewing leading philosophers and thinkers from around the world, discovered eight universal human ethical principles which he believes can be agreed on by almost everyone.

This list of eight includes: (1) love, (compassion): (2) truthfulness, keep your promises: (3)

fairness, justice, fair play, 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.

Last year, another book on virtues became a best-seller--THE BOOK OF VIRTUES; A TREASURY OF GREAT MORAL STORIES, by William J. Bennett. The author put together between the two covers of a large book, 831 pages, more than 250 stories and illustrations

of what he calls basic human virtues. There are ten chapters, each of which is 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 sound 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 best-seller for non- fiction works means that a lot of us in this country are interested in talking about

morals and the basic spiritual principles of life. That's good news. The problem comes when we begin to be 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 so 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 and 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.

That's what got Jesus into trouble. He got 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, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and you neighbor as yourself." That was the right answer. But then came the follow-up question, "If I am supposed to love my neigbbor, who is my neighbor?"

That's getting specific.

To answer that specific question, Jesus told 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. All

through his life and teachings, Jesus 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. "I and 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 life-long Republican, "I take it that means you will vote for Senator so and

so." "No," said the cab driver, "There are times 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--that of loving one's neighbor and 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 followed directly in this line of prophetic 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 then he got specific and said, "It's going to take money, money, money."

Now the congregation forget 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 which 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 every having to address himself to particular men

and women in specific historical circumstanc-

es. And we love the genralizations. 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 Jeru-

salem 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

want to consider a gift of 5% or more of your income, or if I would 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 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 the world of ideas and the cunning realities of everyday lives. There is always a disturbing discrepancy between theory and practice. We are able to conceive magificently 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 originl owner, a frail woman in her 70's.

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 stike a blow for the freedom of the American colonies."

"What happened," I asked, "Did he die before the revolution?"

"O 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 man like many of us, had the problem of 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 stike a blow for freedom. As time passed his concept of the revolution grew more and more glorious. Maybe he even dreamed that one day 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 of his grand concept of love of God 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 specific in human life. Love of neighor 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 ask, "What is the Golden Rule? What specifically do you

mean and in what situation?" It's like 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 he or she believes in the church and tells you how important the church is--get specific and ask how

much he or she is willing to give regularly for the support of the local church?

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 of personal commitment. Amen.