Sunday, October 30, 1994
IDEAS THAT HAVE USED ME
Mark 12:28-34

Here is the cleaned-up version of the sermon:

In his autobiography titled The Living of These Days, Harry Emerson Fosdick's last chapter is entitled "Ideas That Have Used Me." Fosdick, one of this country's most distinguished preachers, quotes Felix Adler, who said toward the end of his life, "I am grateful for the ideas that have used me." Fosdick then makes the point that "despite our egotism, the fact remains that our personal arrival on earth was long antedated by varied ideas of life's meaning, contrasting life philosophies, and conflicting concepts of personal and social right and wrong."

He maintains that our life's ultimate significance lies in our choice of the ideas we use and allow to use us. In his own life, as he looks back over it, he discovers that whatever satisfaction he can find springs primarily from some of the ideas that have used him.

"Ideas that use us." It's an intriguing way of examining our lives and evaluating them. I believe Victor Hugo was correct when he said, "Nothing is so powerful in this world as an idea whose time has come."

The special people who happened to represent or restate an idea were often not remarkable in themselves, but because they let a great idea use them, their lives were changed, and their contribution to the world was something that made a change for the better. They were the implements of an idea whose time had come.

For example, most of the teachings of Jesus were not original to him. They come out of the tradition in which he was raised. When Jesus was asked by one of the religious scholars of his day, "Which commandment is first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." This came out of his religious tradition.

The idea that there is one God and that love of God and neighbor go together and cannot be separated is one of the most powerful religious ideas of all time.

The first disciples of Jesus were not extraordinary people but became so because of the ideas that used them. There's a story in the book of Acts in the New Testament that especially illustrates this. Simon Peter and the disciple named John had been hauled into court in Jerusalem and threatened with severe punishment if they did not cease preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. Peter and John were not considered to be distinguished individuals. They were Galileans, common people, fishermen by trade.

In fact, the author of the book of Acts says that the people in the court that day "perceived that they were uneducated, common men." Yet here they were standing before the most powerful leaders of their religion and nation. To whom does the future belong? The people who had them on trial? Or to Peter and John and the idea they represented?

We know the answer. The good news of Jesus Christ, which they represented, is still alive and changing the world for the better. They were being used by an idea of tremendous power.

On the other hand, there have been those in history and among us who have let ideas use them that were destructive and caused all sorts of evil. Some of the cruelest periods of history have come about because of the ideas that used the leaders of those times.

Take, for example, the idea that one race of people is to be the master race and rule over all others. When that idea uses people, there is trouble. Or take the idea that God loves and cares for some people more than others. It's a perversion of the idea of God's love, and what evil it can bring about when it uses people. Or take the idea that only men are to be in charge and women subservient — that idea has narrowed human life and brought misery and tragedy to many.

To make it worse, some of these destructive ideas have been put forth in the name of Christ. Alfred North Whitehead once wrote: "Great ideas enter reality with evil associates and disgusting alliances. But the greatness remains."

So it is that the Christian faith has been and often is perverted and corrupted, but its greatness remains. Our faith, when misused, has tried to give divine sanction to such evils as slavery, racial discrimination, anti-Semitism, sexism, and religious persecution.

Thus it is important that we continually ask ourselves, "What ideas are using me?" It can make all the difference in the world.

Take the idea of selfishness, for example. The idea that the purpose of life is to get all you can for yourself and not worry about others. It's not a new idea, although it comes out in new clothes from time to time. It's an idea that has been around the world since the beginning of the human race.

And what have been the results of that idea using people? Homes ruined, justification of greed, friendships broken, and all kinds of evil things that have made our human life together miserable.

People die, but ideas go on, waiting to be used or to use others. The ultimate meaning of our lives, therefore, lies in the ideas we allow to use us.

Jesus knew this. He also knew that we each choose the ideas that will use us. It is also true that no one can be used by a great idea without becoming greater himself or herself.

Think of the people who have helped our human race because of the great and constructive ideas they allowed to use them. Florence Nightingale, Mother Teresa, Susan B. Anthony, Gandhi of India, Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln.

Remember, one need not, in oneself, be very great to be used by a great idea. Even some of us who do not think much of ourselves may have this high distinction: that the supreme ideas of our time use us.

Such was the case with Martin Luther, born November 10, 1483. Today, on Reformation Sunday, we remember him because of the ideas that used him, and he becomes an example for us of what can happen when we let powerful and constructive ideas use us.

Until he was 34 years old, Luther was relatively unknown. Because of a life-changing religious experience at age 22, Luther, who had planned to become a lawyer, entered a monastery to study for the priesthood instead.

Taking the medieval religious system at its word, Luther tried as a faithful Augustinian monk to gain the assurance of the grace of God through the performance of the prescribed works of penance, as then outlined by the church.

But for him, it didn't work. Instead of being assured of God's love and forgiveness, Luther's sense of unworthiness increased. Try as he would, nothing he did convinced him of God's grace.

After several years of futile attempts, he rediscovered an idea in his study of the Bible, an idea that took hold of him and began to use him as nothing else ever had.

The idea or principle from the Bible was simply this: God does not demand. God gives. God loves. God never stops loving. God's love cannot be earned. It is a free gift to anyone who accepts it. All we need to do is to accept our acceptance by God. This was the supreme message of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It was the good news proclaimed by the early church. But the idea had gotten covered up during the Middle Ages. And now Luther rediscovered it and let himself be used by it, and it changed not only him but, through him, much of the world of his time.

The more Luther studied, prayed, and taught, the more the idea began to use him. His studies now brought him to a totally new understanding of the nature of God and God's grace. God is not an angry God who demands more and more. God is a gracious and forgiving God.

After this rediscovery of the central meaning of the Christian faith and as the idea began to use him more and more, Luther then began to work on some of the implications of this idea.

One corollary of Luther's recovery of the meaning of justification by faith is especially relevant today. Luther recognized that even after the forgiveness of sins and the acceptance of God's grace, each one of us remains righteous and a sinner at the same time.

This contrasts with much of the talk we hear today about "being saved." Luther recognized the danger present in the most transforming moments of communion with God. We can come to believe that we are somehow better and more loved and accepted by God than others.

Luther also knew, even as you and I know, that many individuals may never have a deep emotional religious experience — an encounter with God or God's Spirit that is so overwhelming that we know it was from that moment on that our life was turned around. There are many individuals who may never be able to identify the specific moment they came to know God and God's grace. But that does not make them any better or any worse than the individuals who have mind-shattering conversion experiences.

A second corollary of the idea of justification by faith that began to use Luther is what he called the "priesthood of all believers." All of us, Luther emphasized, have a direct relationship with God and, as such, are priests to one another. The fact that some individuals are ordained as ministers or priests does not give them any special standing as far as God is concerned.

These ideas and more that used Martin Luther are what made him the great reformer. No one can be used by a great idea without becoming greater himself or herself. The surprising potential value of our lives is that great ideas can use us.

What gives me hope these days is that powerful and world-changing ideas are on the move, and they will not be killed — the idea that there are more productive ways to solve human conflicts than killing one another; the idea that the human race is one family with God as our creator and with more interconnections than we could have ever imagined; the idea that the more we give, the more we receive.

Incidentally, isn't it amazing how often we try to squelch new ideas? Back in 1925, the Daily Express of London wrote an editorial saying, "For God's sake ... get rid of the lunatic who says he's got a machine for seeing by wireless. Watch him ... he may have a razor on him." The editorial was about John Baird, the inventor of television.

Then there was this classic quote: "Who the heck wants to hear actors talk?" That great line was from Harry Warner, founder of Warner Brothers Studio, back in 1927.

The best has to go to Thomas J. Watson, Chairman of IBM, who back in 1943 said, "I think there is a world market for about five computers." And as recently as 1977, Ken Olsen, president of Digital Equipment, said, "There is no reason for any individual to have a computer in their home."

Never underestimate the power of a new idea, or the power of an old one that is rediscovered and uses us.

We learn from Jesus, from his disciples and followers, from people like Martin Luther, and from countless other men and women that in every generation, the future has belonged to the great ideas that are always waiting to use you and me.

Jesus was crucified, and he rose again, and the other things that could not be killed were the powerful ideas he taught and lived and died for.

What ideas are using you? What are you giving your life to? What are you serving that is worth serving? I'm not worried about the ultimate victory of the good. My concern is that in our generation, we might somehow miss being used by the great ideas, the constructive, positive ones; that instead, we will let ourselves be used by ideas that are not worthy, those that narrow and limit us and others.

You'll never hear anyone at a memorial service or funeral mention how much money or power this person had, how many people feared them, or whether they had a lot of sexual conquests. These kinds of things, which too many people give their lives for, don't really bring us love or identity of any lasting sort.

I can't get that courtroom scene out of my mind that took place in Jerusalem so many years ago, which I mentioned earlier. Almost all of the educated, well-born, worldly-wise, prosperous establishment-type people were on the wrong side of the supreme issue of their time. And on the right side were two common people, Peter and John, who in retrospect we still remember because they helped lead us around one of the most significant corners in history. It was because of the idea that used them.

Keep asking yourself — what ideas are using me? Amen.