Sunday, May 4, 1997
THE FUN OF BEING SPECIFIC
John 15:9-17

In the introduction to his book, What's Right With the Church, William Willimon tells this story. A man from Iowa (although it could have been a man from Nebraska) got married. He had long been in love with the idea of marriage, so when he met the woman of his dreams, he proposed to her. Things went well at first. He told his friends that his new wife was "all I ever hoped for in a marriage partner." She was beautiful, intelligent, witty. His friends observed that here was "a marriage made in heaven."

Unfortunately, this initial bliss was not to last. Gradually, in day-to-day living, he began to notice certain imperfections in his new wife. She was beautiful, but not always. Sometimes, before nine in the morning, she was downright unattractive, even ugly. She could look stunning for great parties and social occasions, but marriage meant he had to see her before she got her makeup on in the morning, and he couldn't help but focus on that more than her beauty.

Yes, she was intelligent — you couldn't take that from her — but there were gaps in her knowledge, rather large gaps. She knew a great deal about a few matters, but there were many areas of interest about which she was as ignorant as the day she was born. This displeased him greatly. He knew there would be a time when she would embarrass him by making some ill-considered statement in public, thus revealing to the whole world her intellectual imperfections. This bothered him.

Slowly but surely, he found himself growing cool toward this woman. Marriage had proved different than he thought. It had been fun to be with her on a Saturday evening, to dance with her into the wee hours of the morning at a society ball. But marriage wasn't like that at all. Marriage was cornflakes for breakfast, someone sleeping beside you with large curlers in her hair; it was disagreements over finances, visits from her Oklahoma relatives, and that grotesque lamp she had selected for the living room. That was marriage.

He still believed in love more than ever. He still longed for the perfect partner. He continued to cling to the general idea of marriage. In general, marriage was fine. It was the specific experience of marriage that bothered him. The man who marries the "woman of my dreams," the woman who marries "Mr. Right," will each discover that the specific experience of marriage is quite different from the idea of marriage or marriage in general. Or, to put it another way, the idea of a thing is frequently different from the thing itself.

This not only happens in marriage and in many other parts of our lives, it's also true in our religious life. Many of us have beautiful ideas about God, Jesus, prayer, love, and the Christian way in general. We like to think in broad concepts. "The Christian faith is basically about love," some say. Or it's the golden rule. We generalize because it makes it easier to swallow.

It's when we get specific that the fun begins. It's easy to talk about loving one's neighbor in general terms, but when that means coming to the aid of someone we despise and going out of our way to do so — as Jesus illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan — that's a different matter.

Jesus always had fun with being specific. One day, a young man asked him what he needed to do to gain eternal life. Jesus told him to sell all that he had, give it to the poor, and then come

and follow him. He got very specific, and the young man who asked the question decided that following Jesus was not for him. He loved the idea of following Jesus but not the specifics.

Like the man in love with the idea of marriage in my opening story, many people approve of both the idea of believing in God and following Jesus, and they approve of the idea of the church, but they back away from the specifics.

There are many people who say they love God but are unable to love the kind of people that Jesus loved. Love of humanity in general is okay, but loving specific individuals who are completely different from us is a different matter.

In all of us, there is a tendency to prefer generalizations, to think in the abstract and avoid the particulars. In my first parish on the far south side of Chicago in the 1950s, we talked a lot about loving one's neighbor. Then the neighborhood began to change. It had previously been an all-white neighborhood, and some Black families began moving in. One night, someone tried to set fire to one of the homes of the new neighbors, and I suggested in a sermon the next Sunday that one way to love our neighbors specifically would be to volunteer to help rebuild that house. But that was getting too specific. There were no volunteers.

That's why so many people try to summarize the Christian faith by defining it in broad general terms. For example, we can say the Christian faith is about acceptance but never define what that means specifically.

It's difficult to speak for other religions, but when it comes to Christianity, it's the scandal of particularity that bothers us.

It is this yearning for generalized and abstract religion that accounts in large part for the popularity of such books as Kahil Gibran's The Prophet. Here, we have the language of things spiritual manipulated poetically in a historic vacuum. Gibran's prophet speaks to humankind without ever having to address himself to particular women and men in specific historic circumstances.

The same is true for the high interest in what we today call "spirituality." I hear a lot of talk about being a spiritual person and developing one's own spirituality, but not much discussion about what that means specifically in our day-to-day problems and relationships.

For some people, therefore, Jesus is best followed in the safe confines of their own living rooms or outdoors in nature with religious feelings that bring tears to their eyes, or by thinking noble thoughts about God in the privacy of their devotions, or by having a spiritual conversation with someone else who sees things the same way. God and Jesus are fine. It's those people in the church congregation that bother them. It's putting their faith into practice in specific, often inconvenient day-to-day activities that they seek to avoid.

However, what makes the Christian faith unique is that the love of God became very specific in the birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As the Bible says, "The Word became flesh and lived among us." You can't get any more specific than that. Furthermore, Jesus got very specific in what he said in the scripture passage from the Gospel of John. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends." Now that's specific.

As you read the Gospels, you can almost taste the dust along the roadside, smell the stable of the nativity, hear the thunder of the mob. Your sight falls not only upon uplifting and inspiring visions but upon mustard seeds, coins, lepers, spittle mixed with dirt, and a young prophet whose words will not let you go. This is the scandal of particularity. Jesus calls his followers to be a different kind of people in this world.

What is said of Jesus holds true for the church, which is called to be the "body of Christ" in the world. It is the scandal of particularity that bothers many people. Like the man in love from Iowa, fascinated by the idea of marriage, many approve of both the idea of following Jesus and the concept of the church. But they are horrified by the particulars.

It's the same thing for some people in regard to children. They love the idea of a cuddly baby in general. But actually having and caring for a specific baby turns out to be something different. The baby has to be fed. The diapers have to be changed. Sometimes, you have to stay up most of the night with a crying, sick child. We discover that the idea of a baby in general and taking care of a specific child are not the same.

It is said that the comedian Groucho Marx once turned down an invitation to join an exclusive club with the words, "I wouldn't belong to a club that would take in a person like me." Maybe that's how some people feel about the church. As one person said to me, "Believing in God is wonderful. It's those people of God, those church members, that bother me."

There are other people who have gotten involved with the church but, before they did, had an idea of what the church is or should be. Then, after a time, they discovered that a local congregation is not exactly like their idea. They become disillusioned and drop out, or they try to find someone or something to blame.

Some even have the idea that ministers are perfect, then are shocked to discover one day that they, too, make mistakes, are forgetful, and do not fit the ideal. (This is not a confession.)

In the delightful little book The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis, a senior devil is giving advice to a junior devil who has been assigned to lead astray a new Christian. In one of these letters, Screwtape, the Senior Devil, writes to Wormwood, the Junior Devil, as follows:

"One of our greatest allies at present is the church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempter uneasy. But fortunately, it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-fi-nished sham Gothic building. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks around him, he sees just that selection of neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like 'body of Christ,' and the actual faces he sees in the next pew."

The fact is, of course, the real church, the body of Christ, is made up of people like you and me. The Bible reminds us that we "have this treasure in earthen vessels." It's okay to have grand ideas of what the church should be and to have a vision of what it might become, but at the same time, we have to make allowances for the difference between the idea and the

reality. 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.

This is a problem in all of life. But more often than not, we are able to come to terms with it. We realize that what we dream must finally be expressed within the limitations of what we are. I can dream of writing a beautiful poem, an inspiring short story, or a wonderful sermon, but until it becomes specific, it's not real. And once it is written, it may not measure up to the dream. Wise people spend little time regretting these elemental facts of life. Even more than that, wise people realize that the joy in life comes precisely from the specific and not the general.

There's no joy that comes from the idea of marriage in general. The joy comes from living day to day with an individual you love, "in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow," as the marriage vows state. There is no such thing as "love in general." That's only the idea of love. It does not truly become love until it is expressed to a specific person in a particular situation.

That's the good news of the Christian faith. The stories of Jesus tell us that God meets us where we are — in the specific situations of life. There are no preconditions. God is in the middle of everyday life, not simply in abstract ideas or concepts. Our faith is an incarnational faith, not a disembodied abstraction.

The story of Jesus is the story of a loving and suffering God — a God who bleeds and dies, a God who is with us at every moment of our existence. God is with us in the specifics, in our joys and in our sorrows. That's the joy of the specific.

At the same time, the gospel reminds us that while we are in this life, no contact with God is ever perfect or complete.

St. Paul wrote, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face." For a fleeting moment, we might sense what it is — but then that moment is gone. Yet that is enough. God loves us where we are, in the specific situations of our lives, and in spite of our imperfect connections. That's good news for all of us. Amen.