

The Pastor's Reflection

**February 14, 2021 – Transfiguration Sunday
VALENTINE'S DAY!!**

(Also, ironically, Racial Justice Sunday in the United Church of Christ)

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is also available in audio form on our "Pod Cast" site as part of a devotional service. To access it, click on the link at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 1:07
Mark 9:42-48
Matthew 10:26-28

"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28)

It's amazing how time flies, although I am willing to consider the possibility that it just feels that way because I'm getting older (I am, you know, at least a third of the way through life). It seems we were just in the Advent and Christmas season, though I am willing to consider the possibility that it just feels that way since Darlene and I didn't exactly rush to take down our Christmas decorations this year. The New Year is so new that I haven't even had time to break all of my New Year's resolutions! (Actually, I have, and I have.) The annual meeting would normally have been scheduled for today following worship and a luncheon put on by Women's Fellowship, heralding yet another beginning in our church year. And here we are on the threshold of Lent!

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, which is this coming Wednesday, February 17. Though both Advent and Lent are times of preparation, Lent is a little different from Advent. It doesn't have all the archetypal symbolism that has accrued to Christmas through the centuries. We don't bring trees into our houses or put candles in our windows. We don't shop for gifts or send greeting cards. The themes of the star and light belong to Christmas, not Easter. Lent is more about fasting than feasting, about giving up rather than taking on, about simplifying instead of complexifying our lives. Holy Week, with its Maundy Thursday Service of Tenebrae, its Good Friday services and Easter vigil, is more serious and somber than the last week of Advent. Advent leads up to birth; Lent leads up to death.

During Advent I like to preach on the themes of hope, peace, joy, love, and light that are symbolized in the Advent Candles. During Lent I also like to preach a sermon series, unfolding a theme that hopefully leads to a deeper understanding and celebration of Easter. This year I would like to begin the series a week early so that I might be able to unfold my theme over the next six weeks and end before Palm Sunday. The theme, which I believe is timely considering what many of us feel is the apparent loss of a moral center or compass in our country, is the development of an ethical framework, a moral code, viewed specifically from a developmental standpoint.

Several factors led to this choice of a theme for our Lenten services. One was a thoughtful essay by Nancy Gibbs that appeared in the February 8 issue of TIME magazine, an essay entitled "America's Moral Vacuum." I happen to like Nancy Gibbs, who used to be the senior editor at TIME and is now teaching at Harvard. (As a disclaimer--when I say I like her, I mean that I always agree with what she says!) A second factor is a recent newspaper article on 340 students who broke pandemic restrictions at UMass Amherst and, through initiating a spread of COVID-19 on campus,

brought about a lockdown and cancellation of classes for two weeks, behavior on their part that showed a clear lack of a sense of social responsibility and an insensitivity to the number of people who have been seriously inconvenienced or much more than inconvenienced by their self-centered behavior.

In addition to the armed insurrection that took place at the Capital, an event which Nancy Gibbs characterizes as “a lack of moral imagination,” the death threats that have been made to House impeachment managers like David Cicilline of Rhode Island, and the increased number of homicides right here in Massachusetts, there are moral issues that are involved in the distribution of coronavirus vaccine in our country and also in poverty-stricken countries in Africa and Asia. One child in ten in our country is living in poverty; is this a social issue or a moral issue—or both? Almost everything that is happening nowadays, especially everything that confronts us in the news, has a moral or ethical dimension to it. It is this that I would like us to address.

Perhaps, in some strange way, addressing the matter of a moral compass or the lack of it, the development of a viable code of ethics or the lack of it, the manifestation of a sense of social responsibility or the lack of it, is a matter for which we, as a culture and as a world, should repent, and is, thus, a fitting theme for Lent.

One of the missions that we traditionally support in our church is Straight Ahead Ministries. Straight Ahead Ministries reaches out to young people who are in the juvenile prison system. From a moral or ethical standpoint, these young people have not developed or matured. What they have received from their parents (if they had them), what they have received from their church/synagogue/mosque/temple (if they ever attended), and what they have absorbed consciously and unconsciously from the sub-culture (including the gangs) within which they were raised has proved inadequate to prepare them to live as responsible, law-abiding adults in our society. In this sense, though most of them are not diagnosable sociopaths, they are socio-pathic; they have a pathological relationship to our society.

If we are to rehabilitate these young people, most of whom are deeply wounded and/or traumatized, we need to think past the punishment orientation of our penal system. If we are to rehabilitate these young people, which should be our primary focus, we need to address a certain vacuum in their lives, an existential vacuum, a moral vacuum, a vacuum that is created by a lack of a meaning in life. How do we fill such a vacuum? Straight Ahead Ministries knows that we cannot do this through punishment, through breaking the young man or woman down through the privations of incarceration. Straight Ahead Ministries believes that this kind of vacuum can only be filled by religion. I think you can see why we wholeheartedly support this mission!

From a sociological as well as an individual point of view, religion performs several functions. Religion has been defined as an organized and systematic attempt to address what has called “the eternal recurrent problems of human existence.” Where did we come from? Why are we here? Is there a meaning to life? If so, what is it? Is there a meaning to my individual life? If so, how can I find out what it is? How should I live my life? What does it mean to live my life fully? What happens to me after I die?

One of these “eternal recurrent problems of human existence” is the matter of how we are to live our life. All religions address this by proposing a code of ethics. This code may be grounded in common sense, in rules that are self-evident for people who are living together in a society. For example, the commandments not to kill or to steal would make sense to anyone living in a social group, whether that person were religious or not. This code may also be grounded in what is believed to be divine revelation, a disclosure of what God wants from us as individuals and as a society

Our religion provides us with a moral code, what we might call “rules to live by.” The moral code put forth by our religion helps us distinguish right from wrong,

healthy from unhealthy, good from evil, that which is permitted from that which is forbidden. If our religion is centered in a belief in God, then the moral code is a statement of the way we believe the Creator wishes his/her/its creatures to live. This code helps us to line up with what many of us believe is the moral structure of the universe.

For the next few weeks, I would like us to think about how our own moral code develops or evolves over our lifetime. I would like us to think about how we make moral or ethical decisions. I trust I am not giving away the punch line, the conclusion of this line of inquiry when I state my belief that Christianity has something special to offer in this area. This is because Christianity, though it contains a moral code, is not primarily a moral code. It is a relationship that gives rise to a moral code.

Christianity is a religion that helps us deepen our relationship with God through Christ. This is all we need to live a moral life. Augustine said, "Love God and do whatever you want." Augustine is saying that if we truly love God, we will not want to engage in immoral behavior, to say or do things that would be hurtful to any of God's children. Paul Tillich's revision of Augustine's directive is "Be a Christian and do whatever you like." Tillich believes that if we are truly Christian, if we take on the heart and mind of Jesus, we will think, feel, speak, and act as he did or as he would have us do; we will not be living our lives out of a formalized code of ethics.

If this is the true foundation of Christian morality, why hasn't this worked? Why are our society and even the Christian church so stained with sin? How can our politicians in Washington sell their souls for the votes they need to stay in office, to stay in power? How can they abandon their principles from a stance of blind obedience to their party, to the cult leader, or to the angry mob that will turn on them at the slightest hint of disloyalty? How can they betray the trust that has been placed in them by their constituents by allowing their votes to be bought by lobbyists? How can Wall Street hedge fund managers manipulate stock prices to accrue obscene levels of wealth while even middle-class people struggle to make ends meet and millions of children go to bed hungry? How can hackers and scammers plunder the retirement funds of little old ladies without losing a single night's sleep over the lives they have brought to ruin? You see, it is not just the young men and women in the juvenile justice system, nor is it only those who are incarcerated in our state and federal correctional system that are the problem. How can this happen in a country, in a culture that claims to be at least nominally Christian or at least religious, a country that declares it stands "under God?" Perhaps unethical behavior is so ubiquitous because we are stuck on the wrong level of moral development, because we do not fully grasp what our faith has to offer. Perhaps it is because people, even Christians, have failed to grasp the deeper dimensions of the Christian message.

For the next few weeks, I would like to examine the matter of moral development from a psychological as well as a religious perspective. We will utilize the template for moral development proposed by the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg as a way of helping us identify where we might have gone wrong in our prison system or where Christianity might have gone wrong in the teaching of morality to its believers. Kohlberg, by the way, earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Chicago in one year. He went on to chair the Psychology Department at Chicago and teach in the Education Department of Harvard University. He is really smart.

Kohlberg attempts to describe the levels of moral development as they evolve, or hopefully evolve, from early childhood to a mature adult morality. His special focus is on moral reasoning. He believes that a person's moral reasoning should develop or evolve or mature over time, just as Jean Piaget noted that a person's cognitive development should develop or evolve or mature throughout one's lifetime. It seems obvious that a

small child cannot think through the complex moral dilemmas of adult life as well as a person who has reached Piaget's stage of formal reasoning. Kohlberg wants us to become aware of a process that at least potentially leads us to a higher level of cognition in moral reasoning.

In Kohlberg's first stage, which is called "Punishment Avoidant," the individual's sense of right and wrong is determined in relation to external authorities. The young child obeys parental rules to avoid punishment. The punishment might be a spanking, being sent to "time out," being made to sit in a corner, being sent to one's room, losing television privileges, or simply experiencing parental displeasure.

This first stage of moral development is characteristic of the interaction between a parent and a child from one to four years old, a child with limited impulse control. The parent attempts to guide the child's behavior by invoking the threat of a punishment. It is important at this stage that the parent follow through on the punishment, because if the application of the consequences is non-existent or inconsistent, the child will not internalize the moral directive.

If you want to see some examples of this, spend some time in a grocery store (not right now, however; even if you have had the first vaccine shot, you should drive up and have them place your groceries in the trunk of your car). In a not unusual scenario, at least back in the days when we roamed the aisles, a mother comes in with a young child. The child, who appears hyperactive, runs up and down the aisles pulling down packages and cans from the shelves.

The mother attempts to reason with the child. She explains how much time and effort went into the creation of a display and how the child is not being sensitive to the person who set up the display when the child, unceremoniously, tears it down. You can see the glazed look in the child's eyes. The child has no idea what the mother is saying and cares even less. People who witness the interaction wonder why the mother doesn't just give the kid a smack on the rear to bring him/her back into line!

What the mother is doing, trying to reason with the child, might be appropriate when the child is older and at a higher level of cognitive development. At such a young age, however, the child just needs to know that certain behavior, as defined by the parent, is unacceptable. If he/she engages in that behavior, there will be unpleasant consequences. If the parent follows through on the threat, and if the consequences are fair and consistent, the child will not engage in the behavior.

When my children were young, I used to tell them that if they misbehaved in the grocery store, I would break their arms and legs. This worked for a while; they were quite well-behaved. Then they figured out that I was unlikely to follow through on that threat. I'll never forget the day that Jay, our especially precocious young son, told me that if I ever did break their arms and legs, he would report me to the Department of Children & Their Families and they would put me in jail. This was the indicator that I was going to have to move my approach to shaping or influencing my children's conduct to a different and higher level.

This punishment-avoidant level of moral development works well with small children. Yet some adults have apparently not progressed beyond this. There are people in our society, actually *many* people in our society, who obey the law only because of the fear of consequences. They know that if they are caught stealing a car, they will be arrested by the police, tried in a court of law, and punished. Because they don't want to go to prison, they avoid engaging in illegal actions. This is the theory behind capital punishment. If people believe they will be executed for first degree murder, acts of terrorism, or particularly heinous crimes, especially to children, they will not engage in this behavior.

Adolescents and adults who remain stuck on this lowest level of moral development, who never evolve to higher levels, can easily set aside their moral code. If you are in the punishment-avoidant stage, and if you think you are smarter than the police; if you think you can commit the perfect crime; if you believe you will never be caught, then there is nothing to prevent you from engaging in illegal behavior. When teenagers become aware that a large percentage of crimes go unsolved, the threat of punishment does not serve as a deterrent.

There is an additional problem with adolescents or adults whose moral code is centered in the desire to avoid punishment. If a person is not afraid of going to jail, if he/she has nothing to live for, if life on the outside of prison holds little advantages over life in prison, then prison would not serve as a deterrent. The deterrent value of capital punishment has never been proven for just these reasons. I doubt that the threat of prison or execution would be much of a deterrent for suicide bombers who believe that their ticket into heaven is validated by becoming a martyr for the "divine cause."

If this is such a primitive stage of moral development, appropriate and effective for small children but certainly not for adults or even teenagers, why do we employ this as the cornerstone of our religious teaching? Why, throughout the centuries, has the church told people that if they break any of God's commandments they will be sent to hell when they die? If people truly believe this on a literal level, they may refrain from engaging in illegal or immoral actions. They may attend worship services every week as commanded by their church and refrain from eating meat on Fridays. *But they are only moral out of fear.*

I wonder about hell. Could it be that hell was invented as a way of keeping people in line morally? As the ultimate punishment, it would certainly serve as a deterrent for anyone who is on the first level, the lowest level, the most infantile level of moral development.

By the way, "hell" is an English word used to translate the Hebrew words "Sheol" and "Gehenna." In Christian tradition it is usually associated with the idea of eternal punishment, especially by fire. This idea appears in Isaiah 66:24, where God says, *And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die; their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.*

The Book of Revelation describes a lake that burns with fire and brimstone in which the wicked will be eternally punished. In Revelation 19:20 we read the prediction that "the beast," the "false prophet," those who worship the beast's image, and the "kings of the earth," when they are captured, will be "thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur."

Scripture records that Jesus held forth the threat of hell as a punishment for wrongdoing, for not leading what we would call a Christian life. In Matthew 10:28, he says, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." In Mark 9, he speaks of the "unquenchable fire." *If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.*

In our English translation of this verse, the word "hell" is used to translate the Hebrew word "Gehenna." The two words are often used interchangeably. However, "Gehenna" really means "valley of Hinnom," also known as "the valley of the sons of Hinnom." Located west and south of Jerusalem, the valley of Hinnom once formed part of the boundary between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

During the monarchical period, this location became the site of an infamous high place in the valley of Hinnom called "Tophet," meaning "fireplace." This is where some of the kings of Judah engaged in forbidden religious practices, including human sacrifice by fire. Tophet literally means "passing children through fire." Because of this, Jeremiah spoke of its impending destruction. King Josiah put an end to these practices by destroying and defiling Tophet.

Probably because of these associations with fiery destruction and judgment, the word "Gehenna" came to be used metaphorically as a designation for hell or eternal damnation. In the New Testament, the word is used only in this way and never as a geographic place name. It is not clear, however, what Jesus was actually thinking when he used the word "Gehenna" in these and other passages of scripture, if, indeed, he said what he is reported to have said.

Is hell a literal place, a fiery place, a place of sulfur and brimstone where our bodies burn for all eternity if we have disobeyed God's commandments? Is it metaphorical, speaking of an experience of the soul, much as the term "kingdom of heaven" might also be speaking of an experience of the soul in this lifetime? I think that's possible, but it really isn't the point. The point is that the church has used this threat for the past two thousand years as a way of keeping people in line. By doing this, it may have prevented its members, its followers from discovering a deeper foundation of Christian morality.

There are several problems with the threat of hell as a deterrent to illegal or immoral behavior. The first is that if the individual does not believe in a literal heaven or hell, the threat carries no more weight than my threat to break my children's arms and legs. But there is another, and I believe more significant reason why our morality should not be based on the threat of "going down" when we die. *This didn't seem to be the basis of Jesus' morality.*

Jesus lived his life in relation to God. It has been said that because of how he lived, though he was "fully human," he was transparent to God. Jesus did not live this way because he was afraid that God would punish him if he did not. Jesus freely chose, from the moment of his baptism, to live the life to which God was calling him. He did not do otherwise because to do so would mean that he was being less than the person God was calling him to be. Jesus was not only not afraid of those who could kill his body, he did not live his life in fear that God would destroy his soul. This is why I have my doubts that he used this as a threat to keep his followers in line. I think these passages may have been written in by the early church sometime in the centuries after Jesus' death.

If this approach to morality is the most infantile, the most primitive stage of moral development, why has the church made this its primary emphasis throughout the last two thousand years? In threatening us with the eternal fires of hell if we deviate from the moral code, if we belong to the wrong religious group, the wrong denomination, if we hold the wrong belief system, it is treating us as if we were little children. This is an insult to our intelligence! No wonder so many young people find themselves turned off by this punishment-avoidant approach to resolving the complex problems of life in the twenty-first century.

If I were a parent of a young child, I would not want my child to be brought up in a church whose Sunday school curriculum taught the children to fear God. I know what the Book of Proverbs says: "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." However, I am not convinced that the word "fear" is the proper translation from the Hebrew. Some people believe that a better translation would be the word "awe." That makes a lot more sense.

I do not believe that punishment is the way to rehabilitate young people or even adults who are in the prison system. They are not young children, and even if they are

at the lowest level of moral development, it is not good to respond to them at that level and leave them there. We need to move them to a higher level, to the development of a moral code that is not built around fear and punishment avoidance. I have serious doubts that our prison system, as it is presently structured, is able to meet the goals we set for it, to move the people in custody to a better place, a place where their relationship with society will be more constructive. I believe we need to do something different, more visionary, more humane, more psychologically sound.

We have the highest percentage of our population in the prison system of any developed country, including countries that incarcerate journalists or members of the political opposition. Something is wrong with our way of responding to, our way of treating people who are unable to live constructive, law-abiding lives within our society. This is a live issue for our area since Framingham Women's Prison, which was founded in 1847, is so dilapidated that it really needs to be torn down. I believe that the approximately \$117,000 per person that we spend annually to house women who have been incarcerated for drug offences, identity theft, and other crimes can be put to better use.

I also do not believe that our relationship with God should be built around fear. That may be how people felt toward God in ancient times, but this is not the message that Jesus brings. There is a world of difference between living our life in fear of eternal punishment and living our life in love and gratitude for the wonderful gift we have been given. If Jesus did not relate to God out of fear, why should we?

In this season of Lent, let us not only examine the grounding for our own moral code; let us move more and more toward the grounding that we find in Jesus. Then I believe we will have a much deeper grasp of the events of Holy Week, the ultimate triumph of Easter, and a clearer vision of the new world we are trying to create.

We can't let the flickering light, the fading light within us and within our nation and the world go out.