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February 21, 2021 – The First Sunday in Lent

The Pastor's Reflection

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 Lesson: Mark 10:32-45

Today is the first Sunday in the liturgical season of Lent. Lent is the period of forty days preceding Easter that is set aside to help us prepare for not only the celebration but also the experience of Easter. If we were meeting in church today, the liturgical color, the color of the paraments on the lectern and pulpit and also my stole would have been purple/violet. Also, the right side of the chancel (as you face the altar) would be graced by a large wooden cross thanks to David Crane who constructed it, Bill Guenon who sets it up every year, and Darlene Sanderson who drapes it and the "ground," the "boulders" at the foot of the cross with branches and purple drapery. The drapery changes to white on Easter Sunday and remains white throughout the Easter season.

Today is also the second in our Lenten series of reflections on Lawrence Kohlberg's levels of moral development. Last week we examined the first and lowest level of moral development, the stage where people are moral (*or at least act moral*) in order to avoid punishment. People at this level obey laws, rules, and regulations only because they fear the consequences of breaking them.

As we noted, this level of moral development is characteristic of small children. We might tell our child, "If you try to flush baby brother down the toilet, you will get a spanking." The child, who really wants to flush baby brother down the toilet, will refrain from doing so because of the feared punishment. This doesn't, however, change his feelings toward the new intruder into the family system. Perhaps the child enjoyed being the only child. He may replace flushing with poking or teasing, but the threat of spanking or being sent to "time out" will not replace jealous anger or resentment with true brotherly love. (I wonder why this particular example came to mind . . .) But that isn't the point.

On a religious level, at least within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the church has held the threat of hell over people to encourage compliance with what the church has determined to be God's rules. If you belong to the wrong religion, you will go to hell. If you belong to the wrong denomination, even within the right religion, you will go to hell. If you are once-born instead of twice-born, you are doomed. If your belief system is not orthodox, you are in serious trouble. On the basis of this last criterion, I confess that I can think of at least one person who is in serious trouble! And we haven't even

mentioned committing actions that are illegal or immoral, nor have we considered that “bad thoughts” can also send you “down.”

As we noted last week, the threat of punishment is of limited long-range deterrent value. As children grow older and get bigger, it becomes problematic to implement; think of a 5’2” mother with a 6’4” teenage son. Plus, *it doesn’t change the child’s feelings. It doesn’t change the person from the inside. It doesn’t make a better or more moral person.* The threat of being consigned to hell for all eternity *might* produce a person who would *not even think* of deviating from the prescribed norm, but *it doesn’t produce a more moral person.*

I can’t resist reposting or revisiting the church sign that was included in the Newsletter section of the Keeping in (Virtual) Touch #32 missive that was emailed to all of you last week. The church sign read,

*Come As You Are.
You Can Change Inside!*

Get it? The sign suggests that you can come to church just as you are, meaning what you are wearing; you can come casual. But “as you are” might also mean that the life you are presently living can change for the better through actually coming into the church for worship. However, the sign could also mean that you can change what is inside you for the better. Get it—change inside?! (I know, this is probably an example of mansplaining. Mansplaining, by the way, is when a man explains something to a woman that does not really . . .). Never mind. I wonder if Pastorsplaining is a word. Perhaps another word for Pastorsplaining is “sermon.”

To be perfectly honest (BTW, I hate it when people say that; it assumes that what preceded the statement was not perfectly honest), the second stage, which is also appropriate for young children who need to be socialized, isn’t much better. In the second stage, the child obeys the parent’s commands to obtain a reward. The mother tells the child that if he/she behaves in the grocery store, he/she can pick out a candy bar from the display by the cash register. As long as the extrinsic reward is of more value to the child than the intrinsic pleasure of engaging in the unruly behavior, this approach will work. However, this approach has its limitations. Since the joy of flushing baby brother down the toilet may bring more intrinsic satisfaction to the child than two candy bars, a comic book, and parental praise, baby brother remains in jeopardy. (Once again, I wonder why I am drawn to this example. . .) If I were a psychoanalyst, . . . But that’s not the point.

From a religious, specifically a Judeo-Christian perspective, what is the reward we are promised if we renounce our instinctive aggression and our more than marginal propensity to live out of what Sigmund Freud called the pleasure principle, the desire to increase our pleasure and decrease our pain? It is heaven. We are told that if we obey God’s commandments, belong to the right religion and denomination, and hold the correct belief system, we go to heaven after we die. There we enjoy an eternity of bliss, flying around on our angel wings and singing hymns of praise to God. All the people we love will be there in heaven--and *none* of the people we find irritating or annoying. There are, apparently, *no* difficult or obnoxious people in heaven!

During the recent coronavirus pandemic television binge, I ran across a television special on heaven that was aired several years ago. In it, people from several different religious traditions shared their views on what they believed heaven would be like. Some thought the streets would be paved with gold. Not to be difficult, but I am not sure why we would have streets in heaven. I also cannot understand why gold, though quite valuable here on earth, would be of any value in heaven. It is not as if we have to

buy anything! (I assume that in heaven everything will be free.) Nor would we need to protect against the possibility of a devalued dollar by investing in precious metals.

In the television special, one person described heaven as a great banquet where we can eat delicious food all day and all night for all eternity, never get full, and (best of all!) never gain weight. At first glance, I found this prospect appealing. I would like to be able to do that in this lifetime! Then, upon reflection, I decided that I am not sure that this is the way I would like to spend the few precious years that are entrusted to me here on earth--eating non-stop. This led to the realization that I was not sure that this is what I would like to do for all eternity (which, as I understand it, is a very long time). As you know (or could see from a cursory glance at my girth), I enjoy a good meal as much as the next person, but there must be more to life in this life or the afterlife than eating. I'm not trying to be difficult (BTW, to be perfectly honest, when I say that I am not trying to be difficult, it usually means that I am), but I also can't figure out where all the food goes that we eat in heaven. I mean, like, do they have toilets in heaven? Do you ever think about that?

I will also refrain from commenting on the Muslim belief that suicide bombers are gifted with one hundred virgins when they get to heaven. All I want to say is that this can't be heaven for the virgins—probably more like hell! I wonder what the virgins did to deserve this, especially since they apparently refrained from sexual intimacy outside marriage and probably died before they got married. This really doesn't seem fair. I don't want to accuse this theology of being sexist, but it does seem to be all about men.

If you note, in these first two stages of moral development, *it's all about me*. I want to avoid physical or emotional pain that is inflicted on me as a punishment. I want to obtain physical or emotional rewards for my good behavior. From a psychological perspective, these two levels of moral development are egocentric. They are narcissistic. There is no mention of empathy or compassion; there is no sense of the intrinsic value of the other. Perhaps it's assumed that at this level, at this age, the child is not capable of empathy. We know this is not true! Expressions of empathy can be observed in children as early as the age of two, if not earlier. It's a strange system of morality that is only centered in us, in our personal gain or loss, with no sense of connectedness with other people or society.

This second stage of moral development, the stage that Kohlberg called reward-obtaining, is a form of instrumental hedonism. It is the approach to morality that is an integral part of the secular celebration of Christmas. When I was a young child, my parents told me that if I was not a good boy Santa would leave a lump of coal in my stocking. I can remember years when I was at least concerned, if not actually a little afraid that this might happen. Since the parameters of being a "good boy" were somewhat vague, I tried to be good, at least during the month of December, hoping that Santa might forget what I had done to my younger brother earlier in the year.

You can imagine my dismay when I learned in Sunday school that God, whom we all know is omniscient, knows a lot more than Santa! God keeps track of *everything*—every single thought, feeling, word, and deed. It's all recorded in *The Book of Life*, and my admission to heaven will be contingent on what the angel at the gate finds recorded in that book! You can also imagine my relief when I learned that Jesus had erased everything in the book, that he had wiped my slate clean, that through the cleansing power of his blood the dark stain of my sin was removed from my soul! This is how you *really* spell relief!

What's the problem with heaven--at least as a basis for Christian morality? First, most of the descriptions of heaven don't make any more sense to me than Dante's levels of purgatory, hell, and heaven—that is, if they are regarded literally, not metaphorically. I think that the kingdom of heaven, as well as the experience of hell, are

already here on earth, are already present--at least potentially--within us. As Jesus says in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, "The kingdom of heaven is already spread upon the earth, but people do not see it."

Second, this emphasis on rewards does not explain why Jesus was moral, why he lived the life he did, including suffering and dying on a cross for us. The belief that doing what God wanted him to do ensured his entrance into heaven clearly wasn't the grounding for Jesus' morality. Actually, I think we could say that Jesus was already in heaven, which, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, was where he came from. If heaven wasn't the carrot that enticed Jesus to live his life as God wanted him to live it, why should it function as the carrot for us?

Let's go back to our scripture lesson. Jesus has just told his disciples that he will go to Jerusalem, be tried by the authorities, be found guilty, be mocked and whipped, and then be crucified. He is trying to tell them not to cling to this life, especially not to cling to the pleasures of this life. He is telling them that life is about more than the increase of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. He tells them that it is in letting go that we receive; it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. He tells them that if they would be spiritually great, they must eschew secular greatness. They must become servants. They must give their lives for others.

James and John don't get it. They are thinking ahead. They have their "eye on the prize." They want to be sure that if they leave father and mother, if they leave wife and children, if they leave their lucrative career as fishermen, they will be rewarded. They want to nail down a specific place in heaven—a spot at the head table. They want to sit on Jesus' right hand and left hand for all eternity. I don't think there could be a clearer depiction of reward-obtaining discipleship than in this passage of scripture.

James and John seek honor. They seek a reward. They totally miss the meaning of Jesus' message. They want Jesus to do something *for them!* They just don't get it. Actually, the rest of the disciples are no better! They become angry at James and John when they learn of the brothers' request--not because they recognize how ridiculous their request is, but because they don't want Jesus to prematurely give away anything that might rightfully be allotted to them!

Actually, it is interesting that in a later version of this interaction, the version recorded in Matthew, it is *the mother* of James and John who makes the request of Jesus. I suspect that between the time that Mark recorded this incident and the time, approximately twenty years later, when Matthew wrote his gospel, it dawned on the gospel writers that James and John's request did not show these two disciples in a good light. So, Matthew took the liberty of modifying the passage in Mark by having *the mother* of James and John make the request. Apparently, this level of chutzpah would be believable of a Jewish mother in Jesus' time! However, Matthew forgot to rewrite the rest of the passage, since in his account the other disciples become angry at James and John for the request, not James and John's mother.

Jesus tells James and John that he can't promise that they will be given what they request. He then tells them that, actually, they should be thinking of other things. He tells them they need to be able to drink the cup of suffering, that he was destined to drink, that they had to freely choose it as he did. He tells them they need to be baptized by fire, just as he was destined to be baptized. I think Jesus was remarkably patient in this interaction. He should have just fired these two dunderheads, perhaps even the whole bunch of twits, and send them packing for being so totally clueless at this late stage in their journey!

Why does the church hold out the promise of heaven (the carrot) and the threat of hell (the stick) as motivating factors in encouraging us to live the kind of life that God

calls us to live? In doing this, the church continues to treat us like donkeys or like little children in a grocery store. It appeals to our baser egocentric tendencies, encouraging us to live our lives out of the pleasure principle, the desire to increase our pleasure and decrease our pain not only in this lifetime but from the perspective of all eternity. This approach, based on external or extrinsic rewards and punishments, does not encourage us to become moral *on the inside*. It does not encourage us to become *moral human beings*. It does not awaken *caring, compassion, empathy, and love* within us. It is a long, long way from how Jesus lived his life! It is a pathetic and self-serving basis for Christian morality.

If we are to be Christians, if we are to be followers of Jesus, if we are to be disciples of the Way, we have to grow up! We have to develop and live out of an ethical framework; we have to live a moral life for other reasons than this. Our motivation and our lives must arise from and then give rise to a higher vision, a higher level of morality. This is what it would mean to take on the heart and mind of Jesus.

Consider the following quote by the Zen Master Muso Kokushi (1275-1351). In his *Dream Conversations on Buddhism and Zen*, Master Kokushi said, *Doing good seeking rewards is contaminated virtue. Doing good without thought of reward, dedicating it to enlightenment, is uncontaminated virtue. Contamination and non-contamination refer to the state of mind of the doer, not to the good deed itself.*

I think this is what Jesus was saying not only through his words but also through his life. In closing, the most beautiful statement of the point I am trying to make is taken from an Islamic legend. The emphasis on the centrality of love that is articulated so beautifully by Jesus and by the apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth found expression in the teaching of the early Islamic female mystic Rabi'a, who lived from 713-801 C.E. Rabi'a is reported to have said:

O God, if I worship you for fear of hell, burn me in hell. If I worship you in hope of paradise, exclude me from paradise. But if I worship you for your own sake, deny me not your eternal presence.

In another story, Rabi'a is hurrying down a path. She has water in one hand and fire in the other. Someone asks her why. She replies that the water is to put out the fires of hell and the fire is to burn up paradise. The person asks her why she would want to do this, especially why she would want to burn up paradise? Rabi'a replies that one should not love God out of fear of punishment in hell, or out of the desire for eternal rewards, but only out of pure love for God.

This Islamic, this Muslim legend is a clear renunciation of the punishment-avoidant and reward-obtaining approaches to morality. This beautiful statement on the central place of love in our relationship with God is what we seek. This was the grounding for Jesus' life. Augustine provided us with the following moral directive: "Love God and do whatever you want." If we love God, if we take on the heart and mind of Jesus, the notion of rewards and punishments fade away. We see through them; we see through their emptiness; and, as we do so, we see deeper into ourselves, into God, and into the spiritual dimension of life.

As we journey forth into this sacred liturgical season of Lent, let us pray that the light within us and the light that we can bring to a darkened world will never go out.