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**March 21, 2021 – The Fifth 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 Lessons: Hebrews 1:1-4; 11:1-3, 17-19  
Matthew 5:17

*"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17)*

Today is the fifth Sunday in Lent and the sixth in our series on a Christian perspective on the traditional levels of moral development.

We have covered quite a bit of ground over the past five weeks. In the first stage, the punishment-avoidant stage, we noted that the child obeys rules to avoid a punishment. In the second stage the child is motivated by the hope of a reward. The child's concept of morality in these stages is based on what is ultimately in his/her best interest.

In the third and fourth stages, the child begins to take other people into consideration. In stage #3, which Lawrence Kohlberg calls "Good Boy/Good Girl," the child's behavior is shaped by the expectations that attend a certain relationship. The child wants to be seen (and wants to see him/herself) as a good son or daughter, a good brother or sister, a good sixth grade student, a good soldier, or even a good gang member.

In stage #4, System Maintenance, we begin to feel like a member of society. We begin to understand that the maintenance of order within our society depends on everyone following certain laws. Our moral decisions are shaped by the desire to be a responsible member of our society. An example of stage #4 would be a commitment to prevent contracting and/or spreading the coronavirus by wearing a mask, socially distancing, and eschewing gatherings that have the potential to become super spreaders; we do this because we want to be both safe and also socially responsible.

The fifth stage presupposes the attainment of formal reasoning, the highest of Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development. Here we begin to grasp the principles that underlie our rules and regulations, even our legal system. These basic principles are articulated in our Constitution. In this stage, we make a commitment not only to the maintenance of our society as it presently exists, but more importantly to the vision, the philosophy of life that underlies the structure and evolution of our society.

It seems to me that stage #5 builds upon stage #4. If you recall, in stage #4, before we do something, we should consider it in light of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative; we should ask ourselves, "Would I like to live in a society where everybody does this?" In stage #5, this way of thinking takes on the status of constitutional rights. For example, we may personally be inclined to forbid people from speaking or writing their mind either in support of or in opposition to LGBTQ rights. However, before we silence either person, either point of view, we should ask whether we would like to live in a society where the majority has the power to silence the minority. When we look not only to the lessons of history, but also around the world today, e.g., in countries where the government imprisons or even executes independent journalists, we do not find this to be a desirable state of affairs. When we think about it, we can see why freedom of speech is a Constitutional right that applies to everyone.

Let me go back to stage #1 to give you one more example of what it looks like when an adult is stuck in this stage, i.e., when an adult is morally developmentally delayed. The incident happened approximately fifteen years ago when I was visiting our son, our daughter-in-law, and our three grandchildren in South Carolina.

We were hanging around the house just watching television, mostly sports channels that I do not get on my television back home. However, that day we ended up watching a show that was entitled "Tell the Truth" or "Share the Secret" or something like that. During this show, people would go on television and share some deep dark secret with an unsuspecting fellow guest. From the get-go, as a psychologist, I didn't think this was a great idea.

The first "sharing" was from a woman who came on the show to share a long-kept secret with her best friend. The sharer had been her friend's maid of honor. The secret, shared on public television with potentially millions of people watching, was that two nights before her friend's wedding, the sharer had slept with her best friend's fiancée.

As you can guess, the public confession of this little secret, while it may have unburdened the sharer of a feeling of guilt, laid a massive burden of hurt, devastation, and betrayal on her friend. As I watched this unfold, I thought, "This will probably prove the end of not only their friendship but possibly also her friend's marriage."

We have all had our less than shining moments, moments when we did something stupid, weak, or irresponsible. There are times when we should honestly and openly own up to what we did. There are other times, however, when we should keep our mouth shut and work it through on our own. In this case, I would have preferred that the sharer and the bride's fiancée had simply gone to confession.

But this isn't the point. What was the point? Oh yes, I was going to give you an example of a problem with the punishment-avoidant level of moral development in adults. The next person on the show related how her Champaign tastes had put her in a difficult situation financially. I can't remember what she did; perhaps she stole something from her employer. What I do remember was when the show host asked her the following question: "If you walked into a bank that was totally empty, all the security cameras were turned off, and there was absolutely no way that you could get caught, would you empty out the tellers' money trays and the bank vault?" The woman, without a moment's hesitation, said she would. I was stunned. I immediately thought that I would not want to hire this woman to work in my bank or even in my Dollar Tree store. The host then turned to her husband, who was seated in the front row of the audience, and asked him the same question: "If you had the opportunity to remove all the money from the tellers' money trays and the vault of a bank with the assurance that there was no possible way that you could get caught, would you do it?" The husband said, "I certainly would, without a moment's hesitation!" Then he added, "Everyone would."

I thought two things. First, I thought "Stage #1." Then I thought, "No, not everyone would. Many people, I hope most people, would not do this."

I may be naïve, but I believe that most of us have progressed past the punishment-avoidant stage of moral development. Some of us wouldn't rob the bank because we have evolved to stage #3: our mother or father wouldn't approve. I know that Mrs. Nolan, my sixth-grade teacher, would also not approve. Some of us would draw from stage #4: we wouldn't like to live in a society where everybody steals whatever they can get away with. Some, who are in stage #5, feel that stealing denies people of their constitutional rights. Those who have progressed to stage #6 would pass up the opportunity to become very rich in a very short period of time because this is not what God or Jesus would want us to do. You can see how, at least as I understand it, stage #6 has a lot in common with stage #3, where the focus is on a very special relationship.

In stage #6, we draw from what could be called universal principles. These principles transcend specific tribal moral codes, the laws under which we live, our cultural mores, even the constitutional principles that underlie our laws. The decisions that are made from this level of moral development are based on the assumption, the belief, even the conviction that there is a moral structure to the universe. It is to this moral structure that we owe ultimate allegiance, and it is to this moral structure that we are ultimately accountable.

Take the example of abortion, which I believe highlights the distinction between stage #5 and stage #6. No one likes abortion. The debate is not whether there should be abortions or not, but whether abortion should be a legal medical procedure that is available to all women.

The way I see it (which is not the way everyone sees it), when we look at the abortion debate through the lens of stage #5, we are confronted by two conflicting sets of constitutional rights: the right of the fetus to life, and the right of the woman to her own body. The Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* decided that, on the basis of *their* understanding of our Constitution, the right of a woman to her own body is more important than the right of the fetus to life. Thus, abortion in our country, at least in certain circumstances, is legal.

I find myself in agreement with the Supreme Court's decision. Women's ownership of their own bodies has been denied in every society throughout history. Women's bodies have been the property of their fathers, their husbands, their religion, and the persons (usually men) in power in the country in which they live. At this point in history, I can think of no set of rights that are more important than a woman's right to her body, her right to make decisions concerning her body. Although not everyone would agree with me in this, I believe this is even more important than the right of a fetus to life. I hope that in the future fewer women will be faced with this difficult decision, but if they are, I support their right to choose whether they will continue the pregnancy or end it. My point is that both my pro-choice stand and the stand of those who are pro-life can arise out of sincerely held religious beliefs, no matter what our state laws or even our Supreme Court dictates.

In stage #6, we realize that there is a higher law than the law of the land, and it is to this law that we owe our ultimate allegiance.

Let's look at another example. The United States is holding hundreds of prisoners of the Iraq/Afghanistan conflict at Guantanamo Bay and other military prisons. Are these individuals prisoners of war? Are they illegal combatants? Are they in a separate and different category as terrorists? Do they have rights under the Geneva Convention? Do they have rights under our Constitution?

On the basis of the answer to these questions we can determine whether we have the right to torture them to obtain information that may ensure the safety of our citizens. After all, our citizens also have rights. They have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Does our need or desire for national security override the prisoner's right to due process? Do the prisoners have any rights at all? However, no matter what the Supreme Court decides in relation to these questions, from a spiritual point of view it seems strange to say that a person, a human being has no rights. I can see how this might happen legally within various countries, but even if our laws and our Constitution provided no protection for enemy combatants, I believe that there is a higher set of laws and principles that does. I don't see how *any* person, even the Marathon Bomber, can have no rights.

Kohlberg doesn't say this, but I believe the 6<sup>th</sup> stage, the stage of Universal Principles, implies the existence of a God. It implies that there is a higher court of appeals than the laws of our country or any country. I can't prove this because I can't prove the existence of God, but I know in my heart this is right. I know in my heart that we are all children of God, all incarnations of God's creative spirit. Even the Marathon Bomber. And we all have rights.

Let's consider another example. In Afghanistan, under Taliban rule, women had virtually no rights. They were denied access to education and employment. They had practically no legal rights. They couldn't even go to a physician unless they had the permission of their father or husband. They couldn't walk down a street unless they were accompanied by a male, even if that male was their little brother. Little girls could be punished severely if they were caught reading or trying to educate themselves in any way.

We don't think this is right. In our country, *though we are still in the process of fully operationalizing our ideals*, we believe that men and women are equal. Actually, it might be more correct to say that men and women should have equal rights under the law. Our patriarchal, misogynous way of thinking and seeing, as evidenced in our reluctance to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970's, may begrudgingly accept equal rights under the law while still denying full equality to women. In our society, women are still members of a minority group.

If we were to sit down with a Taliban leader to discuss the matter of equal rights for women, on what basis could the discussion take place? We would tell him that women should be treated as human beings, not as animals, things, or possessions. He would say that such a radical position is not supported by their culture, their laws, or their religion. He would tell us that we in America are free to treat women any way we want, but we should not be so presumptuous as to tell him how to treat women in his country. If the court of last appeal were a nation's religious laws or even its constitution, his point would be valid. However, most of us could not accept that position. We have a sense that no matter what the laws and customs of a country might dictate, some things are just wrong! It is wrong to treat women as less than full human beings no matter what the laws of one's country might allow. It is wrong to enslave Black people, to treat them as possessions, no matter what the laws of one's country might allow. We believe that these conditions are wrong because they are wrong in the eyes of God!

Let me give you one more example, one last example of a current issue that touches on the importance of stage #6. The issue is what we should do about the 2022 Winter Olympics that are scheduled to be held in Beijing. I owe this example to Jeff Jacoby, the conservative Republican columnist with whom I disagree at least 90% of the time, but whom I always read because he is very intelligent and makes a good argument for his point of view. I wish we had more Republicans like him.

This past week, in the Boston Globe, Jacoby made a case for either moving the 2022 Winter Olympics to another country or shunning it. He notes that in 1963, the International Olympic Committee decreed that unless South Africa abolished its system of apartheid, they would not be allowed to send their athletes to the Games in Tokyo. In 1970, they fully expelled South Africa from participating in the Olympics. This boycott, which brought pressure to bear on a racially segregated country, lasted 28 years. Only after apartheid was repealed was South Africa allowed to have a racially integrated set of athletes represent their country.

In his column, Jacoby expresses his belief that a core purpose of the Olympic movement is “the preservation of human dignity” and “respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.” This is apparently enshrined in the Olympic Charter. Jacoby goes on to say that, just as with apartheid South Africa, to allow China to participate in the Games is to make a travesty of everything the Olympics are supposed to represent.

In Jacoby’s own words, “Beijing should not be allowed to host the Games so long as its communist regime is engaged in grotesque violations of human rights and systematic crimes against humanity, including genocide, torture, slave labor, compulsory abortions, religious persecution, cultural oppression, and a brutal antidemocracy crackdown.” Jacoby is calling attention to the plight of the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, where 1.5 million Muslims are imprisoned in a gulag of internment camps and are “subjected to horrific abuses—systematic rape, involuntary sterilization, the breakup of families, coercive ‘reeducation,’ and government-directed enslavement.” He points out that both former Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and our current Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, have labeled these actions genocide.

I think back to China’s invasion of Tibet in the 1950’s and the effects of China’s Cultural Revolution that destroyed thousands of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and executed thousands of Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns. Every single one of the atrocities that Jacobi lists was also inflicted on the Tibetans, including cultural genocide. America, England, and India stood by and did nothing, partially out of fear of China’s growing military power through and after the Korean Conflict, and partially because of financial considerations. Today, with China such an important trade partner, there is little chance that the United States, the European Union, or the United Kingdom will even say anything that might offend the Chinese government. By the way, I hate to admit it, but I agree with our former president in the tough stand he took against China.

My point is that when we raise these issues with China, they will predictably tell us to mind our own business. They will say that we have no right to intervene in what is essentially an internal affair. They will either deny that these atrocities are taking place, or, in the example of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, they will say that their actions (to preserve law and order) are in accord with their laws. I believe that our only response to their stated position is stage #6. We would tell them that we believe there is a set of higher laws, a set of universal principles to which we are all held accountable. And yes, *we in the United States* are held accountable to this higher set of moral principles as well! In our discussion with our Chinese counterpart, I’m not sure how far this dialogue would go. This is why I am willing to take seriously Jeff Jacoby’s call to either move the 2022 Olympic Games out of Beijing or have our athletes boycott it. Fat chance of either.

As you can see, there are two difficulties with our line of reasoning. The first is that we cannot prove there is a God. If there is no God as a court of higher appeal, then the highest court of appeal becomes the law of one’s land. The concept of universal principles implies a universal God and a universal moral code. The problem is that we cannot prove that there is such a universal God, a God who wills peace, happiness, and

justice for all human beings (and maybe also all little animals, all sentient beings), but we know in our hearts this is so.

The second problem is that citizens of the other country might also believe in a god, a god that proscribes female genital mutilation as a rite of passage for young girls entering womanhood, a god that allows the subjugation of inferior races, a god that demands death to all unbelievers. We believe that our God would not approve of these actions or norms for a society. We cannot prove that our God is greater than their gods, that our religion is a higher religion than theirs, but the bottom line is that we actually believe this is the case.

As you know, I am open to the insights and I am respectful of the teachings and spiritual practices of the major world religions. Some might believe I am a little too open. I believe there are many different ways to deepen our relationship with God. There are several paths, perhaps even many paths up the same mountain. However, some paths are better than others. Some paths do not even lead up the mountain. They lead somewhere else.

Jesus' path leads up the mountain. *For me*, Jesus is the Way. The ultimate standard for me is Jesus. The ultimate moral formula, the articulation of the universal principles, is simple: What did Jesus say about that? What would Jesus think about that? What would Jesus feel about that? What would Jesus do in a situation like the one that I face or that we face as a nation? I cannot prove to you that Jesus is the true Way, but I don't have to. Jesus is the standard by which I judge my life. He is at the center of my moral deliberations. His way, his truth is higher than the highest court of our land--or any land. For me as a Christian, the universal principles of which Lawrence Kohlberg speaks are not only articulated by Jesus; they are *incarnated* in him. And (this is important), *they can also be incarnated in us!* If we take on the mind and the heart of Jesus, how could we go wrong? The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich has said, "Be a Christian and do whatever you like." If we are *truly* Christian, we would not want to do anything that would hurt other people. We would not become involved in ways of thinking, feeling, or acting that are inconsistent with what Jesus would want us to do.

This matter of taking on the heart and the mind of Jesus is not some kind of abstract exercise. We do this, not by an act of imagination, but by deepening our relationship with Jesus. We read the scriptures to help us understand how other people experienced Jesus, but we can't simply relate to him through the experiences of others. We have to deepen our personal relationship with him through prayer and worship. This is why on every communion Sunday, in addition to experiencing his presence in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we enter into a conversation with Jesus. If we did this not only once a month in our communion service, but every day, we would begin to take on more and more of his heart and mind. Then our actions would become more like his--more loving and compassionate.

Our religious tradition agrees with Kohlberg that there is a higher authority than the law of the land or even consensual morality. We all know it is wrong to kill one's child. However, when God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham was prepared to do what God commanded. Because of this, as the writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* tells us, Abraham is held up as the supreme example of faith. Abraham is an example of what the existentialist philosopher/theologian Soren Kierkegaard, in his book *Fear and Trembling*, calls "the teleological suspension of the ethical." (I have always thought that "the teleological suspension of the ethical" has a nice ring to it, and I have been patiently waiting since 1963 for a time and a place to use it.)

The description of Abraham's testing in Genesis and the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, admittedly, are troubling passages of scripture. It is easy to do what we know is morally right, what everyone would agree is morally right. It is much more difficult to

do what is wrong, what we know is wrong, what everyone else knows is wrong from the perspective of our religious teachings, the laws of our land, or the cultural mores or moral code of our society. And yet, at certain times in our lives, God might actually call us to do this. An example of this was Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. As a Christian minister, Bonhoeffer knew that killing, that murder is wrong. However, in this particular case, he believed it was something that God wanted him to do. Bonhoeffer, whose attempt was unsuccessful, paid for this with his life.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus tells us that there is a higher law than the law of the land or even the laws that form the cornerstone of one's religion. He tells us that he is the spokesperson of that higher law. He says, "You have heard it said that . . . , but I say to you ...". At times what he tells us is harsher and more demanding than the laws expressed in the Torah. At other times what he tells us is more compassionate and loving. In any event, it is clear that the secular and religious laws of the land are not the final court of appeal for Jesus or his followers. Jesus articulates and incarnates a much higher law, a standard against which not only Christians but all the world is judged. Jesus articulated and incarnated a deeper principle for his society and ours--the law of love. He told us that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind. He told us we should love our neighbor as ourselves. He said that underneath every law, even those laws that are articulated in the Torah, lies the law of love.

Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law. I have come not to abolish it but fulfill it." That is exactly what he did. As we continue our journey through Lent, and especially as we enter into Holy Week, we will hopefully glimpse that larger vision that guided Jesus' life, that led him to lay down his life for us. We will hopefully experience not only his great love for us, but also God's great love for us. Then the celebration and the experience of Easter will lead us as individuals and as a society to resurrection, to new life in relation to God.

As we journey forth in 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.