

A Question About Basic Goodness

A note left in my office last Sunday requested a sermon based on this question: “What are the four or five elemental characteristics of a ‘good’ person — the basic, deep-down, bedrock fundamentals of good character?” I had the feeling that this person was not asking for a list of specifically Christian virtues, and the next part of the question showed that was true. My anonymous parishioner had heard the talk from the Christian Far Right that we must teach values in our schools and that this necessarily means we must teach religion. “But,” says the writer, “don’t basic values transcend religious divisions? Aren’t they common, in fact, to all societies, of whatever religion or even of no religion?”

One is tempted to agree that there is a kind of consensus in cultures around the world about basic values, but if you travel or read widely you find out that there are some surprising differences. The ancient Greeks, to whom we owe so much, praised wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice as basic human values, but kindness and compassion and humility, for example, did not seem as important to the Greeks as they do in Christian writings. And in modern times, there are some Islamic scholars who feel Jesus cannot be an adequate guide because so many normal human experiences were never his: he never had to resist a cruel invading army, he never knew the problems that may arise in marriage, he never had to deal with teenage children.

But for one of the most powerful attacks anyone has ever made against the specifically Christian virtues you have to turn to the German philosopher Nietzsche, who called Christianity a “slave morality” — that is,

good for slaves who couldn't help themselves — all that meekness and humility and self-sacrifice — but an insult to all the strong, virile people who are the achievers in life. And absurd, as well, he said. Why let the weaklings fix the rules of the game of life? It's as if a football team, seeing that their foes are bigger and quicker, should ordain that there must be no tackling, because that might hurt, and that no one should be allowed to run faster than at a fixed and moderate speed. Why shouldn't the strong use their strength, even if the weak do get hurt in the scramble?

It may be that hurt and broken people have profited from Christianity, Nietzsche says, but what about the race as a whole? Instead of our helping the helpless and prolonging their lives, they should be allowed to perish in the struggles of life just as evolutionary nature has done with her creatures over millions of years. That is, the poorly adapted individuals may perish, but by the elimination of their genes, the race as a whole is made stronger. Christianity reversed all that, with its insistence on pity for the helpless, Nietzsche scoffed, and the result is that weaklings saved by so-called Christian love breed still more weaklings to increase the burden on future generations. If the morality of pity is the most sinister symptom of modern civilization, as he said, imagine what he would say now, watching compassion and modern medicine work together to preserve a gene pool loaded with handicaps for future generations!

There are flaws in Nietzsche's argument, but it has been very attractive to many, especially to the strong who grow weary of carrying the weak around on their backs. If a Master Race is to inhabit the earth it cannot

afford to waste its time and strength and resources on those who cannot keep up. Well, we have had a laboratory experiment with those ideas on a massive scale. When much of Nietzsche's philosophy became flesh in the person of one Adolph Hitler, we saw believers in the Master Race set out to conquer the world and we saw, with compassion gone, the horrors of the holocaust. So where, exactly, do you and I stand in all this? I can only speak from my own limited observation, but it seems to me we are caught in a confusing middle between Christ's set of values and those of someone like Nietzsche. We claim to be a Christian nation, primarily, but we all but worship success, and however much we may like to hide our face from it, success often comes as a result of clever ruthlessness. I read about the media lords. I read how giant corporations have squeezed out competition. Sam Walton knew how it was done, I hear, but the church and I have both bought at Walmart and Sam's, and some of us, exhilarated by success, buy a little stock in the company. We live, you see, in tension between the Christian values we profess and some of the Nietzschean values we practice to make it in our beloved land of sanctioned competition. Christianity has enough hold on me to make me pause at times to be merciful to the weak and kind to the helpless, but not enough to make me an idealistic flower child — which is not a bad description of Jesus of Nazareth.

People sometimes commiserate with me because of my life as a minister. They say, "I couldn't put up with the trivialities of church life for all the money in the world. How do you do it?" But they miss the boat. It's a fiction that there are more trivialities in church life than in academic life — I've been there! — or in the

kind of business life my father had. It's not the usual grit of conflicting egos and petty rivalries in church life that dismay me; my view is that one cannot escape such things, no matter what occupation is chosen. What is tough as a minister is to know the radical difference between the philosophy we profess, and the life we feel constrained to lead if we hope to succeed in the kind of world which closes in on all sides of us.

That marvelously observant and honest woman, Annie Dillard, has made the point far more eloquently than I can. When some of the most distinguished writers in the western world were asked to contribute an essay on one of the books of the Bible, Annie got Luke, the gospel that has more to say about compassion and mercy than perhaps any book in the Bible. She remembered the affluent church folk of her Presbyterian childhood and how odd it came to seem to her that they should actually want children to know the Bible when that book so often denounced their own social and economic practices. "Why did they spread this scandalous document before our eyes? If they had read it, I thought, they would have hidden it. They did not recognize the likely danger that we would, through repeated exposure, catch a dose of its virulent opposition to their world. Instead, they bade us study great chunks of it, and think about those chunks, and commit them to memory, and ignore them." In her typical way of warning church folk how dangerous it is to take the Bible seriously, she says, "We crack open its pages at our peril."

No doubt about it! If I wish to lie to save my skin, this Book says no. If I wish to break a competitor and ruin his life to advance my own interests, this Book says no. If I wish to ignore my needy neighbor, this

Book says no. It gets annoyingly in the way of doing all sorts of things that can be useful in getting ahead. I look at locker room signs in sports arenas, I look at television ads on how to win or succeed, and I don't see much about those Christian virtues Paul listed for his Galatian church: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control. Let's face it: we have a difficult dichotomy between the world we inhabit here on Sunday mornings, and the world in which we spend the rest of the week.

But the person who asked me to talk about universal values was not asking for a rehash of specifically Christian values. That person wanted to know what I would list as basic and important human values, quite apart from church talk or the views of the Apostle Paul. What do I value in my own life, and in the life of loved ones and friends? What kind of character would I wish for my three children and for the grandchildren? I will deliberately use language that is not conventionally religious. Here we go:

First, I believe profoundly in the value of responsible and effective work, parenthood, and citizenship. Let's look at this triple-header one basic value at a time. I will sound like a good old-fashioned Calvinist, I'm sure, but I have to confess that I have a problem with idlers and with people who are sloppy about what they do. I think a man or woman of character will want to do some useful work in the world, and do it as well as possible. I am so hopelessly hooked on this idea that I told one son I thought needed the advice that if he really wanted to build a solid case for himself he might try showing up for work five minutes early and leaving five

minutes late. He was the lovable flowerchild of our three, and without prodding what he was likely to do was show up five minutes late and leave five minutes early.

As for parenthood, I am absolutely obsessed with the conviction that those who choose to be, or happen to become, parents have an obligation to be both responsible and effective. They need to learn the skills of parenting and they need the strength to live with the notion that children need discipline. If you truly and wisely love your children, you put up with being disliked at times for saying No and meaning it. We are all appalled at times by physical and sexual abuse of children, but those are drops in the bucket compared to the myriad crimes of bad parenting. We have too much soft love and not enough tough love, and our kids pay the price. The primary goal of a good parent is not to be always adored by a child, but to insist on the rules that will create a good human being. I was impressed some days ago by a couple from this church who have the tough love to do that — to say No and stick with it even when other parents in the neighborhood are giving in. My prediction is that their son will be a fine, strong man who will understand by and by how they helped it happen.

As for the matter of responsible and effective citizenship I could quote, of course, the Biblical sanction: “Render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar” but that was a basic human value long before the Bible was written and in places now where the Bible is neither known nor read. I do not mean simply driving safely or voting, but actively caring about the community where you live. I missed talking with Larry and Anita Jones last Sunday, but my significant other did talk with them and learned they were about to finish their new home in

Colorado. When she hoped they would continue to spend part of the year in Wichita, they said a very sensible thing. They are away from Wichita enough these days to feel they are losing touch with civic affairs here, and they are not yet in Steamboat Springs enough to have gotten involved in ways they like, so they may have to settle in one place, like it or not, to have the impact on a community which they feel it is their obligation and their joy to have. Like so many others in this church, they are not simply residents.....they are citizens.

Intelligent religion encourages all these things, but it is not religion alone which teaches them. We need to get over the notion that only those who believe in Christ, or in God, can possibly hold or teach noble human values. We have only to read history to know better. It's one thing to argue that religion may exalt a life with all sorts of added dimensions, but it's quite another thing to argue that only the religious can teach basic human values. You may remember when the disciples of Christ got all upset one day because someone not in their own party was doing good work. Jesus was not so narrow-minded. "Those who not against us are on our side." Neither Christianity nor religion itself has a monopoly on goodness — and we diminish ourselves when we pretend otherwise.

Basic goodness, we've been talking about — the values that make it possible to live happily. I was given the liberty in this response to list my own, so I would like to add one more. It may not seem as important to some of you as other things I've mentioned, but each passing year of my life has convinced me that it essential to happiness. What I have in mind is gratitude. I beg a dying friend in Dallas, and another in Wichita,

to seek comfort by remembering how good life has been to them, but thankfulness can transform every day, not just the last ones. If you want a model for your life, look to people who spend far more time being grateful than they do in complaining — which, after all, is a deadend street.

Some of you may have read a story I have seen several times in print, about a plain old shoemaker's awl that is on prominent display in the French Academy of Science. It looks like any other heavy-duty needle until you learn why it is special. It is the awl that fell one day from the shoemaker's table and put out the eye of his nine-year-old son. Soon after, the child became blind in both eyes and was forced to attend a school for the blind where children learned to read by handling large, carved, wooden blocks. When this child grew up, instead of wasting his life in bitter complaint about the injustice of life, he thought of how he might help people blind like himself. It involved punching dots on paper, and Louis Braille devised this new method by using the same tool that had blinded him to create a whole new reading system. Don't waste precious time asking about a setback, "Why was this allowed to happen?" Ask a creative question: "How can I make some good use of it?"

I love the humor with which Jewish rabbis flavor their respect for God. One of them, writing over 200 years ago, makes a serious little joke about how God hates complaining and rewards gratitude. These are his words: "When asked how things are, don't whine and grumble about your hardships. If you answer 'Lousy,' then God says, 'You call this bad? I'll show you what bad really is!' When are asked how things are and,

despite hardship and suffering, you answer, 'Good,' then God says, 'You call this good? I'll show you what good really is!'

It really does seem to work that way!

about personality traits which have been encouraged in can be learned by exposure to any of the world's great religions, but can also be learned (let's be honest!) in a secular setting as well.

I believe that every person should be, like God, a maker of something, involved in creation. You make or build something...music, a book, a boat, a table, a dress, a model car...the possibilities are endless. I've already expressed a faith that there is no greater creative accomplishment than to make a heedless child into a happy and responsible adult, which means that mothers and fathers are among the most important creators on earth.....followed by teachers who

And finally, because we have time restraints, I will mention one more essential human value which may sound a bit odd at first. Every one of us needs enough ego strength to cope with the ups and downs of life. Ego? A good thing? O yes, and so recognized by the founder of our own religion who said: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” and said it wisely because if you do not love yourself you are not going to love anybody else, neighbor or not. Like most other things in our mental and physical chemistry, ego is a matter of balance. Too much of it and you make other people miserable, too little of it and you suffer from such an inferiority complex that you are afraid to take from life the good things you deserve. Ego — pride — is one of the seven deadly sins because it can inflict so much harm on others, but it is also deadly because And at this moment we have circled back, because more than anyone else parents can create a healthy sense of self worth in children — or by neglect or verbal abuse convince them that they are nothing, which is a form of murder — worse than murder, because instead of ending a life instantly they doom their children to death in life. Self-esteem, honesty, loyalty, integrity, kindness, compassion, generosity — these, and more, are traits without which we cannot have a good society. I cannot resist adding one more: a constant feeling of gratitude for every good thing that has come into your life. I love the wise humor of an old Jewish rabbi writing over 200 years ago: “When asked how things are, don’t whine and grumble about your hardships. If you answer ‘Lousy,’ then God says, ‘You call this bad? I’ll show you what bad really is!’ When asked how things are and, despite

hardship and suffering, you answer, 'Good,' then God says, 'You call this good? I'll show you what good really is!'"

It really does seem to work that way!

Grateful to have one another, to have been in this lovely place yet

once more, we leave now to play our part in the creation of a

better world, through Christ our Lord. Amen.