

## **"Moral Dilemmas and Moral Solutions"**

Psalm 147:1-11; I Corinthians 9:16-23

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

October 8, 2017 – 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, tells of how he has learned to work effectively with people in order to spread the Gospel. "To the Jews," he says, "I became as a Jew... to those outside the [spiritual] Law, I became as one outside the Law... to the weak, became weak, so that I might win the weak." No doubt he could have given more examples of how he shared the blessings of faith with others.

Basically, what he says is that he meets people where they are. He comes to them in such a way that he's able to identify with them, and they with him. In this way the gap is reduced between him and others. Paul didn't regard such accommodation as a loss of his identity; rather, it was a bending of who he was so that he could engage the person in front of him. All of this so that the power of God could then be at work in the life of another. When like reaches out to like, the conditions are set for positive things to happen.

Often, people are ready to offer something worthwhile to others but only on their terms. Through personal example Paul shows us that we must be ready to come to folks we say we care about, and to do it where they are. When we meet people on equal footing, we are more likely to be heard for what we have to say.

Similarly, when there is a moral dilemma in life we have to deal with, then its solution calls for a moral response from us. Moral problem, moral resolution. Like must meet like. Answers can be imposed on others, but they are rarely solutions if they don't address the underlying causes and concerns behind them. What's really a moral difficulty will only find its answer when its remedy is found in a moral way to address it.

I noticed an editorial cartoon in a church publication a little while back. It showed a group of people at the bottom of a cliff all bruised and bloodied. Attending them were people with bandages who were identified with little signs that said "Faith Community." Now that's a natural place to find the church as we respond to the hurts of society. We're called upon to help those in need in whatever ways we can. That's why we have a Personal Assistance Fund at the church and collect for disaster relief. We do whatever we can to make things better when people are hurting.

There was more to the cartoon, though. It also showed a whole line of people on top of the cliff moving toward its edge. There, at the very rim, were other figures who were pushing the people over the edge, and they were labeled "Health Care Policy and Practice." The intent of the cartoon was to point out that it was not by chance that all those unfortunates were down there; rather, the situation was directly related to what was happening at the top. It served as a reminder that no matter how diligently people of good will might tackle the end result, nothing would change until the cause of the suffering is alleviated.

We could look at the great scourge of the opiate crisis in America as well. This problem is so pervasive, but we haven't been ready or able to approach it from a wider perspective. We are

still too punitive with the individual user rather than to look seriously at why people choose to use drugs in the first place.

When I served a church in Chillicothe the clergy there were increasingly concerned about alcohol and drug usage among the people of the Scioto Valley. On the outside most residents seemed to be easy going and satisfied, but many of them were deeply troubled and pessimistic about their personal future. Often they turned to drugs as a way of coping with a world that seemed to hold little hope for the days ahead, and where there was more pain than promise.

Law enforcement there, with state help, began to convict more and more ordinary people and send them to varying terms in prison for their mistakes. Yes, they were guilty of possession of narcotics but little was being done to seek out why they were seeking to numb the pain of life in the first place. The bigger problem was why people felt so hopeless about their life and what could be done to help them have greater anticipation for the future.

A certain minister years ago lifted up this same concern by saying: "Suffering is a consequence, and not a cause; and we often make a great mistake in trying to remove the consequence without touching the cause—leaving the cause...actively at work to produce more suffering." That pastor was Washington Gladden of First Congregational Church, Columbus, and the year was 1895.

I followed Dr. Gladden there a hundred years later but saw how perceptively he understood the bigger picture in society. If we are going to really help suffering people, we have to meet them where their pain and despair begin, and not just where they end up later as a consequence.

The action at the bottom of the cliff is compassion and charity. Action that needs to take place at the top of the hill would be advocacy and change. The consequences below are inevitable because of a lack of prevention above. Caring first about the underlying conditions is where the greatest impact can be made to stem the problem.

My understanding of Christian faith is that we are called upon to help those in need, but we are equally asked to do whatever we can with problems before they become crises. To bandage the hurt is compassion, but to allow it to continue unnecessarily is neglect. You can't truly care about a person and limit your response to what happens only after the injury; you also have to ask yourself, "Is there anything I can do to slow or stop it in the first place?"

If a community knows that there is a dangerous railroad crossing where accidents continue to occur, and that a gate and lights can eliminate the problem, then isn't there some obligation to act on what is needed? Can we be satisfied with attending to pain and suffering afterward, when it could have been prevented in the first place?

Some will advocate that is not the role of the church to enter into what are the rightful functions of government. I do not agree. Who is the government? In a democracy **we** are the government. This is the way that we organize ourselves as a society to deal with issues that require collective decision because problems are often so immense they're beyond individual action.

Again Dr. Gladden anticipates that some will argue that the church should steer away from social issues, saying “The references of our Lord to political affairs are few... [and] is often cited as a reason why ministers of our day should let political subjects alone....”

He continues: “[Yes] the pulpit is not the place for partisan politics. But the pulpit **is** the place for enforcing upon the consciences of citizens the solemnity and sacredness of the obligations which rest upon them, and their duty to discharge these obligations....”

So, what is a moral issue in our world of today? It’s our elderly having to choose between medical care and living expenses. It’s young people with promise being shut out of higher education because of rising tuition and reduced assistance. It’s discrimination in the full rights and benefits of society because of one’s gender or gender orientation. It’s money buying access and influence that average citizens do not have.

Should we become involved in these and similar issues as persons of faith? Of course we should. Moral issues are what we in the church **should** be involved with. We should help people think through these pertinent questions that they might come to their own conclusions based on the words and actions of Jesus.

Part of our task as a church is to prepare our young people for their rightful role as members of society. We must insist that just because life treats us well, we cannot conclude that we have no responsibility toward others. We are our brothers’ keepers, and our sisters’ too. We cannot live in social isolation from others. We cannot abide a march toward militarism without raising our voices and advocating peaceful co-existence. We cannot stand by and let the delicate balance of God’s creation be exploited by short-sighted energy policies.

Our morning psalm declares, “The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds...The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground...His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.”

Faith begins by recognizing whose world it is and whose disciples we are. Major problems don’t have easy answers. Solutions rarely fit into soundbites. There’s a great deal to be done. The challenges are many. With God’s help, however, and our human ingenuity, we can face the moral dilemmas of our time outfitted with the moral resources we have been given. This is what our faith requires us to do.