

When Good People Make Bad Things Happen: A Sermon

Exodus 19:3-8

Psalm 15

1 Peter 4:7-11

Matthew 16:24-27



The lectionary readings this morning are Ember Day readings. Historically, in the Western church, Ember Days are a set of days set apart for praying and fasting and for the ordination of clergy. These readings all have an ethical focus, and they strike me as particularly appropriate given events that are happening in our culture right now.

Our country is in the midst of what can only be called an ethical crisis, the center of which seems to lie in an inability to discern whether there is such a thing as a common cultural good. Here are a few examples.

You can attend a conference in Washington D.C. next week called the “Values Voter Summit,” where you can hear speakers like Dr. Ben Carson, Kellyanne Conway, Vice President Mike Pence, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo talk about moral values. Meanwhile, the subject of the news the last several months has been how much their boss, the President of the United States, did or did not know about a hush money payment made to a porn star, and how one after the other of the president’s associates keep pleading guilty to various felonies. So much for voting your values.

The other big news in the secular culture over the last year or so has been the "me too" movement, in which various famous men mostly connected with the entertainment industry have been accused of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct. It turns out that household names that people once admired have a dark past. You know the names so I don't need to mention them. The list keeps growing longer, and *Time Magazine* has a regularly updated online list of 141 names so far.

If these kinds of things were only happening in the secular culture, outside the church, perhaps Christians could afford to be glib. After all, what do you expect of *those* people? What should give Christians reason to pause are recent revelations of moral misconduct by Christians in places of leadership. Last month, a Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report accused 300 Catholic priests of sexually abusing over 1,000 children, and of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church engaging in a massive cover-up of this abuse.

You might think that this does not concern those of us who are not Roman Catholic, but that would just mean that you have not been paying attention. While perhaps not as widespread, sexual abuse is not confined to Catholic clergy. I could tell you what I know about cases of sexual abuse by Anglican and Episcopal clergy,

And there are other areas of moral crisis within the church, particularly the ongoing crisis about sexuality that has led to a kind of slow motion dissolution of the Anglican communion over the last decade and a half. At its General Convention this summer, the Episcopal Church laid down an ultimatum that will make it even more difficult for orthodox clergy to stay within that church. If the clergy go along, they will be forced to compromise their consciences and to allow in their churches what they understand to be a violation of faithfulness to the Scriptures as God's Word, and to their ordination vows. If they refuse to go along, they may find themselves subject to deposition and to losing their

congregations. Those who have left or are considering leaving will face law suits over property and the pain that comes with division as some go and others stay.

What, if anything, do these incidents have in common? I would suggest three factors.

First, in each one of these cases, the people involved are good people. The Values Voters, the Hollywood entertainment industry, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church – these people are not bad people, but good people. In their own way, each one of these groups is attempting to make the world a better place.

Second, there is self deception. In each case, an otherwise good group has allowed something like a concern for a moral cause to blind themselves or to overlook some moral failing that has really hurt weak or innocent people. Each group has convinced itself to overlook the moral failing because they wanted to preserve a good moral cause that they either wanted to promote or that they feared was under threat.

Third, there is consequent manipulation and cover-up. When it became obvious that there was an elephant in the room, that the moral failing or moral conflict was not going to go away, each group stooped to use manipulative means to cover up the moral offense or to further their cause by coercion or manipulation when it was no longer possible to promote what they thought was a good agenda through the ordinary means of persuasion. Self-deception means that we manipulate others, but we convince ourselves that we are pursuing the good in doing so.

In what follows, I am not going to pretend to have any answers or solutions to this moral crisis in the culture right now. However, it does seem to me that if the culture (including the church) is in the midst of an ethical crisis, that looking at what the Scriptures say about Christian ethics might be of

some help. So let's look at this morning's lectionary readings.

First to be noticed is that the ethics of the Bible is not a kind of ethics in general, an ethics for everybody, but a distinctively Christian ethics with unique characteristics because it is Christian. This contrasts at least with the understanding of ethics held by both the conservative "Value Voters" and by the liberal ethics of Hollywood. For both the "Values Voters" and Hollywood, there is a notion that the right thing to do is the right thing for everybody to do, and the right thing to do is just what their own group would do. Conflicts occur because the two sides don't agree with each other about what that right thing is, and because they disagree so much, their own version of the right thing just cannot be the "right thing for everybody." The result is an irresolvable disagreement, and each side inevitably concludes that the other side is guilty of "bad faith." Those other people must be misguided, foolish, or perhaps even evil, or, as one political candidate put it, a "basket of deplorables."

How does Christian ethics differ from a general ethics for everybody? First and foremost, Christian ethics begins in grace. All Christian ethics is a response to the priority of divine grace, to the good gift of God that is both undeserved and unsought for. In the Exodus reading this morning, we hear: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." (Ex. 3:4) In Deuteronomy, we are told: "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples." (Dt. 7:7) In Romans we read that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8)

Christian ethics begins not with something that we have done, but with something that God has done. In the Old Testament, God created a nation by rescuing Israel from slavery. In the

New Testament, God has created the new people of the Church by sending his Son to deliver us from sin when we were powerless. But that means that at the start, Christian ethics is not an ethic for just anybody, but an ethics for those whom God has rescued and redeemed from sin. It also means that Christian ethics is not an ethic for good people, for either the good "Values Voters" or for the successful culture creators of Hollywood. The Christian ethic is not an ethic for good people because we who are Christians are not good people, but bad people who have been forgiven and delivered from our sins, and so acknowledge our foolishness and our selfishness.

Again, in contrast to universal ethics, Christian ethics is a communal ethic, not an ethic for just everybody, but an ethic for God's people, an ethic for the Church. God addresses the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai: "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples . . . and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" (Ex. 19:5-6) In 1 Peter, we hear, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Pet. 2:9) So Christian ethics is not for everybody in general, but for the Church, for those who recognize that they are redeemed sinners.

Christian ethics also has a particular structure or pattern. We see that structure in the gospel reading this morning: "Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'" (Matt. 16:24-25) The pattern of Christian ethics is cruciform, a discipleship that means patterning our lives on the cross of Christ. As Paul writes in Philippians 2: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to

be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant . . . being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:5-8)

This cruciform pattern is not a rejection of the self, it is not about self-denial for its own sake, it is not a kind of masochism, but it is about being united with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection in order that we might serve the interests of the other in the same way that the incarnate Christ took on the form of a slave for us. As Paul writes: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Phil. 3-4)

We see the way that this cruciform Christian ethic plays itself out in other passages from this morning's readings. Christian ethics is a cruciform community ethic for the Church lived out in response to God's redemption in Jesus Christ. It has the following characteristics:

First, Christian ethics is grounded in love: We love one another as Christ has first loved us (John 13:34). As we read in 1 Peter this morning: "keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Pet. 4:7) Christian love demonstrates itself by voluntarily becoming servants to one another: Peter continues, "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." (v. 10)

Second, Christian ethics is about speaking the truth to one another, and living in such a manner that our lives are consistent with what we claim to believe, and what we say. In the Psalm we read this morning, "O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart; who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil

to his neighbor.” (Ps. 15:1-3)

Christian ethics is then about speaking the truth and living truthfully. For Christians, truth is not merely a matter of cognitive knowledge, about knowing truth from falsity – although in our post-modern culture that is important – but most importantly about living in accordance with God’s reality. Christians do not need then to engage in deception or manipulation, either of themselves or of others. Because they live out lives consistent with the grace and forgiveness that has been given them in Jesus Christ, Christians can show that same grace to others, and they do not need to deceive or manipulate others in an attempt to make sure that their right side will win out. They can trust God to take care of their future, and so they can trust God in their dealings with others.

Of course, to live in such a way is costly and difficult, and it is only made possible through God’s grace. But God’s grace is precisely what we have been promised has been given us in Jesus Christ. We are to serve one another through the strength that God supplies. And the point of it all is to glorify the God who has himself graciously given himself to us in Jesus Christ. Again, we hear in 1 Peter that we are to live as “good stewards of God’s varied grace; whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet. 4:10-11)

So that is the basic structure of Christian ethics. It is a response to God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ. It is a communal ethic for the Church, not an ethic for “just everybody.” It is a cruciform and resurrection ethic that follows the pattern of Jesus Christ’s own humiliation on the cross and resurrection from the dead; it is an ethic of servanthood that is grounded in love, it recognizes in the other someone for whom Christ has also died, it speaks truthfully and it lives truthfully, and it has no room for deception or manipulation. It is an

ethic that trusts in God's providence and so does not need to coerce or manipulate others in order to get our own way or to promote what we think is our own good cause.

Of course, this Christian ethic is far removed from the "general ethics for everybody" of both the "Values Voters" and the secular progressivism of Hollywood, New York City, and the Seattle tech community, even if Christians do care about "family values," and we don't boycott Starbucks just because we don't like the design on their Christmas coffee cups. At the same time, we should not be surprised that visions of the good life that are so far removed from the Christian gospel lead to irresolvable conflicts. We also should not be surprised that for all the moral posturing of both groups, an inherent moral vacuum results in payoffs to porn stars and the "me too" revelations that former cultural heroes have clay feet.

But we also have to address the crisis in the churches. It is not just Washington, D.C. and Hollywood where the ethical crisis lies, but among ourselves. In the last few minutes of a sermon, I don't have solutions, but I do have some brief reflections.

First, the crisis in the churches has taken place because those in leadership have forgotten or ignored one or another one of these key aspects of Christian ethics and discipleship. In the Roman Catholic Church, the hierarchy decided to protect the institution rather than to speak the truth and live the truth. At a certain level, one can understand. A shocking scandal would have undermined all of the good that the Church does, and so the scandal was covered up, and offending priests were moved from parish to parish. But the scandal happened anyway, and the cover up made plain that the hierarchy had forgotten that their entire purpose was to be servants of the laity, not to look the other way while the wolves fed on the flock.

In the current crisis about sexuality in the mainline churches – this is not just about Episcopalians and Anglicans – there is an irony in that leaders of the mainline churches have decided to use the politics of power to further a cause that presumably challenges the politics of power. But again, these leaders have forgotten that they are shepherds of the community of Christ's Church, not advocates of a cause who have to do whatever is necessary to both promote what they perceive to be the goodness of that cause and to eliminate any resistance that might offer protest.

As orthodox Christians, how should we respond to these parallel crises in the Church, one concerning sexual abuse by clergy and other leaders, one concerning political manipulation to promote an agenda that at the least is at odds with catholic unity, and with charity towards those who not only do not support the cause but who find it to conflict with the gospel?

Any response cannot forget what Christian ethics is about. As orthodox Christians, we need to remember that we are servants of one another in a community. Our life flows from our worship of the One who loved us and died for us, and we need to both speak in love, and to walk in love, to do the truth and to speak the truth. There must be a fundamental openness and honesty about what we do, and an unwillingness to manipulate or to conspire in secret to promote our own agendas.

I also note that, among non-Catholics, there has been a lot of talk about solidarity with the Catholic Church right now, and about the need for other churches to recognize our own failings in this regard. Absolutely, but in that concern for solidarity, it is important not to forget that there are real victims. Forgiveness of sin and reconciliation should not mean "no accountability" for those who have abused the trust of the innocent. Our concerns should be first with the victims of clerical abuse, and only then with the abusers.

Finally, if Christian ethics is a community ethic, then the integrity of the Christian community must be maintained. Christians need to be Christians. This is the truth of Rod Dreher's *Benedict Option*. At the same time, however, speaking the truth in love must also mean that to be the Church means always to be oriented toward mission. Circling the wagons is not a missional option.

If there is an ethical crisis in contemporary culture rooted in the collapse of any notion of a common good, then, as Christians, we need to promote that common good, not to abandon it. As Christians, we certainly should expect to have enemies, but Jesus has commanded us to love our enemies, and to bless our persecutors (Matt. 5:44). The mission of the gospel means that we respond to our enemies, not only to those outside the Church, but to those inside the Church as well, with love, with the hope to convert, and not the desire to destroy.

And that is all I have. Perhaps it is a start. God have mercy on us, and God forgive. Have mercy on a culture that has lost its way, and needs to hear the call of the Good Shepherd. But even more, God have mercy on his Church. May we learn once again what it means to be servants, to speak the truth in love, to walk in the way of the cross.