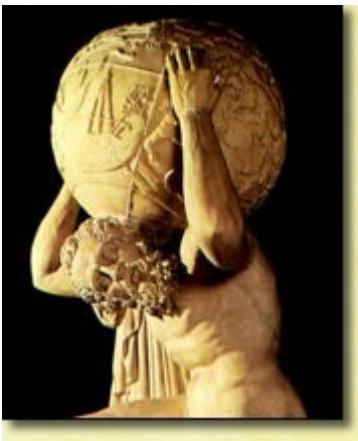


The Perils of Bootstrapping or What is Christian Ethics? A Sermon

This is the first sermon I preached right after The Episcopal Church's General Convention 2003. At the time, I was an aspirant for Holy Orders in the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut. Within a month I had withdrawn from the ordination process. Two years later, on July 13, 2005, Bishop Andrew Smith invaded St. John's Episcopal Church, changed the locks and deposed Mark Hansen, our priest, and imposed a priest-in-charge, who later removed those of us on the vestry for "numerous offenses" (unspecified).

I now live in the Anglican Diocese of Pittsburgh, and Archbishop Robert Duncan is my bishop. With the inaugural meeting of the new Anglican Church of North America this week, of which I am a member, I thought it appropriate to repost this sermon.

Psalm 147
Eph. 5: 15-20
John 6:53-59



At General Convention 2003, the Episcopal Church made two decisions that have put the Anglican communion in an uproar. They decided to ordain an Episcopal priest who

had divorced his wife, and has been living in an ongoing homosexual relationship with another man, and they decided to allow individual dioceses to provide rites of blessing for homosexual relationships, at the discretion of the local bishop. The issue of controversy in the Episcopal Church today has to do with a disagreement about ethics or morality. So I have decided to talk a little this morning about Christian ethics.

The first thing that I think needs to be said is that it is quite difficult today to think about ethics from a Christian perspective, even for those inside the Church. The reason for this is that there is a competing ethic in our culture that has nothing to do with Christianity, but which we can hardly avoid. This is an ethic that has so permeated our culture that even Christians fall into its ways of thinking. I am going to refer to this as the "do-it-yourself" ethic. "Doing-it-yourself" is the idea that morality is about doing the best you can—pulling yourself up by your boot straps. If you do the best you can, you'll be all right.

This "do-it-yourself" ethic comes in two varieties, a conservative variety and a liberal variety. The conservative variety aims for perfection. The conservative "do-it-yourselfer" does not allow for any failures, and tolerates no half-hearted efforts. Sometimes this view is called moralism or Puritanism. The liberal "do-it-yourselfer" is more tolerant. He realizes that not everybody is perfect, so he thinks that God grades on a curve. As long as you try, you get an A for effort.

A lot of people think that "do-it-yourself" ethics is just what Christianity is all about, that Christianity is kind of like the boy scouts' motto: "Do a good deed daily." If they like the idea of doing good deeds, then these people approve of Christianity, even if they're not Christians themselves. They say things like, "I admire Jesus' moral teaching. I think

he was a great man . . . but I don't go to church or anything. I'm not a fanatic." On the other hand, if they're not so sure about their own stock of good deeds, if they're concerned that they don't measure up, then they won't like Christianity at all. One sometimes hear people complain that Christians are "goody two shoes" or "killjoys" who like to keep other people from having a good time.

And you can hear both sides represented in the public media discussions of what happened at General Convention. The conservatives were horrified. Even if they don't go to church themselves, they think that Christianity is about keeping the rules, and Bishop Gene Robinson is a bad example. He hasn't kept the rules. On the other hands, the liberals were pleased. It is about time that those Puritan Christians got off their high horse, and accepted the changes that are going on in the real world. Of course, these folks don't go to church, and they're not going to start now, not even if the Episcopal Church comes around to their way of thinking. But they are happy to know that they were right all along.

The problem with both of these groups is that they do not understand the Christian gospel, and so they do not understand Christian ethics. Since they don't understand Christian ethics, they can not provide a Christian evaluation of what has happened in the Episcopal Church.

For the last few weeks, the epistle readings in the lectionary have come from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and what Paul has said has largely had to do with issues of Christian behavior. So I think Paul can give us some tools to help us think about Christian ethics. What does it mean it mean for Christians to act and to live in a moral manner?

The heart of the Christian gospel is about two things: forgiveness of sins and transformation of life. We see this earlier in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He says in chapter 1, "In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the

forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” In chapter 2, Paul says, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”

The problem with “do-it-yourself” ethics is that it has no room for forgiveness, and it has no room for redemption and transformation. Since the conservative “do-it-yourselfer” insists on perfection, there is no room to be forgiven, or to start over. For the liberal “do-it-yourselfer,” no one needs to be forgiven. We’re just fine the way we are.

But Christian ethics is an ethic for people who realize that they are sinners, and that they need forgiveness. It is also an ethic for people who know they need to change, but realize that they are powerless to change without divine help.

Christian ethics is about becoming a follower of Jesus. But what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? It means that we enter into a new kind of life, a life that would not be possible if there had been no Jesus. Christian living is about our coming to share in the very life of this Jesus who lived, was crucified, and was raised to new life. The Bible talks about this in different ways. Again in Ephesians, Paul says that “God has raised up up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places.” Later he uses the imagery of a head and its body. Paul says, “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body . . . when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” In chapter 4 of Ephesians, Paul compares becoming a Christian to putting on a new suit of clothes. Paul says that through Christ, we have “put off [our] old self,” and have put on a “new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Scholars believe that Paul is using the image of baptism here. When the early Christians were baptized, they took off their old clothing, and were

immersed in a pool to symbolize that they had died to their old life. After they rose from the water, they put on a new white robe, to illustrate that they had been raised to a new life. When we are baptized, we put aside our old life, our old ways of living and thinking, and begin a new kind of life, a life that is lived because the Holy Spirit lives in us, and unites us to the risen Jesus.

In John's gospel, Jesus says: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing" In this morning's gospel reading, John uses the language of the other central New Testament sacrament, the eucharist or the Lord's Supper, to speak of how we come into union with Christ, and so come to share in this new kind of life. Jesus says: "My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in them. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me."

By being united with Christ, we come to share in the life of Christ. Because Jesus Christ is God incarnate, we can come to share in the very life of God, which Jesus has because he is the Word made flesh, the second person of the Trinity become a human being.

That is the heart of Christian ethics, and it has nothing to do with doing the best we can, or doing it by ourselves. Christian ethics is all about being forgiven, and allowing ourselves to be changed and transformed, as we become more and more like Christ.

And because Christian ethics is not about self-improvement, but God-improvement, that is, about God making us all over again, its characteristic attitudes are neither the scolding we find among Puritan "do-it-yourselfers"—"You've just gotta try a little harder!", nor the kind of defensiveness we often

find among compromising “do-it-your-selfers”—“I’m as good as you. Where do you get off telling me what to do?”

The characteristic attitudes of Christian ethics are the attitudes of those who realize that they have gotten what they do not deserve, not those who think they deserve what they’ve got. What are those attitudes? In the chapter in Ephesians from which this morning’s reading comes, Paul mentions two that are certainly among the most important. First, in this morning’s reading, there is gratitude. Paul says we should “give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Second, at the beginning of the chapter that was last week’s epistle reading, Paul mentions love as characteristic of those who wish to imitate the God who has come near to us in Jesus Christ. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” You probably recognize that verse, since it is one of the offertory sentences in the Prayer Book, one of the verses of scripture that is read just before the gifts of tithes and offerings, and bread and wine are presented at the Lord’s table for the celebration of the eucharist.

This then is the heart of Christian ethics. Christian living is about being forgiven, and starting over, and living a new kind of life, a life that depends on the very life of the risen Christ. In Jesus Christ, God become human, died for our sins, and was raised from the dead. Through the Holy Spirit, we are made one with the risen Christ, who shares his life with us, and enables us to live a life of holiness like the life he lived on earth. The Christian life has to do with following Christ, with responding to God’s gift in Christ with gratitude and with love. It is not about just following the rules, nor of saying that I do not have to follow the rules because I am all right just the way I am. Christian ethics is about entering into a new kind of life.

Unfortunately, there is a way of hearing the gospel message so that it is not a message that challenges us to live a new kind of life, but a message that endorses the kind of life we were living anyway. But the gospel message in the New Testament is not that kind of message. If Christian ethics is about sharing in a new life by following Christ, if it means (as Paul says) putting on a new self, then we have to ask, what about that old self? And Paul is very clear, that old self has to die. As Paul says, the old self “belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.”

Paul begins this morning’s epistle reading with some very negative instructions: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” In the current climate of disagreement that characterizes discussion in today’s Episcopal Church, there is sometimes a tendency to contrast love and law. Those who want to change the church’s historic teachings claim to be motivated by love, and to be following a new leading of the Holy Spirit. Those who resist the changes are accused of being unloving, and being bound by rules and regulations. I think this contrast is pitifully inadequate. We have heard Paul tell us to “walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us.” But to walk in love means to do certain kinds of things and not to do others. Later in chapter 4, Paul gives a list of instructions that tell us what it means to walk in Christ’s love. He marks a contrast between darkness and light. Paul says, “Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.” Surely Paul’s point is that certain kinds of behaviors are behaviors that are appropriate to the children of light, the behaviors that are good and right and true. And certain kinds of behaviors are not appropriate to the children of light because they are the

works of darkness. To walk in Christ's love is to walk as a child of the light. To walk in darkness is to reject Christ's love.

And throughout Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, Paul contrasts various kinds of behavior which are consistent with Christian love with kinds of behavior that are not. He tells us positively that we should speak the truth in love. Negatively, he tells us that if we become angry, that we should not let the sun go down on our anger. He says the thief should no longer steal, but should do honest work so that he will have something to share with others. Paul says that we should not speak language that will corrupt others, but only things that will build others up, and will give grace to our hearers. He says that we should put aside bitterness and anger and slander, and that instead we should be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as Christ has forgiven us. Lots of negatives there, but each is balanced by a positive.

And, yes, Paul does say some things about sex. He says that those who are sexually immoral have no place in God's kingdom. But Paul is consistent here. What Paul says about sex is not merely negative, for the verse just before Paul condemns sexual immorality is the verse where Paul says that we should walk in love, as Christ loved us. Paul knows that what makes Christian ethics work is that it is about love. All human actions are rooted in desire, but some desires are illusory because they are loves for things that are ultimately not good for us. So Paul says that our old self belongs to a former manner of life that is corrupt through "deceitful desires."

Sexual immorality is one of those loves that ultimately is a false love. It is an attempt to fill a hunger and thirst that can only truly be satisfied by Christ with a substitute. As Jesus says, "My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink." Do-it-yourself religion can offer no hope to the one who is caught in the false love of sexual sin. The high minded Puritan "do-it-yourselfer" can only point fingers, and accuse.

The more open minded “do-it-yourselfer” can only say, “Well, we all do it, don’t we?” But what Paul realizes is that the love of Christ offers hope where “do-it-yourself” religion does not. Christ’s love forgives, and Christ love transforms, and Christ’s love offers the alternative of a holy love for one that is ultimately self-observed. And this offers hope to all of us, for haven’t we all followed deceptive loves from time to time, even if they are not the love that has created the crisis in the Episcopal Church?

Is it too late for the Episcopal Church? I do not know. I do know that speaking the truth in love will not allow the Christian to endorse a false love that separates from Christ even if Episcopal bishops endorse it. But I also know that Christ’s love still offers a way beyond the choice between cold anger and easy acceptance that are the only choices for our contemporary culture. Christ’s love offers forgiveness, and Christ’s love offers transformation. Do we dare to risk that love for ourselves? Can we hear Paul’s words that speak even to us?:

*“Awake, O sleeper
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”*