THE HEART IS A LITTLE TO THE LEFT

Essays on Public Morality

&

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THE POLITICS OF COMPASSION

ONE OF THE GREAT church people in this hemisphere is Archbishop Helda Camara of Recife, Brazil. I once heard him say, with a broad smile and in a heavy accent: "Right hand, left hand—both belong to ze same body but ze heart is a little to ze left."

I tell you this story because I too believe that "ze heart is a little to ze left." You don't have to give socialist answers, but you do have to press socialist questions. These are the ones that point toward greater social justice.

Tonight I want to talk as a convinced Christian, the better to refute the answers of my fellow Christians "a little to ze right."

In religious faith, simplicity comes in at least two distinct forms. One lies on the near side of complexity. Those of us who embrace this kind of simple faith dis-

like, in fact are frightened by, complexity. We hold certainty dearer than truth. We prefer obedience to discernment. Too many of us bear out Charles Darwin's contention that ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge. And apparently such religious folk were as abundant in Jesus' time as they clearly are in ours. Also, in Jesus' time, as in ours, conventional religious wisdom stressed correct belief and right behavior.

Then there is the religious simplicity that lies on the far side of complexity. That's where, I believe, we must look for Jesus and his message. I believe that when all's said and done, when every subtle thing has been dissected and analyzed every which way, Jesus' message remains incredibly simple, unbelievably beautiful, and as easy to translate into action as for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

Nowhere is this simple message more clearly stated than in the parable of the Good Samaritan (found in the tenth chapter of Luke). I hardly need remind you that the two men who passed by on the other side, the priest and the Levite, were considered the most religious persons in the Israelite community, dedicated as they were to the preservation of the faith through full-time religious service. But the third man—the one

who showed mercy, who had compassion, who proved neighbor to the bleeding man on the side of the road—this Samaritan was only part Jew and believed only part of the Jewish Scripture. To Jews, Samaritans were heretics; Samaria was a dangerous place. Yet it was the heretic, the enemy, the man of the wrong faith who did the right thing while the two men of the right faith flunked.

The same simple, subversive message comes through in Jesus' other well-known parable. Of course we tend to identify with the older brother of the prodigal son because, like him, we want the irresponsible kid to get what he deserves. But the prodigal love of the father insists that the son get not what he deserves but what he needs—forgiveness, a fresh start, which is exactly what —thank God—God gives all of us. We can't be relieved of the consequences of our sin, but we can be relieved of the consequences of being sinners; for there is more mercy in God than sin in us. Wrong behavior is not the last word.

The culture of his time prevented Saint Paul from seeing many things, but the simplicity, beauty, and difficulty of Jesus' message was not one of them. He ends 1 Corinthians 13 with "And now abide faith, hope, love, these three. And the greatest of these is *love*." And he be-

gins the next, the fourteenth chapter: "Make love your aim."

Make love your aim, not biblical inerrancy, nor purity, nor obedience to holiness codes. Make love your aim, for "Though I speak with the tongues . . . of angels"—musicians, poets, preachers, you are being addressed; "and though I understand all mysteries and have all knowledge"—professors, your turn; "and though I give all my goods to feed the poor"—radicals take note; "and though I give my body to be burned"—the very stuff of heroism; "but have not love, it profiteth me nothing."[1] I doubt if in any other scriptures of the world there is a more radical statement of ethics: if we fail in love, we fail in all things else.

So Socrates was mistaken: it's not the unexamined life that is not worth living; it's the uncommitted life. There is no smaller package in the world than that of a person all wrapped up in himself. Love is our business; if we can't love, we're out of business. And all this Christians learn primarily through the words and deeds of that "love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down."

In short, love is the core value of Christian life. And the better to understand what we're saying, let's briefly

1. See 1 Corinthians 13:1–3.

review four major ethical stages in history. Most people shudder when they hear "an eye for an eye" and "a tooth for a tooth." But far from commanding revenge, the law insists that a person must never take more than *one* eye for an eye, never more than *one* tooth for a tooth. Found in the Book of Exodus, this law became necessary to guard against the normal way people had of doing business, namely, unlimited retaliation: "Kill my cat and I'll kill yours, your dog, your mule, and you, too."[2]

The father/mother of unlimited retaliation is, of course, the notion that might makes right, an uncivilized concept if ever there was one and one that to this day governs the actions of many so-called civilized nations. So limited retaliation is certainly an improvement over unlimited retaliation: "Get even but no more." Limited retaliation is what most people have in mind when they speak of criminal justice—"You did the crime, you do the time." Limited retaliation is also the justification most frequently used for capital punishment, the most premeditated form of killing in the world.

Unlimited retaliation, limited retaliation. A third stage might be called limited love. In Leviticus 19:18 it is written: "You shall not take vengeance nor bear a grudge

2. Exodus 21:24.

against the children of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself."[3]

Again, a step forward. Limited love is better than limited retaliation, and limited love can be very moving—a mother's love for her child, children's love for their parents. But when the neighbor to be loved has been limited to one of one's own people, then limited love, historically, has supported White supremacy, religious bigotry, the Nazi notion of *Herrenvolk*, and "America for Americans" (which never included Native Americans). Actually, limited love is often more self-serving than generous, as Jesus himself recognized when he said, "If you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you only salute your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"[4]

Jesus, of course, was pressing for a fourth state, unlimited love, the love that is of God, the love you give when you make a gift of yourself, no preconditions. (Have you ever noticed how Jesus healed with no strings attached? He didn't say to blind Bartolomeus, now healed, "Now don't you go ogling beautiful women." To the owner of the withered hand he restored Jesus

3. Leviticus 19:18. 4. Matthew 5:46–47.

didn't warn, "No stealing now.") And the neighbor to be loved according to the parable of the Good Samaritan is the nearest person in need regardless of race, religion, or nationality, and we can safely add gender or sexual orientation.

Such was the love that Saint Paul extolled; such was the love of God when at Christmas he gave the world he so loved, not what it deserved but what it needed, his only begotten son that "whosoever should believe in him should not perish but have eternal life."[5]

One of my favorite stories concerns a beggar in sixteenth century Paris who, desperately ill, was taken to the operating table of a group of doctors. In Latin, which they were sure he would not understand, the doctors said, "Faciamus experimentum in anima vile" (Let us experiment on this vile fellow). The beggar, who was actually an impoverished student, later to become a renowned poet, Marc Antoine Muret, replied from the slab on which they had laid him: "Animam vilem appellas pro qua Christus non dedignatus mori est?" (Will you call vile one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?).

If Christ didn't disdain to die for any of us, who are we not to live for all of us?

5. John 3:16.

In order to live for all of us, to strive for the unified advance of the human species, we have to recognize that just as there are two kinds of simplicity—one on the near, the other on the far side of complexity—so there are two kinds of love: one lies on this side of justice, the other on the far side.

Said prophet Amos "Let justice"—not charity—"roll down like mighty waters," and for good reason: whereas charity alleviates the effects of poverty, justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it. Charity is a matter of personal attribute; justice is a matter of public policy.

To picture justice as central, not ancillary, to the Gospel often demands a recasting of a childhood faith. Many of us were brought up to believe that what counts is a personal relationship with God, inner peace, kindness to others, and a home in heaven when all our years have sped.

And many of us never get over the religion of our childhood that we either loved or hated. Either way the results are disastrous.

It is also true that many pastors deliberately perpetuate a childish version of the faith, particularly if they are ministers of mainline middle-class churches, for, not surprisingly, they find it easier to talk to their congregations of charity rather than of justice. Charity, after all,

threatens not at all the status quo that may be profitable to a goodly number of their parishioners. Justice, on the other hand, leads directly to political controversy.

So there is a real temptation to think that an issue is less spiritual for being more political, to believe that religion is above politics, that the sanctuary is too sacred a place for the grit and grime of political battle. But if you believe religion is above politics, you are, in actuality, for the status quo—a very political position. And were God the god of the status quo, then the church would have no prophetic role, serving the state mainly as a kind of ambulance service.

In the 1990s, both the Million Man March and the Promise-Keepers let the political order off the hook. Theirs was a purely spiritual message that just happened to parallel the antigovernment message of the Republicans.

By contrast, Martin Luther King Jr. led the 1963 March on Washington and later the Poor People's March to confront the government, to put the government on notice.

The Christian right talks a lot about "traditional values" and "family values." Almost always these values relate to personal rather than social morality. For the Christian right has trouble not only seeing love as the

core value of personal life but even more trouble seeing love as the core value of our communal life—the love that lies on the far side of justice. Without question, family responsibility, hard work, compassion, kindness, religious piety—all these individual virtues are of enduring importance. But again, personal morality doesn't threaten the status quo. Furthermore, public good doesn't automatically follow from private virtue. A person's moral character, sterling though it may be, is insufficient to serve the cause of justice, which is to challenge the status quo, to try to make what's legal more moral, to speak truth to power, and to take personal or concerted action against evil, whether in personal or systemic form.

It is no accident that the welfare reform bill is called the Personal Responsibility Act. Most talk of responsibility these days is directed at the most powerless people in our society. If you believe, as do so many members of the Christian right, that the ills of society stem largely from the carelessness and moral failures of America's poor, if you separate economic issues from cultural concerns, if you can't see that economic coercion is "violence in slow motion," that it is the economy that consigns millions to the status of the unwanted, unused, discarded, then you find little need to talk of

homelessness, poverty, hunger, inadequate medical care, for these are created by illegitimacy, laziness, drugs, abetted by welfare dependency and sexual deviation. To the Christian right, the American underclass is far more a moral phenomenon than an economic one.

In this fashion the theological individualism of the religious right serves its political and economic conservatism; the victim is blamed for a situation that is largely systemic. What the religious right persists in ignoring is that, although self-help is important, self-help alone will not solve the problems of the poor. And to blame the poor for their oppression and to affirm the affluent in their complacency, to oppose sexual permissiveness and say not a word about the permissiveness of consumerism—which insists that it is right to buy, wrong to defer almost any gratification—these positions are anything but biblical.

Clearly, the love that lies on the far side of justice demands a communal sense of responsibility for and a sense of complicity in the very evils we abhor.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a mentor to so many of my generation, constantly contended that in a free society "some are guilty but all are responsible."

That profound understanding of community has a striking historical example. In the middle of the seven-

teenth century, Oliver Cromwell sat down to draw up new rules of war for his revolutionary army. He came to the question of what to do with a man found with a wound in his back—someone who fled in the face of the enemy? Cromwell's answer was to round up his friends and drum them out of the army and the church. Why? Because cowardice is a communal failure. More accurately, cowardice is a place where personal and communal responsibilities intersect: "Some are guilty but all are responsible."

If cowardice is a communal failure, so is poverty. It is hardly the fault of those Americans willing, even desperate, to work that there are simply more unskilled workers than unskilled jobs and nowhere near the money necessary for training people to land jobs that would lift them out of poverty. Or consider these two facts: (1) a child of affluent parents is six times more likely to have an undergraduate degree than a child of poor parents; and (2) the odds are 3 to 1 that a pregnant teenager is poor, which suggests that poverty traps girls in pregnancy more than pregnancy traps girls in poverty.

Without question, education is the best way out of dead-end jobs and welfare dependency. Lack of it, then, is another communal failure. A recent study in Wash-

ington State showed that 36 percent of those on welfare had learning disabilities that never had been remedied.

Crime is a communal failure. We're not tough on crime, only on criminals. Were we tough on crime, we'd put the money up front, in prevention rather than in punishment. We'd be building healthier communities, not more and more prisons. "Some are guilty but all are responsible." We stress the guilty in order to exonerate the responsible.

In short, it is not enough to be a Good Samaritan, not when, from North Philadelphia to East Oakland, whole communities lie bleeding in the ditch. What the poor need today is not piecemeal charity but wholesale justice.

And that's what is so lacking today. "The comfortable are in control," as John Kenneth Galbraith wrote a short while ago, and largely because, as another observer put it, "We have the best Congress money can buy." Until we Americans get serious about reforming campaign financing, our politicians will increasingly become lapdogs of the rich.

When I was a boy in public school, I was told that there are rich people and poor people—no connection. When I came to New York, I was told that this was the most exciting city in the world, but "we do have prob-

lems"—a lot of poor people. When I read the Bible, I find that the poor are never the problem. It's always the rich who are a problem to the poor, as Oscar Romero, the martyred monsignor of El Salvador, recognized so movingly. Never did he call the poor of his country *los pobres*. He called them *los enpobrecidos*, those *made poor.*

Surely, we should also be calling America's poor "the impoverished," especially when we see our Congress reversing the priorities of Mary's Magnificat, filling the rich with good things and sending the poor empty away. Why, the way we are cutting taxes for the wealthy and social programs for the poor, you'd think the greedy were needy and the needy were greedy!

Why should we back the proposed school vouchers when, without an affluence test, such vouchers are but disguised welfare checks for the rich, many of whose children are already in private schools at the expense of the public school system? As far as I can see, parents wouldn't have freedom of choice; school administrators would. Parents would have freedom to apply.

Some people even deny the need for the government to subsidize a daily guaranteed hot meal for every poor child in the country, and today such children are almost one in four. You have to be morally malnourished so to treat any child of God in the richest country in the world.

And finally, as our welfare system increasingly takes the form of block grants to states, it is safe to assume that the states will cut taxes to attract business, reduce support to cities and to the social programs the cities must provide. Cities will be left with problems undiminished and resources shrinking—a sure recipe for disaster. Even Nixon, though anxious to decentralize education, job training, development, and law enforcement, still wanted a sturdy safety net centralized so that benefits would be uniform, not subject to the shifting political winds of fifty states.

Jesus was certainly something more than a prophet but surely nothing less. And that means, once again, that the love that is the core value of our individual life should also be the core value of our life together. Love has a corporate character as well as a personal one. So just as the simplicity we should embrace lies on the far side of complexity, so the love we should embrace lies on the far side of justice, never on the near side. This understanding is crucial today, when, as I said, no longer is it an individual who lies bleeding in the ditch but whole communities in city after city across the land.

We Americans have so much, and we're asking of ourselves so little. What we are downsizing more than anything else are the demands of biblical justice.

Let Christians remember how Jesus was concerned most for those society counted least and put last. Let us all remember what King and Gandhi never forgot—that for its implementation compassion frequently demands confrontation.

I said at the outset that conventional religious wisdom in Jesus' time stressed correct belief and right behavior. Conventional religious wisdom in America does the same today.

To many American evangelists, faith is a goody that they got and others didn't, an extraordinary degree of certainty that most can't achieve. This kind of faith is dangerous, for it can be and often is worn as a merit badge or used as a club to clobber others.

In contrast, Saint Paul sees faith as confidence in the face of *not* knowing. "For we walk by faith, not by sight."[6] Saint Paul's faith is a thankful response to grace, to the outpouring of God's love, that persistently seeks to get everything right in this world, including us. Such a faith is never exclusive, always inclusive and deeply ethical, never moralistic.

Jesus subverted the conventional religious wisdom of his time. I think we have to do the same. The answer to bad evangelism is not no evangelism but good evange-

6. See 2 Corinthians 5:7.

lism; and good evangelism is not proselytizing but witnessing, bearing witness to "the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it";[7] bearing witness to the love that burns in every heart, deny it or suppress it as we will; and bearing witness to our version of the truth just as the other side witnesses to its version of the truth—for let's face it, truth in its pure essence eludes us all.

And that's where I think a Christian should stand, one whose heart is "a little to ze left".

7. John 1:5.