

Editorial

“COMMON MORALITY” VIS À VIS THE BIBLICAL STORY

Several years ago, one of the national offices of the United Church sent out a children’s pageant that could be used at a Sunday service near Christmas. The pageant portrayed a shepherd boy who was out in the fields with his elders when they received a heavenly vision; it concerned a saviour being born in Bethlehem, a saviour who was the Messiah, the Lord. Following the directions the angels had given, the older shepherds decide to rush over to Bethlehem. But the boy, having such a high sense of responsibility, decides to stay where he is and look after the sheep. The center-piece of the story is the responsible little boy.

We have here an example, in the religious formation of our children, where “common morality” is given precedence over the biblical story. Instead of providing a pageant that might awaken in our young people an overwhelming awe over the Christmas event — as being part of the wildly unusual things God performs on our behalf — this one drew their attention distinctly away from it. The pageant offered what our young members can get anywhere, a story with a neat moral. When I use the term “common morality” I am not referring to the “middle class morality” that Bernard Shaw pokes fun at so successfully in *Pygmalion* (more widely remembered through the musical, *My Fair Lady*). I am thinking of the basic admirable moral qualities that home, school, church, mosque and newspapers all agree needs to be instilled in people, and that I tried to instill in my own children. My concern is that we in the United Church often throw the tent of common morality over the biblical stories, which conceals from us not just their unusualness — even their outrageousness — but also Who it is that belongs in the center of all our considerations.

The Book of Proverbs is, admittedly, something of a storehouse of common morality, but much of the Old Testament contains

material that regularly transcends it, or even offends it — like the Passover story. The dominating presence in the Old Testament is the Lord God, who is wild, fearsome, demanding, and unpredictable. Unpredictable but not untrustworthy. God has a long memory for disobedience, but an even longer patience for the fortunes of his beloved people, with whom he makes a covenant. He remains faithful to that covenant in spite of everything, for his love is steadfast. Common morality does everything it can to tame this God, and also to play down the centrality of Israel's story in God's purposes for the world. It is a universal God that common morality seeks, and it is offended that such a universal God should come through a "chosen people".

What about Jesus? Does he espouse a common morality? It doesn't seem so. We all recall his disturbing words, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." But we say, that's not typical; it's just hyperbole; after all, he did offer the Sermon on the Mount. Well, yes he did. But even there he leaves the impression of fanaticism. The story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is one we like, but when we look at it more closely, we see it is another of Jesus' sayings that throws us off balance. Jesus portrays a man who simply thanks God that he is not like some other people, which all of us do virtually every day of the week, and twice on Sundays. And this man has reason for thinking the way he does, for he has accepted a high standard for himself: he fasts twice a week (exceeding the normal targets of the Torah) and gives a tithe (10%) on *everything* he receives (once again exceeding the requirements of the law). The Pharisee has been vilified by Christian interpreters as a man full of overweening pride. I would suggest, however, that if we actually look at the way Jesus tells the story, the Pharisee would have been considered in almost any of our congregations as a person who offers a standard the rest of us might aspire to. But it is the disreputable tax collector who is commended by Jesus, and all he does is ask God for mercy on himself, a sinner.

Also unnerving, when you get down to it, is the story of the

Prodigal Son. In that parable Jesus leaves so many questions hanging that, in my opinion, it gives no comfort to common morality. Jesus shows the younger son as selfish and impetuous, who doesn't respect the mores of the time about inheritance. When he has blown his wad and is considering his options, he decides to go home. But Jesus doesn't make it clear whether there is any real remorse on his part. Because of the way Jesus sets it out the hearer might conclude that the young man is simply calculating on how he can win the sympathy of his father. And despite what many sermons have said about the elder brother, Jesus doesn't in fact indicate that he was simply a duty-bound son, but cold and unloving. We tend to make ourselves comfortable with the story by assuming the younger son is warm, loving and lively, and the older one cool and unattractive. But the way the story is actually told would have greatly shocked Jesus' listeners, offending them by its implied unfairness. And this is not unusual in Jesus' parables. He tells a story about a farmer hiring people to come and work in his fields. He starts hiring early in the morning, and keeps on through the day. But when it comes time for payment they all get the same amount. This is ridiculous!

And think of the rough treatment Jesus can hand out. He doesn't simply say that the poor and the hungry and the mourners are blessed since good things are on the way for them — sometime! No, he carries on: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." A man comes to Jesus and says he would like to follow him right away, but he wants to give proper honour to his parents. When they die and he has buried them, *then* he will come and be one of Jesus followers. Jesus response is harsh and terse: "Let the dead bury their own dead. But as for you, come and follow me." In another place he bluntly asserts that re-marriage after divorce is adultery. No common morality here.

Nor in another incident. Jesus is walking near the pool of Bethzatha. The pool had the reputation of possessing therapeutic powers; the first to get in the water when it became turbulent would

be healed. There are many invalids around the pool — blind, lame or paralyzed — and Jesus stops by one who has been lying there for 38 years, with no one to help him into the pool at the right moment. Jesus heals him, and then moves on. Now we may be struck by the wonderful thing that is done for this poor man, but are we not also left outraged that Jesus doesn't help any of the others? Isn't it the height of arbitrariness to heal only one if the capacity is there to heal all?

Let's move on and think of the occasion when Jesus visits in the home of Mary and Martha. Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet and Martha struggles in the kitchen preparing food for a crowd. And when she appeals to Jesus about the unfairness of it all, he rebukes her, telling her she is fussing about so many things, but there is only one important thing and Mary has chosen it. Standing with common morality we would take Martha's side every time in this exchange, and in our more egalitarian age perhaps go further and wonder why some of the lazy male disciples didn't go to the kitchen and help out. Surely the only thing that could possibly justify Jesus' rebuke is that conventional things are suspended when an utterly unique thing happens: the Son of God visits your house.

God in Jesus Christ bursts the wine-skins of common morality. And Paul recognized that; in Romans he points out that as sin increased, grace increased all the more. Ah yes, grace. That is what the father in the parable was displaying. Whatever the authenticity of the younger son's remorse, the father was full of grace. And the pagan critic of Christianity in the 3rd century, Celsus, saw with clarity that the Christian understanding of grace contravened common morality. The latter would have invited people to the altar who had "pure hands and a wise tongue". And how is the invitation extended by those stupid Christians? They say, "Whoever is a sinner, whoever is unwise, whoever is a child, and, in a word, whoever is a wretch will be received by the kingdom of God."

Naturally, there are many things in both testaments that support common morality. But we are letting it be the interpretative frame through which we look at the Bible. It should be the other way round.

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