Book 4

Sunday September 8, 1974

"Learning from Tragedy" Luke 18:18-19, 9-14; 11:24-28

The other day at a luncheon meeting, I tried to listen politely as the two persons next to me were solving the problems of the world. While recognizing the many issues we face as a nation and as individuals and as one world, these two persons were also sure that all of the problems of immorality, greed and corruption could be handled rather easily. As the conversation continued the two persons implied that they were not any part of the problem and if only all people were more like them, all would be fine. It was always those other people. (see perspective)

I think if Jesus had been present at that luncheon table with us, he might have told the parable which was part of our scripture lesson this morning--the parable directed at those of us who trust in themselves that we are righteous and despise others. In the parable, two men go to the church to pray, and the first spends his time reminding God of his merits and thanks God that he is not like those other people who are always fouling things up. But the second person realizes his mistakes and admits that he is part of the problem.

However the conversation of the two persons at the luncheon table and the problem of evil and corruption in society and in us as individuals raises an important question. When there is tragedy, when there is corruption and immorality on a wide scale, what can we learn from it about the power of evil and how to deal with it?

This is especially important for us as Christians, for as Karl Menninger points out in his book, "Whatever Became of Sin," it is the special prerogative of the church and its leaders to study sin, or whatever we want to call it--to identify it, to define it, to warn us about it, and to spur measures for combating and rectifying it.

It has been said that "the wise learn from tragedy--the foolish merely repeat it." Now that the more sensational aspects of the Watergate events are over and are being dealt with by the courts, we Christians need to look at what can be learned from this tragedy. There are some wrong lessons and some right lessons. We are not trying to relive the Watergate events, but only to use it as an illustration so that we can learn from it.

1. The first wrong lesson is to conclude with cyncism -- Everybody does it; politics is corrupt, that's all there is to it. Now of course it's true that no person or group is perfect or completely righteous. But to say simply that everybody does something is usually to try to excuse it and it doesn't get at the core of the problem. It's no defense against evil. Rather it implies that we are to give in to it. Can you imagine us saying that since there are many people who commit murder and never get caught, we should therefore excuse those who do get caught?

Or the next time you get a speeding ticket, try to get off by telling the policeman or the court--"But there were lots of others speeding who weren't stopped."

So to say, "Everybody does it," or "A lot of people do it," does nothing to solve the problem. Rather it can cause us to give up and to conclude that nothing constructive can be done. So for us in the here and now, it is not particularly important whether Mr. Nixon was the first to bring dirty tricks to the presidency. What we need to do is to be determined that he shall be the last to do so.

2. The second wrong lesson to be learned from the Watergate scandal is to conclude -- "We need to stir ourselves to regain the high morality of our ancestors." The problem with this statement is that the America of our ancestors was not as moral as we like to believe. Like all nations, we have been and still are a mixture of good and evil, generous and mean, helpful and greedy. The danger we always face as individuals and as a nation is that we may try to pretend or convince ourselves that we are so much better than others and then we are really fooling ourselves and become even more naive about the nature and power of evil as the Christian faith understands it.

Not only as individuals, but as a nation we can become like the Pharisee in the parable which Jesus told and to which we referred earlier. We can find ourselves saying, "God we thank thee that we are not like other nations, and then begin to remind God of all of our merits.

If these then are two wrong lessons about the nature of evil, what then are someof the right lessons? How can we better prepare ourselves and our children to live in a world in which injustice and falsehood and corruption all exist?

1. First of all as our Christian faith reminds us, we need to be told often and accurately about the power and influence of evil. In the Old Testament, the prophets performed this function over and over again. Often they were not liked for it, but it had to be done.

We need to be frank with our children about the power of evil. Our history as a nation has its high points, but also its low points. There is nothing to be gained by glossing over our shabby treatment of the American Indians, or our tragic involvement in slavery, or our massacres in Viet Nam.

Much of life in this country has been built upon the sufferings, deception, and dispossession of others. This is true all over the world. It is not shocking. It is as ordinary a fact about human societies as there is. It does us no good to gloss over these facts and to pretend it doesn't happen. Our Christian faith takes the reality of evil very seriously.

On a personal level, our children learn soon enough that we their parents are not perfectly truthful and they learn that their friends are not always truthful and that they themselves, like us, are capable of lying, deceit, betrayal, cruelty and meanness. Our Christian faith tells us that this capability is within all of us.

The tragedy of Watergate is that many of the people in charge were naive about evil. They believed they could do no wrong. They were the exception. They could see the evil in others, but not in themselves.

When a ruler came to Jesus and asked him, "Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus replied, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

So the first lesson is that we need to admit that in this world life is often unfair. There is injustice and inequality. People do cheat and lie and steal. Governments, even our own, can lie and mislead us. Our Christian faith says this should not surprise us. And it is only when we are willing to see clearly the reality and power of evil in the world, and in us, and in the normal everyday routines of life as well as in public life, then and only then are we in a position to try to increase the small circle of truth and justice.

We cannot make the world much better or ourselves much better for that matter, by seeking to be innocent. We make the circle of morality and righteousness bigger by taking evil seriously, by diagnosing it wherever it is and then by working to set up obstacles to block it.

2. Secondly, the Watergate situation and our Christian faith remind us that our capacity for self-deception is uncanny. All of us like to convince ourselves that we are the exception. Or we tell ourselves that we have gotten the evil out of ourselves or out of the systems. We are on the "law and order" train.

But that, according to the Bible is when we are in the most danger. Jesus told a parable to underscore this. He said in effect, just when you get one evil thing out of yourself, then in the vacuum and while you are congratulating yourself on the fact that you are safe and good, seven other evil spirits come and take their place and you are worse off than before.

3. Thirdly, the most important lesson we all need to learn as individuals, as groups and as nations, is that we all need to be held accountable to someone else. Moral progress is not an individual affair.

In the case of public life and politics, it is part of the role of government, local and national, to regulate the uses of power, to be a referee. At the same time, we are not to fool ourselves and believe that we are going to root out all the evil and build the perfect society. In the best athletic contest, the officials are not able to detect and call all the fouls. But they have to do they best the can and keep at it. Some of the worst abuses can be blocked. But the nature and power of evil is such in our personal lifes and in public life that constant viligance is called for.

Reinhold Niebuhr used to say, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; man's capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary." As Christians we know that both in personal morality and in public morality we are much less innocent than we might like to believe.

The secret wisdom of the founding fathers in 1789, was not their morality, but the fact they took evil seriously. They knew that the goodness of people or of politicians could

could not be trusted all by itself, unwatched. Thus they built American democracy on the premise that human beings in power cannot be trusted all by themselves. The only hope for some honesty, justice and compassion therefore was to set up a system of checks and balances and accountability and then added to that a free press. Each part of the system is to hold other parts accountable. Let no part get too big or too powerful for its own good or anyone elses' good.

The same principle is true in our private lives as well. We all need persons to whom we are accountable. Moral progress is never an individual affair. In order to grow in honesty, courage, compassion, truth and freedom, we need the truthfulness and watchfulness of others. We need others to correct us, to stop us, to tell us the painful truth, to encourage us when we are timid, to see in us possibilities we have blocked or kept from growing.

So our Christian faith reminds us that we can learn from tragedy. Life is often unfair, The evil do sometimes prosper at least for a time. There is a tendency toward evil in all of us. We are a mixture of good and evil, and a tangle of mixed motives. It is often difficult to be truthful even about simple things. Temptations will continue to come our way. In the daily struggle to be honest, free, courageous and compassionate we will meet defeats as well as victories. - See sermon on cheating →

But once we grasp the power of evil in us as individuals and in society as a whole, then we are at least in a better position to help ourselves and others block the evil that is all around us. We will be less surprised by it and will be able to work more effectively to see that checks and balances operate which limit the power of evil.

More than that, we will see that we need each other. We need each other's honesty and openness. We need each other's resistance to our own self-centeredness and self-deception. It is together that we constitute an image of God who knows exactly what is in us and draws us to honesty, courage and freedom. It is when we help each other that God works most effectively with us. Amen.