Sunday, September 14, 1975
PERSONAL GOODNESS IS NOT ENOUGH
Amos 5:21-24; I John 4:7-11,19-21

The writer of the first letter of John certainly wrote beautiful words about love. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and one who loves is born of God and knows God. We love because God first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God and hates another person, that one is a liar,’ for if we do not love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen, how can we love God whom we have not seen.”

Most of us accept these words from the Bible and we believe that we are to follow them. And for the most part, we as individuals are fundamentally decent. We try to do our best in our personal lives. I am convinced that most people are honest and well-meaning and want the same things for themselves and their families: a modest sufficiency, a little peace, a little pleasure.

But how does it happen that people who are individually good, those who are personally· decent and loving; at the same time often unite or become part of structures and institutions in society that are unjust and unloving?

As a result, social injustice in many forms, large and small, often makes our personal goodness, our individual morality irrelevant. If we are decent, loving and nice to someone whose whole life is at the same time twisted by the system in which he or she lives, and which we wittingly or unwittingly help to maintain, then our personal goodness is not enough.

Hitler’s persecution of the Jews is an extreme illustration of this point. In Nazi Germany, Jews were forced to identify themselves as aliens in their own country. At first, they had to wear armbands decorated with the Star of David. They were robbed of their businesses and property. Often, they were mobbed and beaten. Finally, they were forcibly removed to concentration camps and six million of them were ruthlessly murdered.

Now suppose you were a next-door neighbor to a Jewish family, and you were very fond of them. You yourself were not antisemitic and you also personally did not approve of minority group persecution. You even had your Jewish neighbors to your house for dinner and you listened with them to Mozart’s music, and your children and their children played on the living room rug together. You were full of personal Christian love and concern.

But, if you did not protest against the public policy which made them wear armbands, which defrauded them of their property and shipped them off to death, your little kindnesses and love, your personal goodness were not of much consequence.

Ironically, many of the churches in Germany at that time preached a gospel to individuals, ignoring a society that was going to hell, on the premise that if the minds of persons could be changed one by one, society would be reformed. And while the churches saved souls one by one, the society damned other souls thousands by thousands.

Some years ago, Allen Drury wrote a book entitled, “A Very Strange Society.” In that book he examined the government, people and problems in South Africa with a fairness that bends over backward. Yet when he came to discuss the totalitarian methods of repression used to

enforce apartheid in that country, he could not refrain from crying out — “The individual Afrikaner is not a cruel person; what evil genius forces him. to be so cruel as a government?”

And the same might be said of any people, anywhere, at any time in history. As individuals we are often decent and loving, but as groups or as a nation we can be cruel, unjust, and unloving.

In our own country in the time of slavery and since then, most Americans were and are not as individuals, cruel, mean people. But as a group we condoned and did things we would not think of doing by ourselves.

The other day I was reading the story of a black person. He recalled that when he was about ten, a good friend of his father was accused of looking funny at a white woman. A mob got together, tied him to a wagon, and after dragging him. through tl1e streets, he was hung up on a tree and shot full of notes. No one was ever arrested. But the writer went on to say that all of these persons as individuals were kind, loving people.

In all of these instances and in others, if we examined each of the persons involved as individuals, we would no doubt find them to be kind and decent persons in their personal relationships, loving their children, supporting their parents, feeding stray cats and contributing to charities.

How does this happen? Part of the reason is that we’ve gotten into the habit of thinking of goodness and morality in personal terms only.

Shortly after World War II, the editors of a leading Protestant denominational magazine decided that they would designate and honor some American political leader as “Christian Statesman of the Year.” Apparently, they believed that politicians would vie with one another for this prize and that the competition would raise the tone of public life.

After much searching of the national scene and their own souls, these conscientious people selected the governor of one of our southern states, a man notorious for his leadership in the forces of racial segregation. The editors explained their choice in these terms: “The governor neither drinks nor smokes and will not serve liquor in his official residence.”

This is troublesome reasoning, but it has been typical of a great deal of Protestant thought in our country since frontier days. A leader of Moral Rearmament announced in the 30’s that Adolf Hitler could not be as bad as he was reported to be, since he was known to be both a tee-totaler and a vegetarian. A popular midwestern preacher proclaimed his political views in these words: “I ask one thing first about any candidate for public office; Is he a regular reader of the Bible?”

All of this underscores our theme for today that personal goodness, although important, is not enough. Hitler was a demonic force in spite of his dietary habits and on the other hand, Winston Churchill was one of the truly creative leaders of the free world, although he was a notorious drinker and smoked like a chimney.

It’s no wonder an eleven-year-old recently wrote to a newspaper columnist to ask why some Christians bear down so hard on such matters as sex, drinking, gambling, and even dancing as sins, while paying comparatively little attention to social injustices and the bigotries that set person against person.

You see, when we think of goodness or morality in personal terms only then we also begin defining evil or sin in personal or individual terms only, and we become blind to institutional evil.

I recently heard of a man who prided himself on his sexual fidelity in his own marriage. He happened to own some buildings on the other side of the city vrl1ere he lived which were used as houses of prostitution. He saw no connection. His personal goodness is not enough.

Most store owners would not think of stealing money or anything else as individuals. However recently it was reported that some stores were not putting as much meat in a package as the label indicated. That's certainly stealing from customers in an indirect way. But because we have a tendency to think of evil in personal terms only, we more easily overlook such things.

We hear a lot these days about the evil of welfare cheaters. But if the stealing can be large enough and subtle enough like a company padding a government defense contract, then it's all right. We forget that personal goodness is not enough. None of us should be involved in stealing as individuals, but we also have an obligation to see to it that the companies and institutions we are a part of do not defraud anyone also.

In the Heidelberg Catechism the question is asked — "What does God forbid in the 8th commandment — You shall not steal?"

And the answer that is given goes — God forbids not only theft and robbery, but also labels as theft all wicked tricks and schemes by which we seek to get for ourselves our neighbor's goods, whether by force or under the pretext of right such as false weights and measures, deceptive advertising or merchandising, counterfeit money, exorbitant interest, or any other means forbidden by God. God also forbids all greed and misuse and waste of his gifts.

This issue of personal goodness not being enough affects all of us in our vocations. We expect a medical doctor to be personally dedicated and treat each individually with attention and concern. But we also expect medical doctors and others to be equally concerned about issues of public health.

It's like that poem I've used before which tells the story of the town at the bottom of a cliff. People were always falling off and getting hurt. The townspeople were very loving in a personal way. They bought an ambulance to pick up each individual who fell. But when it came to building a fence at the top of the cliff to keep people from falling, nobody got too excited about that.

If we go further than personal goodness many of 0ur insti-tutions can have a good effect on society as a whole.

When IBM located its huge new typewriter plant in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1958, it was the first manufacturing facility of significance in the area. A few years later, IBM began a new national policy of recruiting black employees for jobs at all levels. However, in Lexington, the incoming recruits had trouble. Despite the state's open housing statutes, realtors were not showing the black employee's homes in certain areas.

When this came to the attention of the Chairman of the Lexington-Fayette County Corm11ittee on Human Rights, he reminded IBM's local plant manager that his company with a work force

of over 5,000 was the largest employer in the area and therefore could be a positive influence in helping to stop discrimination in housing.

IBi1 had a plan under which it guaranteed the sale of employee's homes when they were transferred to new places. In 1967, it guaranteed the sale of homes worth $4,000,000 in the Lexington area. Realtor commissions on these sales amounted to some $240,000. Although it involved only some 2OO'homes, it affected the entire local real estate market.

As a result, IBM's Vice President for Manufacturing in Lexington, sent a letter to the President of Lexington's First Security National Bank, which was acting as the company's agent in listing homes for IBM under the guaranteed plan. The letter reiterated a verbal agreement with the bank. It said --

"In the listing of such properties, First Security will communicate to such realtors that IBM's policy is to utilize only those realtors who provide their services to prospective purchasers. without discrimination against such individuals because of race, color, religion, or national origin. If you discover this policy is not followed, please advise me."

The bank President sent the letter to the Real Estate Board which sent a copy of it with an accompanying memo to participants in the local multiple listing service, stating that IBM guarantee plan properties would only be assigned to realtors who agree to observe IBM policy.

Within two days after the IBM letter went out, black employees who had made no progress in finding homes after weeks of effort, began receiving phone calls from real estate dealers.

And so it is that our institutions can have positive effects on many people's lives as well as our own personal goodness.

Reinhold Niebuhr summed it all up when he wrote, "We cannot build our individual ladders to heaven and leave the total human enterprise unredeemed of its excesses and corruptions. For the church and individuals to urge kindness to our brothe.rs and sisters, one by· one, while ignoring social structures that damn them all in all, is to be irrelevant to our society and unfaithful to the fullness of the gospel." Amen.