Sunday, March 4, 1979
TEMPTATIONS OF RELIGION (No. 3 in a Series: The Anger of Morality)
Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:6-11

Text: Luke 6:11 “But they were filled with fury (anger) and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

One of the most seductive temptations of religion is the “anger of morality.” People who consider themselves very religious and therefore highly moral are tempted to get very angry when someone else does not follow the rules as closely as they do. Even though someone may break a religious rule in order to serve a higher purpose the anger of morality is still there.

This is precisely what happened in the two incidents read from the Bible this morning. In the first, Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field on the Sabbath, and as they walked the disciples took some of the grain and rubbed it out in their hands. The protectors of morality saw what happened and they asked in self--righteous anger, “Why are your disciples doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” In the second incident which also took place on the Sabbath, a man who had a crippled hand was in the synagogue where Jesus was teaching. Again, the protectors of morality, the upholders of the law were there watching and waiting to see whether or not Jesus would heal the man’s hand on the Sabbath and thereby technically break the fourth commandment which forbids doing any work on the Sabbath.

In this instance, Jesus was prepared. He knew they were waiting and watching to see what he would do. So, he asked them, “is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?” They didn’t answer him. Jesus then healed the man’s hand. What was their reaction? Luke reports: “They were filled with fury, anger, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

Here we can see the anger of morality in its most dangerous form. It is an attitude that chokes off love, a bitter rejection of what does not conform to one’s own way of seeing the world. The worst part of the temptation is that the Pharisees thought in their own blind way that they were doing good. They were upholding one of the ten commandments. They were the defenders of the law! They were insisting on a particular institutional order, and a particular way of believing. By their stubborn and angry insistence, they were turning the commandment and their religion into a rigid framework that imprisons people rather than aiding people.

All of us are subject to this temptation because there is within us a periodic inertia that defends an obsolete system and resists change. There is within all of us a tendency to want to say to others at times, “You can’t do it that way. It will upset the system. It’s against the system.” It’s a tendency that can lead to the anger of morality.

The anger of morality is a temptation for every social order and institution, even those making no explicit appeal to religion. The anger of morality is caused by the failure to recognize the limitations and inadequacy of any particular institutional order or set of rules or commandments. Just as all paradigms are imperfect and inadequate in explaining the world completely, so are all institutions or sets of rules imperfect and inadequate. They are human creations. At the same time, they are necessary, just as we saw last week that paradigms are necessary.

The temptation begins when we elevate human institutions, rules, or commandments to an almost holy status. Thus, Jesus had to remind the Pharisees, “The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath.” In other words, even though the prohibition against working on the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, it was given to us for our own good; to be of help to us. We were not made to serve it.

But let’s back up a bit and see how this temptation, the anger of morality, comes about — how laws, rules, and institutions can be corrupting as well as helpful.

To begin with, we human beings are order-creating creatures. We need a sense of order in which to live, so that we can live together with as much peace as possible, so that we do not take advantage of others and others do not take advantage of us. We need some rules and laws and institutions to enforce and maintain them.

However, since the various social worlds in which we live are human constructions and always subject to change, each and every social order is inherently precarious. Traditions are always subject to erosion. The maintenance of order in society usually demands the sustaining of a particular pattern of thought and behavior against the destructive forces of individual and group interests and the disintegrating impact of other cultures.

Religion in any society often provides the foundation or the reason for a particular way of organizing the society. Sometimes a particular religion is directly related to the way in which a society or government is organized. Right now, for example, in Iran, an Islamic Republic is being proposed. This means that the religion of Islam would form the direct foundation or basis for that government and that the rules and commands of that religion would be directly written into the civil law.

In our form of government in the United States, the religions of Judaism and Christianity are indirectly related to the way we have society organized. The rules and commandments of no one particular religion are written totally into our state and national laws, although in the past some have been and still are, and there are always movements to write into the civil law particular religious laws.

In the past, for example, some states have had laws forbidding businesses from being open on Sunday. These laws had a religious foundation and motivation. If a strict observance of the 4th commandment is part of a person’s religious life, that’s quite all right. What needs to be resisted is the move to make that religious rule a civil rule for all people.

Another example of religious rules being written into state law occurred some years ago in the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut when it was illegal for a physician to prescribe any kind of birth control methods for their patients. It was also illegal for drug stores to sell any birth control devices, and it was even illegal for residents of those two states, married or unmarried, to practice any method of contraception. Finally, the laws were declared unconstitutional.

The problem of attempting to write a particular religious view into state or national law is illustrated especially today in the debate over whether or not our country should have a constitutional amendment forbidding abortion. Supporters of the “right-to-life” movement want to make the prohibition of abortion absolute by making it illegal everywhere.

On the other hand, many of those opposed to the move for a constitutional amendment outlawing abortion are not necessarily in favor of abortion. They, however, believe that in most

instances it should be a matter of the right to choice by the woman involved and depending on the particular circumstances of the person. They are opposed to a constitutional amendment because they do not want to see a particular religious and moral point of view written into national law. In the abortion debate, we can often see the anger of morality in its extreme.

Personally, I have found people whose moral sensitivity I respect in great perplexity over this issue. I myself find it difficult to be absolutist in any position, though my predominant feeling is against abortion, except in unusual circumstances. However, this does not mean that I want to see abortion made illegal by adding a constitutional amendment. I believe that's the wrong use of the constitution.

Personally, I am also upset over the fact that many people who are opposed to abortion and support the right-to-life do not show the same concern about the taking of innocent lives in war, by starvation, or through capital punishment. Angry morality often tends to be narrow.

Societies tend to remain freer when church and state remain separate; when religious systems do not seek the power of the state for the enforcement of religious rules, and when the state does not seek to have religion bless what it does. Religious authorities in such situations have often mistakenly aligned themselves with the rich and the powerful who resist any change because of their vested interests in the existing set-up.

Religious faith needs to be free to exercise its prophetic role of denouncing social injustice when necessary and of being the conscience of a society. It cannot do this very well if it is the captive of the state or of any particular group in society.

Above all, we need to remember what Jesus was pointing out to the Pharisees that Sabbath day — all systems should have as their purpose the betterment of human beings and human society. If a system becomes too narrow and begins to keep good from being done, then it needs to be made more flexible, otherwise the anger of morality takes over.

Life lived only according to rules or systems with no exceptions allowed is a crude form of morality. This is not to say that rules, laws, and commandments are not necessary. They are! Without the mediation of the law, we human beings might confuse the demands of the spirit with the fantasies of self-indulgence.

But at the same time, we need to remember that all rules, all systems, all institutions are incomplete, inadequate, and crude and cannot possibly cover all the complexities or uniqueness of human existence. Could a loving husband and wife codify in a set of rules the demands love makes upon them in their life together? It's not possible!

Although rules, commandments, and systems are important in our life together, they are not the source or power of Christian living; because Christian living consists of more than the observance by us of a set of rules from God. All laws and institutions are but means toward an end — they are not an end in themselves. It's when the set of rules or the system becomes an end in itself that the anger of morality develops. We become angry with everyone who does not fit into our little system or obey the rules to the letter.

Moral values always transcend their embodiment in a particular social order or a particular institution or system. The law is fulfilled when we go beyond it in our behavior.

That's what Jesus Christ was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount. "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." And then Jesus went on to give examples of behavior that transcends the rules: "You have heard that it was said to the people of old, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you, do not resist one who is evil; if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him or her the other also."

In a similar fashion, the law did not require the Samaritan to help the Jew in the ditch by the side of the road. But the law of love does require that we treat our neighbor in such a fashion and anyone in need is our neighbor. There is no room here for the anger of morality.

There are open people and there are closed people, open institutions and closed institutions. Open people are those who are open to truth and love. They are ready to go beyond themselves. They are not afraid of reality even when it leads them beyond all limits into the ultimate. They are not afraid of love. They are able to love and trust others, and they do not refuse faith, which is a loving trust of ultimate reality. Open institutions are those which serve to mediate such openness and do not attempt to confine human experience within the limited order they create.

Closed people are those who refuse to go beyond themselves. They cannot bear going outside the lines. They call a halt to seeking the truth as soon as the drive for truth begins to draw them beyond the familiar, the comfortable, the safe. That's why their anger flares when they see someone like Jesus go beyond the law to do good. They are afraid of losing themselves in a self-transcending, self-giving love, whether human or divine. Closed institutions, and sometimes churches are closed institutions, minister to the fears of such people by suppressing any movement that cannot be contained within the order they create and try to control.

Jesus Christ was an open person, and he calls us to be that kind of open person. He calls us to resist the kind of angry morality that attempts to judge others in a narrow fashion. Amen.