Sunday, June 5, 1988
THE LIMITS OF PERSONAL GOODNESS
Luke 10:25-28; I John 4:7-11,19-21

Most of us, from an early age, have been taught to be personally good and moral people, and we strive to live up to that goal. Like the "Good Samaritan" in the Bible story, if we see someone hurting or in trouble, we believe we should help that person. There is a lot of personal goodwill in most of us, only waiting to be tapped.

This is another way of saying that we agree with the writer of the First Letter of John in the New Testament, when he wrote, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and those who love are born of God and know God. 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?"

We try to do our best in our one-to-one relationships. I am convinced that most people are honest and well-meaning in their dealings with others and want to be treated that way themselves. We try to follow the "Golden Rule," "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

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

Maybe you remember as a youngster joining in with a group of other young people who were picking on someone or ganging up on another individual — and maybe you even liked that person the group was mistreating — yet you went along with the group. You would not have done what you were doing all by yourself.

Adults who have become part of lynch mobs have gone through the same experience. They find themselves doing things that their personal morals would not allow on a one-to-one basis.

Recent history gives us even more extreme examples. 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 and systematically murdered.

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

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

To put it another way, if we are decent, loving, and nice to someone whose whole life is at the same time being 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.

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 bent 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, during the time of slavery and since then, most Americans were not, as individuals, cruel, mean people. But in groups, we condoned and did things we would not think of doing by ourselves.

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

In all of these instances and in others, if we examined each of the individuals involved, we would no doubt find them to be kind and decent people in their personal relationships — loving their children, supporting their parents, feeding stray cats, and contributing to charities. And if one of their neighbors or friends got into trouble, they would be there to help them.

How does this happen? How is it that we can be individually good and moral, yet in a group, be something else entirely different?

The easy and obvious answer is that we find it difficult to resist the pressure of the group. We tend to go along with the crowd rather than to question the action. We don’t want the crowd to turn against us.

But I think there are deeper and more fundamental reasons. First of all, we’ve gotten into the habit of thinking of goodness and morality in personal terms only. An individual is thought to be moral if he or she does not indulge in certain personal vices.

Shortly after World War II, the editors of a leading Protestant denominational magazine decided that they would designate and honor some American political leaders 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, 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.” Commendable personal habits, but hardly the test of Christian statesmanship.

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

Another part of the same problem is that we Christians in the last several centuries especially have too often defined Christian love only in intimate personal terms. We have normally defined Christian love of neighbor as a relationship of personal intimacy between two or more people. We have seen Christian love as the activity of being sensitive to each other and, for better or worse, affirming each other’s value as an individual person. And certainly, this is an important aspect of Christian love as Jesus defined it and lived it.

But there’s more to the practice of Christian love than this. In fact, the New Testament concept and practice of Christian love, of love of neighbor, is much more than being intimate and personal.

According to the New Testament, love of neighbor is a readiness to serve others in their particular situation; a readiness to help them with their particular problem; to do good for them in the face of their specific need. And of course, the word “neighbor,” means anyone who is in some kind of need.

To put it another way, Christian love involves the effort to do what is best for the other; to use the most satisfactory resources and to do so in the most effective way. There is no hint that only personal resources should be used. That may be the least of what the person needs at the time.

For example, there is as much Christian love being practiced if a person uses his or her skills to work at providing jobs for the unemployed as there is in bringing baskets of food to a family that is hungry because the mother or father is unemployed. Now the fact is that working to provide jobs may not bring us into some kind of direct or intimate personal relationship with the people who are out of work, but helping to create a system that will provide jobs is still a practice of Christian love.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, which was read as part of the scripture lesson this morning, there is no hint of a deep personal and intimate encounter between the Samaritan and the Jew who was injured. There is simply the emphasis on the Samaritan’s readiness to act on behalf of someone who was hurt.

As you are aware, in that time, the Samaritans and the Jews had no personal relationships with each other. They avoided all contact. That is part of what makes the story so significant. The Samaritan saw a Jew in need, and he served that need to the best of his ability. The story says he took the man to the next town, saw that he was adequately cared for, then left some money for his continued care, and continued on his way.

He helped the man in the ditch not because he liked him or disliked him, but because it was the responsible thing to do. In our time, we might stop to help a motorist who had an accident or someone else in need. But we are also practicing Christian love in the best sense of the word when we work for safer highways, better driver education, safer cars, and adequate emergency services to be available for those who need them. And to carry out this kind of Christian love almost always means we have to get involved in group action so that improvements can be made.

The point is that when we think of goodness or morality or Christian love in personal terms only, then we also begin to define evil or sin primarily in personal or individual terms, and we become blind to institutional evil and also blind to institutional good.

So it is that we are practicing Christian love of neighbor when we are concerned and work toward having the best police force possible, the best health education, good courts of law, and the most just government. Justice is a form of love. The hospital worker whose job it is to antiseptically clean the rooms to prevent the start or spread of infection is doing a work of Christian love as much as those who come in direct contact with the patients and work to cure an infection.

The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to love our neighbor both in personal, individual ways, and in other ways as well.

Reinhold Niebuhr 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 brothers 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.