Sunday, August 28, 1988
WHY BE GOOD? (No. 4 in a Series: Everyday Questions)
Luke 15:11-32

In a Bible study group which I was leading, we were studying the parable of the prodigal son. When we began talking about the last part of the' story, everyone in the group could empathize with the elder son who had - stayed home. He had been a good and responsible individual and now felt cheated. One person in the Bible study group said, "Why be good? I agree with the feelings of the elder son. His younger brother took off, squandered his part of the family inheritance, led a riotous life and when he returned, he was given a lavish party. It's almost as if he was rewarded for his bad conduct."

Then another member of the Bible study group said, "It happens all the time. Read the newspapers. Someone gets into a lot of trouble, gets caught, then writes a book about it and becomes rich and famous. Why be good?" It doesn't pay.

Indeed, why be good? It's a question I hear frequently from young people and older people alike. Goodness seems to take a lot of lumps, and it often doesn't seem to pay off. Years ago, the German philosopher Nietzsche wrote, "No good deed goes unpunished."

People often say, "Why be good? No one appreciates it anyway." I believe it was Leo Durocher who said, "Nice guys finish last." And John Barrymore once remarked, "The good die young — because they see it's no use living if you've got to be good."

But let's take a moment to consider the false assumptions at work here. In the case of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, he assumed that his younger brother was having a better time, enjoying life more while he was away wasting his life in riotous living. We too often assume that living a life of indulgence or irresponsibility is more fun and more fulfilling than living a life of goodness. But is it really more enjoyable to live a useless life?

Remember, the prodigal son ended up living among pigs and was so hungry that he would have gladly eaten their food. It was only then that he realized what a fool he had been. The celebration given by his father upon his return wasn't a reward for his wasted life, but rather a celebration of his repentance and return to the family.

And even if the younger brother hadn't ended up in such dire straits, is a wasted life truly more meaningful, more fun, more satisfying? Are such people really happier?

One of the saddest books I've come across recently is The Windsor Style. It's about the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and the kind of life they lived. The Duke of Windsor was the former King of England, who gave up the throne to marry Wallis Warfield Simpson. In conversation with a friend, the Duke once said, "You know what my day was today? I got up late and then I went with the Duchess and watched her buy a hat." This line sums up the utter nothingness of their lives better than any biography ever could.

The Duchess said, "I would rather shop than eat," and her days were filled with couture fittings and having her hair done. The Windsors dined out every night, all dressed up, or dined at home, all dressed up. They relished the minor arts of exquisite living — dressing, eating, entertaining. Their toilet paper was unrolled and cut into squares by their staff, their toothpaste

was squeezed onto their toothbrushes for them, and their kitchen boy sorted their salad leaves to match in size. They were surrounded by luxury, but their lives were empty.

Before we go further, let's define what we mean — and what Jesus meant — by being "good." It's more than simply obeying the rules. People who are "righteous" obey the rules but often go no further. They take great satisfaction in keeping the law, both of the church and of the state, and they are inclined to be very hard on those who do not. But they often fail to extend themselves beyond what the law requires. They can become self-righteous, lacking in compassion and unwilling to reach out.

In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite were sincerely righteous people, but they left a wounded stranger to die in a roadside ditch because the law did not require them to help him, and it would have put them at personal risk to do so.

To be good, on the other hand, is to act in response to what mercy, kindness, and justice require. To be good is to be public-spirited, self-sacrificing, generous, and unselfish. It's to do more than the rules require. Sometimes good people are called "do-gooders," a term not usually intended to convey approval. Often, in their doing of good and in their work for justice, they seriously disturb the moral order of society, with consequences that are not without cost. In that sense, Nietzsche was right — no good deed goes unpunished.

Yet, when people are reasonably free from insecurity and anxiety, they tend to support the efforts of those who do good for its own sake. Many find themselves doing good not for any reward, but simply because doing good is its own reward — it's being true to our basic nature.

Unfortunately, times are not always secure and worry-free for any of us. When they aren't, compassion, kindness, and love tend to dry up. It is at those moments that we all too frequently fall back upon keeping the bare letter of the law and doing only what righteousness demands. It's then that we ask, "Why be good?" We think being righteous is enough.

That's why we Christians need to keep a constant watch over what we are about with our righteousness. I worry because in our time now there seems to be more concern for righteousness than for goodness. We need to be certain that in our legitimate longings for law and order, fairness and justice, humanity's higher responsibility for doing good is not forgotten.

Why be good? Life without goodness is priests passing by on the other side, the rich getting indigestion while the poor go to bed hungry, and in the end, a world that is not worth living in for anybody.

To be good in the sense that Jesus describes is to be true to our basic God-given nature. Sometimes this kind of goodness is called "altruism," and there is strong evidence that this kind of altruistic goodness is built into nature itself.

Some years ago, Dr. Lewis Thomas, a biologist and head of the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, wrote an essay on altruism in nature. He pointed out that altruism has always been one of biology's deep mysteries. Why should any animal, on its own, choose to give up its life in aid of another being?

At first glance, it seems an unnatural act to give away one's life, or even one's possessions, to another. And yet, in the face of improbability, examples of altruism abound.

Here are some examples, according to Dr. Thomas. “When a worker bee, patrolling the frontiers of the hive, senses the nearness of an intruder, its attack is pure, unqualified suicide; the bee’s sting is barbed, and in the act of pulling away, the bee is fatally injured. Among other varieties of social insects, like ants and higher termites, there are castes of soldiers for whom self-sacrifice is an everyday chore.”

We might say that altruism is the wrong word for such behavior. After all, it’s a human word, for creatures who can think and make decisions, and a honeybee has no connection to creatures like us, no brain for figuring out the future, no way of knowing the outcome of that sting.

But Dr. Thomas points out that the mind of a single bee, not to mention the 50,000 or so connected minds of a whole hive, is not easy to dismiss. A bee can tell the time of day, calculate the geometry of the sun’s position, argue with other bees about the best location for the next swarm, even anticipate the movements of a Princeton biologist who is shifting a dish of sugar further and further from the hive. Bees do a lot of close observing of other bees; maybe they know what follows stinging and do it anyway.

Altruism is not restricted to social insects. Birds risk their lives and sometimes lose them in efforts to distract the attention of predators from the nest. Among baboons, zebras, moose, and other animals, there are always stubborn, doomed guardians prepared to be done in first in order to buy time for the herd to escape.

It is genetically determined behavior, no doubt about it, says Dr. Thomas. Animals have genes for altruism, and those genes have been selected in the evolution of many creatures because of the advantage they confer for the continuing survival of the species.

Some believe that this kind of altruism is based on kinship; by preserving kin, one preserves oneself. But what is kinship? How far does it extend? Who is part of your family? First cousins? Second cousins? At what point do genetic ties to each other become so remote that we feel no instinctual urge to help?

On the other hand, some argue that altruistic behavior among human beings has nothing to do with genetics, that there is no such thing as a gene for self-sacrifice, not even a gene for helpfulness, or concern, or even affection. These are attributes, they say, that must be learned from society, acquired by cultures, taught by example.

Lewis Thomas, however, argues that precisely the opposite is true; we get along together in human society because we are genetically designed to be social animals, and we are obliged by instructions from our genes to be useful to each other. When we behave badly — killing, maiming, or stealing, or becoming involved in other antisocial activities — we are acting on misleading information learned from the wrong kinds of society we put together. It is our cultures that are deformed, and this keeps us from paying attention to what our genes are telling us.

This is exactly what St. Paul was saying in another way in his letter to the Christians in Rome: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

The Christian faith has, from the beginning, proclaimed that we are born with a basic goodness in us and that we are all part of one large human family, that we are all connected to each other no matter what our racial characteristics or ethnic origin.

Why be good? Because God is good, and it is in the core of your nature to be good. When you are reaching out to others, it is then that you are truly alive, it is then that life takes on new meaning. The good that is in you has no limit. You can be as good as you allow yourself to be. The purpose, the direction of life is to continue to grow in your goodness — to continue to become more open, generous, loving, joyful people. Amen.