Sunday, September 9, 1990
THE ILLUSION OF PURITY
Mark 10:17-22

In his book, The Seven Deadly Virtues, F. Forrester Church offers another version of the story of Little Red Riding Hood, but from the wolf's point of view.

Once upon a time, there was a good wolf, always helpful to others, always kind. One day, while walking through the woods, he met a little girl all dressed in red. At first, he was frightened because humans have a history of being cruel to wolves, but he overcame his fear and welcomed her to his part of the woods.

"Where are you going, little girl?" the kind wolf asked. "To my grandmother's house on the other side of the forest," the little girl replied. "My grandmother is very old and very ill, and I am taking her this picnic basket filled with treats to make her young and well again."

What a sweet little girl, thought the wolf to himself, yet so naive, so unschooled in the ways of the woods, which are the ways of life and death. The more the wolf pondered this, the more worried he became. Perhaps he should have accompanied the little girl, not only to protect her from any who might wish her harm but also gently to give her a little of his wisdom, lest, as children often do, she should end up feeling in some way responsible when her grandmother died.

By this time, Little Red Riding Hood was out of sight and well on her way through the forest. Nonetheless, the good wolf put down his walking stick and ran as fast as he could to the little girl's grandmother's house, taking a shortcut he knew, hoping perhaps to accompany the little girl home and protect her.

When he arrived at the grandmother's house, the wolf knocked on her door, unsure as to whether or not the little girl had already arrived. There was no answer. He knocked again. Still no answer. The door was unlatched, so he entered the cottage, only to discover the little girl's grandmother lying lifeless in her bed. She had no pulse and was not breathing. Desperately, he attempted artificial respiration, but to no avail. He could not resuscitate her.

Just then, he heard the little girl singing sweetly in the distance as she approached the cottage. Determined to protect her from the shock of finding her grandmother dead, he had to think fast. Then the idea came to him. He had one chance, albeit a risky one. Though he had already enjoyed a good breakfast and was not hungry at all, he wolfed the old woman down, threw on her nightgown, and jumped under the covers.

Despite the wolf's best intentions, as so often happens, everything went wrong that possibly could. To begin with, the disguise was far from perfect. When the little girl came in, her curiosity concerning her grandmother's appearance led her to ask a number of questions, about the length of her nose, for instance, and the depth of her voice. But when she commented upon the size of her grandmother's teeth and the wolf replied as sweetly as possible, "The better to eat with, my dear" (prejudice later added the "you"), Little Red Riding Hood recognized that this was not her grandmother at all, screamed, and ran from the cottage. The good wolf pursued her, trying to explain, but before he had the chance, a hunter leapt from the underbrush and shot the wolf dead.

Very sad. Wolves love to hear this story. Around the den at bedtime, when Daddy and Mommy tuck the cubs into bed, it is the one they usually ask to hear, even though they know it by heart. The moral never fails to move them. Even though the good wolf was killed, in a way he died for all wolves, for through his example, generations of wolves have been inspired to perform unself-regarding deeds of kindness.

There are always at least two sides to every story and usually more. Think, for example, about how the story might be told from the point of view of the hunter who killed the wolf. The meaning of a story and its details always change according to the perspective of the one who is telling it. This is true in the four gospels which make up the first four books of the New Testament, and it's still true in the stories we hear and tell today.

I thought about this story of Little Red Riding Hood from the wolf's point of view because it illustrates how we human beings, as individuals and as nations, view our enemies. An essay in a recent issue of TIME magazine pointed out that we Americans, as well as others, have always tended to overpersonalize hostile forces in the world. On our side, the vilification of Saddam Hussein of Iraq is only the latest example. According to TIME, his mug shot now hangs on the walls of various U.S. government offices in Washington, and across the top of the picture is printed in large red letters: WANTED.

The problem is we risk severe disappointment and worse if we think we can solve the crisis of the moment by getting rid of the scoundrel of the hour — whether it be Muammar Gaddafi, Fidel Castro, or Manuel Noriega, who for many years we courted and paid big money as our "friend."

As the TIME essay pointed out, experts on Iraq have conjured up a number of post-Saddam "succession scenarios" that would be no improvement on the current situation. "There are people waiting in the wings who make Saddam look like an Eagle Scout by comparison," said a top U.S. Intelligence official.

Part of the problem is that we Americans live in a celebrity culture. At home, we are always in search of heroes and heroines, while abroad we are on the lookout for supervillains, tyrants, and aggressors whose indisputable nastiness makes us look pure. We are caught up in the illusion of purity. We argue as follows, "Our enemies are evil. We are against them. Therefore, we are good."

Both sides can and do play this game. The Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, when he was alive, called the West and especially the United States, "the Great Satan." Our president was at the same time calling the Soviet Union "The Evil Empire." So thoroughly did we Americans hate Khomeini's Iran, that we supported Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran. The enemy of our enemy was our friend. Now it turns out that the enemy of our enemy became our even greater enemy because Saddam, more than Khomeini, is bent on aggressive territorial expansion. That should come as no surprise. After all, ten years before Saddam invaded Kuwait, he invaded Iran. Yet, I heard on the news the other day that some American companies are still secretly selling arms to Iraq.

An article in the September issue of The Atlantic magazine titled "The Roots of Muslim Rage," by Bernard Lewis, a historian of Islam, gives important background for our present situation. According to Mr. Lewis, one of the main roots of Muslim rage against Western countries, and especially against the United States because we are seen as the leader of the West, is that we

represent two of the worst evils present in the world today: secularism and modernism. Muslims see these two evils as major threats to their religious faith.

Muslim fundamentalists are firm in their belief that they are fighters in the war for Islam, the holy war in the path of God, and they are therefore fighting for God. It then follows that their opponents are fighting against God, and since God is, in principle, the sovereign, the supreme head of the Islamic state — and the Prophet (Mohammad), and after the Prophet, the caliphs, are God's vice-regents — then God as sovereign commands the army. The army is God's army, and the enemy is God's enemy. The duty of God's soldiers is to dispatch God's enemies as quickly as possible to the place where God will chastise them — that is to say, the afterlife.

Mr. Lewis goes on to point out that for the dedicated followers of Islam, it is entirely proper and right for the true believer to rule over the misbeliever since this provides for the maintenance of the holy law. But for misbelievers to rule over true believers is blasphemous and unnatural.

Above all, the true faith, based on God's final revelation to Mohammed, must be protected from insult and abuse; other faiths, being either false or incomplete, have no right to any such protection. That's why the followers of Islam have demanded that the author of The Satanic Verses, Salman Rushdie, be put to death. He insulted the true faith by writing his book, and we in the United States insulted the true faith by allowing it to be printed and sold in this country.

Sound extreme? We who claim to be Christians have some similar episodes in our history. We've burned heretics at the stake and conducted crusades to kill the infidels. Even some of the disciples of Jesus wanted him to call down fire from heaven and wipe out those who were opposed to his ministry. Jesus, however, refused. He would not be tempted by the illusion of purity (Luke 9:51-54).

We don't have to be religious to be tempted by the illusion of purity. I know people today who would argue that anyone who abuses the flag of this country in any way should be put to death. So we shouldn't be surprised that militant Muslims want Salman Rushdie killed.

This kind of attitude and conduct is built on the illusion of purity. Our enemies are evil. We are against them. Therefore, we are good. We can be tempted by the illusion of purity as individuals, as people of a religious faith, and as nations.

This is not to deny that sometimes our enemies are evil and need to be opposed, but that in itself does not make us good. And when we oppose enemies from a self-righteous point of view, we tend to become like them. Someone once said, "Choose your enemies very carefully, for you will grow to be more like them."

As religious people, we are especially tempted to be self-righteous. It's no wonder that I frequently hear people ask, "What is it that makes religious people so intolerant? And the more religious they seem to be, the more intolerant they are?" Intolerance seems to be as inevitable in human nature as sin itself. As soon as people become believers, they also tend to become impatient with those not quite so intelligent and good as they are.

As followers of Jesus, we are provided with a corrective that can help prevent us from giving in to the illusion of purity.

One day, a man came to Jesus, knelt before him, and asked, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus, before answering his question, felt it necessary to remind him

that no one is good, no one is free from sin and evil, except God. Jesus said, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

Was Jesus aware that this man was trying to flatter him by calling him a good teacher? Perhaps. But even more, I think Jesus could sense the self-righteous attitude of the individual because he proudly said to Jesus that he had observed all the commandments from his youth until now. Jesus had to remind him that he still lacked something. “Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me.” At those words, the Gospel tells us, “the man’s countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions” (Mark 10:17-22).

We all need to be saved from the illusion of purity — as individuals and as nations. The Apostle Paul said the same thing in another way in his letter to the Romans. He reminded them and us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Personally, in spite of the present crisis, I am filled with hope for the future. The movement nowadays called fundamentalism is not the only Islamic tradition, just as fundamentalism is not by any means the only Christian tradition. There are others more tolerant, more open, that helped to inspire the great achievements of Islamic and Christian civilizations in the past, and I have hope that these other traditions will in time prevail.

In the meantime, we need to take care on all sides to avoid the danger of a new era of religious wars, and we can begin to do this by having a better appreciation of other religious and political cultures through the study of history, their literature, and their achievements, and by being aware of our own illusion of purity. Amen.