

Engaging Critical Moral Issues in Church and in the Community

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis

October 16, 2005

1. What is a Moral Value?

- a. "Morality is a set of principles, or rules, that guide us in our actions."
(Solomon)
- b. Ethics is critical reflection on how we ought to live and why.
- c. There are different ends: pleasure, wealth, power, success, or happiness.
- d. There are different systems of morality or ethics.
 - i. Duty
 1. Divine command
 - a. Ten Commandments
 - b. "Love God and your neighbor as yourself"
 2. Rational (Immanuel Kant)
 - ii. Consequential (Utilitarian; J. S. Mill)
 - iii. Virtue (Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, MacIntyre)
- e. Values: Compassion, Justice, Love, Character, Courage, Equality, Freedom, Sanctity of Life, Integrity, Truthfulness, Responsibility, Forgiveness, and on and on.

2. What are Moral Issues?

- a. Issues that concern how we ought to live
 - i. Do I have the right to defend myself? To kill?
 - ii. Should I be concerned about the future condition of the planet?
 - iii. Should I be concerned about the poor, the stranger, and the outcast?
 - iv. How much is enough?
 - v. Is it just?
 - vi. Should I always follow authority?
 - vii. Does the state have the right to tax individuals?
 - viii. How do I, or the state, spend my resources of time, talent, and treasure? To what end? Is it just?
- b. What, for Christians, are God's primary concerns about how followers of Christ should live?
 - i. "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." (Micah 6:8)
 - ii. Mary's Song (The Magnificat)
 - iii. Jesus' first sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4)
 - iv. The Sermon on the Mount, or Plain (Matthew 5-7 or Luke 6)
 - v. Lord's Prayer
 - vi. Jesus's Parable of the Judgment of the Nations (Matthew 25)
 - vii. John's Gospel and the Johanne Letters on Love
 - viii. St. Paul on Love in Romans 13 and 1 Corinthians 13

3. Should Churches and congregations publicly address moral issues?

- a. If Christianity is a moral religion that is to give moral guidance for how people are to live a life pleasing to God, which is the fulfillment of life, how can they not?
- b. What is their hesitancy?
 - i. Fear of conflict
 - ii. Lack of knowledge to address the issue intelligently and faithfully
 - iii. The belief that church should be a place of comfort in a world of conflict

4. How, then, should we address moral issues?

- a. Carefully, respectfully, intelligently, and passionately
- b. A suggested process
 - i. Why is this issue a religious issue, e.g., war, poverty, taxes, abortion, sexual orientation, immigration, the environment?
 - ii. What is the issue?
 - iii. What are alternative responses to the issue?
 - iv. How are we to think theologically about this issue?
 - v. Good Christians can disagree, but more about means than ends?
 - vi. In critical situations the church has the right to make a stand
- c. When we address issues we should be thorough and respectful, representing all positions as faithfully as we can, in the form of Thomas Aquinas and a good debate: argument, counterargument, response
- d. Provide opportunity for dialogue, as well as debate, among people with divergent points of view.
 - i. Creates the opportunity to see people as more than their opinions
 - ii. Creates the opportunity to see that people's views are more complex than simplified arguments and positions
 - iii. Creates room for understanding rather than persuasion
 - iv. Creates the opportunity to build relationships across divisions
 - v. Creates the opportunity to reinforce love and respect above winning an argument
 - vi. Creates room for new alternatives, compromises, to arise.
- e. There comes a time to be prophetic and to take a stand for the sake of the Gospel
 - i. However, we might be wrong.
 - ii. And we are taught to love our even our enemies.
- f. Charity is necessary, but not sufficient in our complex world.
 - i. Charity can be used by unjust systems as a way to sustain them.
 - ii. Justice is God's ultimate concern, because God loves all creation and all creatures, especially the most vulnerable, the abused, and the oppressed
 - iii. Systems affect how we live, so unjust systems are moral issues.
 - iv. As persons called to live in community in communion with God, the quality of community and the character of our communion with God are equally important to realize the love of God in this world.