

Seduced by Mediocrity

Luke 18:9-14

October 19, 2008

Most of us know something about both of those people, don't we? The one is the sanctimonious, super-pious, self-righteous one. He is religiously and ethically scrupulous, and never lets you forget it. He dots every "i" and crosses every "t" and is prone to remind us of that every chance that comes along. Good as he is on paper, though, he is not the favorite person of anyone – probably not even his wife. Though he believes that he is an example of what everyone should be, people bend over backwards to keep from seeming to be anything like him.

Then, though, off in the opposite direction there is the other fellow. He hasn't handled his life very well, has done a lot of shabby things, has little of which to be proud, and is burdened with a lot of regrets. Having recently looked at himself candidly, he doesn't like what he sees. He recognizes that he needs a lot of forgiveness from others and from himself. But his self-esteem is so low that he's not at all certain that he is forgivable.

Those two: the self-righteous boor and the moral train wreck, are familiar enough to us. Few of us, though, really fit either category. At least we hope we aren't as morally deteriorated as the one, nor as asinine as the other. So actually, for our time, a third person is needed to be added to that parable. This would be the one who believed he had invented a safe middle-ground. This one might have prayed: "O God, I'll be the first to admit that I'm no saint. But then again, I haven't messed up as badly as have a lot of people you and I know., True, I have acquired some bad habits and I suppose I behave irresponsibly from time to time, but that's also true of a lot of my buddies; "boys will be boys." After all, we're only human. And God, at least I'm not a stuffy hypocrite like certain others I could name. Maybe I could be doing something more with my life, but you know, God, I'm one who doesn't see anything wrong with being average. It's my humility, I guess, my willingness to leave the heroic, difficult stuff to the smarter, more talented, more saintly people. Meanwhile, God, I just do my best to be a fun-loving "regular fellow;" to stay out of the way, to try not to hurt anyone. I'm content just to get by and get along, to go with the flow, and have a few laughs."

Anymore, I suspect that we have at least as many of that third type, as we do either of arrogant, self-congratulatory Pharisees, or morally disoriented sinner-types such as were in Jesus' parable.

Why? It's because, while almost no one approves of moral weakness, outright evilness, gross immorality, or irresponsibility, and while most of us are EVEN MORE reviled by self-righteousness. There has sneaked in, a tacit acceptance of a supposed middle-ground that suggests that the way to go is mediocrity, false humility, moral helplessness, and of always remaining ethically flexible. You know the kind, don't you? He's the charming rogue, the lovable rascal, the seemingly innocently

naïve or irresponsible person who just doesn't seem to "get it," when it comes to what it might mean to be a fully aware, accountable, moral being.

One can hear echoes of it in the story about the town's grizzly reprobate who, reeking of whiskey, wandered into a Southern Baptist church revival meeting. When the time came in the service for personal testimonies, he stood up and said, "Brothers and sisters, you all know – and I know too -- that lots of times I ain't been what I ought to have been. Sure, I abandoned my wife and baby. Yes, I've stolen livestock. True, I've told a lot of lies. I've had some of them social diseases from time to time. I've gambled away every penny I ever earned. I've been in more bar fights than I can count. But thank the Lord, there's one thing I ain't never done. I'm proud to say that I ain't never, for a moment, lost my Christian religion."

Do you see? It's a self-satisfied false humility, a know-nothing, fake innocence, a brazen claim of moral helplessness and incompetence that he still hopes to pass off as virtue. It's not because such a person, at some level, really doesn't know better and can't do better, but because he finds his calculated mediocrity so much easier, so much less demanding.

You may have noticed that particularly among men (but increasingly among women) there is an odd compulsion to regale each other, with much detail and relish, with the really stupid or reprehensible things that we did when we were younger – were teenagers perhaps. Some of that is done to be entertaining, but without question, much of it is to demonstrate that I'm not "too good," that I've been "one of the boys" enough to do some really stupid and irresponsible things lest, for lack of some choice bits of wickedness to me, anyone not feel comfortable around me.

Worse yet is the fact that there is a form of this kind of downgrading of who and what we are that masquerades as being "Christian." Pleading guilty to every known weakness and error, the coming across as "not having a clue" when it comes to real moral issues, has often been passed off as an indication of being spiritual and devout. "Whatever is wrong, I just accept it. I empty my mind of all the concerns that trouble the spirituality of other people. God, I'm thankful I'm not like them."

What that is is merely a rationale for excusing oneself from living fully, competently, proactively and responsibly in one's world. It is to try to make a virtue of NOT knowing all that can be known, and from NOT being all that he can be.

Some time ago on National Public Radio there was presented the opera, Billy Budd, by Benjamin Brittain. Many of you might remember the story from high school. Herman Melville is the author. If you were required to read it, there's a strong chance that your English teacher introduced it by saying that it was a "Jesus Christ analogy." That's often been said of it.

I beg to differ.

The story, if you've forgotten it, is this. Billy Budd was a sailor on a war ship. He was a handsome, likeable, humble, very pious young man. He was also blindly trusting, in fact trusting to the point of being naïve, simplistic, and a danger to himself. According to the story, one night Billy is approached by a crew member and asked to be part of a mutiny that is being planned. Billy, wide-eyed with shock and dismay, tells the man that he couldn't even conceive of being a part of something like that. At the same time, though, he is such a nice guy, is so amicable, so peaceable, so anxious to please, that he can't bear the thought of causing any trouble for his mutinous shipmates. Innocently, he believes that good will, their higher instincts, their innate sense of responsibility will come to the surface in those mutineers, and they won't proceed with this terrible thing. In any case, he doesn't inform the ship's captain of the plot.

The mutiny never actually happens, but Captain Vere does discover that a conspiracy had been afoot. The prime conspirator was the Master of Arms, a classic villain named Claggart, who despises and abhors Billy because of Billy's sweet, idealistic, niceness. So when the conspiracy comes to light, Claggart cynically names Billy Budd as the leader of what has turned out to be the aborted mutiny. Billy is stunned by this. He is too trusting, too believing in everyone, too determinedly innocent to imagine that someone could knowingly make such an unjust, unprovoked, blatantly false accusation. It couldn't happen in the world in which Billy insists upon believing. Thus, so shocked is he when accused, that he can't speak. And in the absence of being able to express himself, with a frustrated, almost child-like indignation, he swings blindly at Claggart. Strictly by chance, he connects, and Claggart dies as a result of the blow.

Maritime law said that a sailor who commits murder on board must be hanged. All extenuating circumstances notwithstanding, then, things proceed in the direction of Billy's execution. When the ship's chaplain visits Billy before the hanging, he discovers that despite the flagrant, outrageous injustice of it all, Billy is accepting it all unquestioningly, with an uncritical, passive, childish, simplicity. It is, after all, the "system," and he's determined to believe in the system and love the system, because he's too nice to question authority. The captain knows the full story, but for pragmatic reasons does not "stay" the execution. Billy is then indeed hanged, and as his final words before the moment of execution he shouts, "God bless Captain Vere."

Though tragic and disturbing, it's a good story. My reason for telling it, though, is that notwithstanding how "nice" Billy is, how believing and accepting (and with all due respect to your English teacher), Billy Budd is not AT ALL a Jesus Christ analogy; no way.

No! That concept of Jesus (and of being Christian) that encourages a wide-eyed, fawning, goody-two-shoes, Susie-snowflake, blind innocence and naivete, does at least as much damage to the credibility of Christianity, as does the most militant of attacks upon it. There is nothing Christian about

being stupid. “Know-nothing” innocence isn’t a virtue. Acting helpless or not-very-intelligent in order to seem humble, is just plain dishonest. Abandoning one’s standards or convictions in order to keep from making uncomfortable, those who have few or no convictions or standards isn’t an example of being sensitive.

That “good-ole-boy” brand of mediocrity, every instance of shying away from one’s own personal excellence for fear of seeming pretentious, any choosing to stay safely “in the middle of the herd,” every claim that one is too weak to change, too stupid to learn, and incapable of recognizing and resisting temptation, are blatant denials and betrayals of that image of God in which we’re created.

The truth is, virtually every one of us is smarter, more insightful, more creative, more gifted, and yes, more influential than we act or allow to be known. We know what is helpful versus what tends to be destructive; we know what bad habits are and how they get nourished by us. We all know what selfishness is, what impulsiveness is like, what it is to “chicken-out” as well as what it is to stand firm on principle. We all have a pretty good estimate of what our real gifts and capacities are as well as our susceptibilities. So any contriving to get by with being less than we are, to not be accountable for what we do, to bury our giftedness, is a major kind of dishonesty.

Nelson Mandela, in an inaugural address said it well: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?” Actually, WHO ARE YOU NOT TO BE?

You are a child of God. Your playing it small doesn’t serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are born to make manifest the Glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us. It is in every one of us, and as we let our own light shine, we consciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence and light liberates others.”

Exactly! As Jesus told the people at the beginning of his ministry (very loosely translated) “You people, all of you, sitting here in front of me, are the light of the world. It’s stupid to hide that light under a bucket. You are the salt – the flavor-givers – of this earth, and the place for the salt is in the soup.”

God has given to each of us insights, intuitions, passions, imagination, ways of communicating so particular and unique, that anytime we withhold them in any measure, we have sold ourselves short. Worse yet, we’ve done so for no good reason whatsoever.