

Mugwumps

Luke 6:1-11

April 27, 2008

Mugwumps...elusive....unforgettable. An experience everyone should have at least once. As a TV ad might say, it's something you'll return to many times in your mind. But how do we know Mugwumps? What do they look like? Where do they live? How do they spend their leisure time? These are questions we could expect from someone like Sherlock Holmes if we asked him and friend Watson to track them down for us, so let's work up a description.

Mugwumps come in several shapes and sizes. They seem to thrive in both polar and tropical regions and have the capacity to move swiftly and undetected. Their great strength enables them to control the areas they inhabit. In the past, they have been known to have large stockholdings in such corporations as Good, Right, and Proper, Inc., Tradition Unlimited; and Comfort Corporation. I'm told they find the stockholders meetings of Tradition and Comfort particularly attractive. Like anything with the capacity for swift, covert movement, it's much easier to determine where they have been than to know where they are now.

A classic case in their Hall of Infamy is datelined 30 A.D. This is by no means their first case or their earliest, but it's one which is well documented. It was a Sabbath Day – weatherwise a perfect one. The services were over. Folks were resting and relaxing with an air of good-natured comradery. Then someone heard a rustle in a grainfield a few hundred feet down the way. Soon a few heads emerged, and they recognized the tallest one to be that sacrilegious so-and-so from Nazareth, out on a stroll with some of his rag-tag friends. He had always bugged folk in this middle-class neighborhood. His friends weren't very respectable, and he would say and do things running counter to their religious tradition and ceremony. Well...here he was on what otherwise had looked like a perfectly beautiful day. What now?

Several of the onlookers had religious rules committed to memory perfectly. Not only had they memorized the words perfectly, but the commas and semicolons as well. And one of them noticed that a few of the strolling rag-tags were plucking grain and eating it. Committed to the memory of this very able onlooker was the fact that thirty-nine major occupations were forbidden on the Sabbath. He knew that plucking grain in a neighbor's field wasn't considered an act of theft, so the ragtags weren't violating theft laws. But his memory scanner quickly came to Shabbat 7:2 which prohibited harvesting and threshing on the Sabbath. Here they were, a handful of men, strolling through a field, picking a little grain to eat, and they were about to be indicted for harvesting and threshing. It was an incident neither the onlookers nor Jesus would forget. The Pharisees and scribes had met Jesus earlier, and he had lodged

sideways in their digestive tracts from the very start. Like Snoopy and the Red Baron, it was obvious they would meet another day...undoubtedly another Sabbath Day.

Sure enough ...a second look at the files of this classic case and we see that it makes mention of another encounter – this one apparently staged by Jesus to make a deliberate point with his middle-class onlookers. The scene was the heart of their religious tradition – the synagogue – and the time was, of course, a Sabbath Day. Jesus had entered the synagogue to teach when he came upon a man whose right hand was withered. We are told that he had been forced to beg as a result of this affliction. The scribes and Pharisees were watching, their memory scanners poised and ready to call up the appropriate religious tenet in record time. Jesus knew their intent, and as he called the man to him he faced them squarely and asked, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?” Not waiting for an answer nor expecting one, he asked the man to stretch out his hand and it was healed. A need had been met, a man had been healed, but these very capable onlookers were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. What was happening? How could respectable and knowledgeable people come to this? MUGWUMPS. A classic case of Mugwumps.

Mugwumps are, in effect, Public Apathy Number One. The regrettable part of Mugwumps is what they can do to prevent human gifts and human capabilities from meeting human needs. Pharisees and scribes were potential dynamos for meeting human needs in their day. But this dynamic potential had been channeled into stifling, compulsive observance of religious ceremony and tradition. Like mounting a 400 cubic-inch V-8 engine on a roller skate, they had invested so much in so little. Jesus was saying to them, in effect, “You’ve missed the boat. You’ve given all your energies to rules and traditions, but you seem blind and deaf to needs.

But, thankfully, the Bible writers carefully did pass on to us the incidents and predicaments in which, without hesitation, Jesus made tough decisions, spoke out in startling ways, and took controversial actions in complicated circumstances, despite the fact that it was going to be seen by some as a lack of religious accountability on his part – maybe even seen as his sitting loose to the laws and statutes on which the Hebrew way of life was based.

Yes, I am thankful that they remembered to pass those kinds of occurrences on to us because it corrects a very wrong impression that the path to true spirituality, that to be Godly and to be a person of principle is to be unswerving, always consistent, and ambiguity-free. She KNOWS the truth and knows the whole truth. He has MADE UP HIS MIND once and for all so always “sticks to his guns.” RIGHT IS RIGHT and WRONG IS WRONG. It’s that simple.

The truth meanwhile is that the deeper the person is, the more the person understands, and the more about which he cares, the more he will have to struggle internally as he comes up against the fact that both good and evil are unfolding around him, inextricably entangled with each other. He will struggle to keep his wits about him as he encounters a life and world where both depravity and creativity share the same stage. She'll have to improvise a way to maintain her integrity in this world of seductive kinds of stupidity on the one hand, and tedious-and-exhausting kinds of responsibility on the other. If he keeps himself fully engaged and keeps his eyes and ears wide open to what all goes on in the life around him, his moral sense will sometimes take him in one direction while his own ethics pull him in a different direction. A person's strong, sincerely held convictions will sometimes go to war with his empathy – a particularly demanding internal dilemma. His imagination, his vision of what could and should come to be may end up flying squarely in the face of what is obviously practical and expedient. She may frequently discover that what is sensible, safe and prudent is nevertheless, appallingly lacking in meaning and still she is called to make a decision.

That's just a tiny snapshot of what one who is fully alive in this 21st century may be faced with as a thinking, reflecting, searching human being. It can moreover, leave you wondering whether the ambiguity that haunts you, the internal struggles that you have, the doubts that your mind keeps raising mean that there is something wrong with you; especially so when most people you know are able to shrug off anything more confusing than game scores, stock prices, film stars divorcing, and who seems to have had cosmetic surgery.

It takes a deeper-than-ordinary person to recognize and to deliberately embrace the holy kind of internal tension and the openness to ambiguity by which a human being becomes wise and large-spirited. They are seductive voices that implicitly promise to rid us of our confusion and ambivalence. The simplicity and peace that they offer requires only covering our ears, closing our eyes, and really “believing.” And when we are bone-weary of the conflicting claims, confusing issues, blamings and counter-accusations, violations and distortions the temptation to slam shut our minds and spirits to any further ambiguity can be very powerful. While a person may find a certain peace of mind in doing that to himself, it is NOT good. The peace of mind that one gets that way is cheap and is deadly because it short-circuits some of our best and highest qualities: ones like imagination, for example, and intuition, creativity, empathy.

The truth meanwhile is that our world and our life together are riddled with ambiguity. And to live fully and effectively in it, our personal principles, our values, and our convictions,

while absolutely essential, need always to be a work in progress, a living, responsive, growing edge of us. Obviously that would mean developing a tolerance for ambiguity.

It means that no matter how infuriatingly blurred and complex the issues and challenges becomes, resisting the temptation, to retreat behind dogmas, party lines, doctrines, and “canned positions.”

It requires not allowing embarrassment – fear of seeming wishy-washy – to keep one from changing one’s mind, from reversing his position.

It means embracing our convictions fervently but always and absolutely humbly.

Religiously it means staying in touch with what is actually an old Congregational precept. It’s the one that says that God always has yet more light to break forth for us.

Especially in our time this is important stuff. Throughout our human history-religious history in particular – there has been this temptation, one way or another, to unload the very thing about us that sets us apart from the lower forms of life. That is the capacity to hold within us, different forms of truth in tension: the moral imagination that keeps us asking ourselves questions like, “Yes, but is it humane?” and “Maybe so, but what about the matter of fairness? What will become of the ones who fall between the cracks – the exceptions?” or “What might I be missing here because my emotions or my self-interest are blinding me?” or “What would it really feel like to be in his/her/their shoes?” and a whole lot more of the embracings of the ambiguous in our experience.

Does that complicate things? Absolutely. Might I feel more serene if I opted for quick, simple answers? Probably. Am I not making myself controversial and irritating to others by continuing to probe and second-guess when they are perfectly certain that they know all that is needed to be known and believed? Quite likely.

Even so, the alternative is that of, over time, becoming a one-dimensional, spiritually shriveled, terminally shallow person. That is much too high a price to pay for cheap simplicity.

Mugwumps is a tendency that can visit any one of us. It’s doubtful we can avoid it, but it’s very important that we know it’s there. The Pharisees and scribes apparently were unaware of its presence and through the words of Christ we can see the tremendous waste that it was creating in their lives. We can be the victims of similar lack of awareness and similar waste.

Frequently as I have mentioned Mugwumps I have linked the word with tradition, ceremonial rules, and comfort. Certainly each of these has its place, and a very important place. Tradition and rules help give a necessary order, structure, and continuity. Without them we could be like leaves blowing aimlessly in a wind. They can lend us a sense of comfort, and I

doubt that any of us could function very efficiently without some comfort and assurance. But Christ continually reminds us that each has its subtle dangers -- dangers which claimed the human need sensitivity of the scribes and Pharisees and could threaten our sensitivity as well.

You may yet wonder where this hideous word, Mugwumps, came from, and I'll tell you in closing. It is a picture portrayal of the ultimate in human indifference -- someone sitting on a fence -- his mug on one side...his wump on the other.

There are several things wrong with that sitting position. You can only see to one side of the fence, and it can get too comfortable. Instead I would prefer to think of us as standing on the rail, walking it somewhat uncomfortably, and having to stay alert to that which is around us. With Christ's example and this awareness, we're equipped to cope with Mugwumps.