

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE




NO-FAULT MORALITY

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NO-FAULT MORALITY

No-fault automobile insurance appears to be the coming thing for the American motorist. Any measure that can cut costs and speed up payments to accident victims ought to have our blessing.

No-fault divorce laws are gradually replacing statutes that made it necessary to fix blame and determine a guilty and innocent party when a marriage went sour. This is a stride towards honesty, and we should be grateful for it.

But my subject today is not automobile insurance or divorce. My subject is America's drift into a "no-fault" morality as evidenced by reaction to the Army's case against Lt. William L. Calley.

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The Calley case made us overnight into a nation of moralists and jurists. Once the soldier from Columbus, Georgia was found guilty of murdering twenty-two civilians in My Lai voices cried, editorial ink flowed, politicians screamed, coalitions formed, people of every rank and file declared themselves.

The dominant mood expressed initially was one of outrage at the verdict. Twenty-two people dead, among them women and children, and millions rise up to proclaim, "We find no fault in him."

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What assumptions form the basis of this astounding reaction? One is the assumption that everyone's guilt is no one's guilt. Responsibility for Calley's atrocities rests on many shoulders, so the argument runs. Implicated are his superior officers, the government of the United States, and the citizens who put that government in power. Because the blame is so widely scattered one individual should not be punished. The attempt to equalize guilt tends to eliminate guilt.

Dean Francis Sayre of the Washington Cathedral was the most winsome spokesman for this point of view. He wrote, "Calley is all of us. He is every single citizen in our graceless land. . . Who, whether hawk or dove, military or civilian, is exempt from some share, some obedience or lazy acquiescence in the faceless slaughter, not only of human life but of almost all we have been wont to count as precious in this world." 1

"Calley is all of us." Potentially, yes, we are all Calleys, but not actually. It is true that anything any other man ever did I could do under similar opportunity and provocation. But "could do" and "did do" are not the same. History turns on the actual not the potential. "Calley is all of us." Is he now, indeed? Calley is not the brothers Berrigan. Calley is not the thousands of COs who have steadfastly refused to bear arms. Calley is not even all of his fellow soldiers in Vietnam, the overwhelming majority of whom would not knowingly open fire on women and children.

The upshot of such wooly thinking is to transform a murderer into a national hero. The gunner of My Lai becomes a likeable "fall guy!" Poor Rusty, we find no fault in him.

The second assumption at work here is that bad systems excuse bad conduct. This is the trap into which religious and political liberals are likely to fall. Admittedly and assuredly the war in Indo-China is a colossal misadventure. The way in which trainees for that war are taught borders on the barbaric. I am told by those who have been there that it is not fashionable in Vietnam to direct our men to "kill." Too many of them have been reared in the Judao-Christian tradition. They recall the sixth Commandment and react negatively to the thought of killing. So we attempt sanctification by semantics. Our boys are not told to "kill," they are told to "destroy" or "waste." To legitimize these commands the enemy is dehumanized and spoken of as "dinks," "gooks" and "VCs."

Last December a war crimes hearing was held in Washington, D.C. Among those testifying was Dr. Gordon

Livingston, a resident psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, who amazed the assembled guests with this prayer: "Help us, O Lord, to fulfill the standing order of this regiment. Give us the wisdom to find the bastards - and the strength to pile it on." 2 When pressed as to where this prayer came from he replied that he had learned it in 1968 as a regimental surgeon with the 11th Armored Cavalry, in Black Horse, Vietnam. It was known as the Prayer of the Body Count and was offered up by the Regimental Chaplain!

However diabolical the system, and it is more diabolical than most of us suspect, I contend that to lay the blame for human failure at the feet of the system is to abandon the Biblical view of man. The Bible offers a more hopeful view of man than this. It is of Freud and not of Scripture to believe that man is a helpless victim of social conditioning and inherited instincts.

Eric Hoffer was cutting through a maze of nonsense when he said, "There is no telling to what extremes of cruelty and ruthlessness a man will go when he is freed from the fears, hesitations, doubts and the vague stirrings of decency that go with individual judgment. When we lose our individual independence in the corporateness of a mass movement, we find a new freedom -- freedom to hate, bully, lie, torture, murder and betray without shame and remorse." 3

Granted, the conditioning to which Calley was exposed was severe and demonic. Still I cannot bring myself to believe that this man had no alternative but to squeeze the trigger. What of his residual humanity? It belongs not alone to the religious, but to people of ordinary decency to rise up and say "no" in the face of such an immoral command. It is a "cop-out" of the first order to assign blame to a faceless, impersonal abstraction like society and to say of Calley, "We find no fault in him."

The other assumption that I should like to deal with is this: Some situations are so bad that moral distinctions within them are unavailing and well-nigh impossible. Billy Graham was the herald of this unwisdom. His utterance on

My Lai, in my judgment, was his darkest day in print. Because he is taken by many to speak for Protestants in this country I should like publicly to disassociate myself, almost entirely, from his position. The celebrated evangelist said: "We are learning one thing -- that Sherman was right, 'War is hell.' I have never heard of a war where innocent people were not killed.

"We have all had our My Lais in one way or another, perhaps not with guns, but we have hurt others with a thoughtless word, an arrogant act or a selfish deed.

"When the religious leaders were about to stone the adulteress who had been convicted and tried Jesus said, 'Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.' If that were the law of the world today, never a stone would be thrown, for the Bible says, 'We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God.'" 4

Yes, Billy, we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. But we have not all sinned in the same way or to the same degree! And the differences involved matter much. There is no exegete or expositor of the New Testament that I have ever read who dared to suggest that Jesus' response to the woman in adultery was to be taken as an eternal dictum on justice. It is naive to a fault to infer that because Jesus forgave this woman and dismissed her accusers no judge should ever don his robe and preside at a bar of justice. To follow the evangelist's logic all the way would be to close down every courthouse in the country by nightfall.

Fundamentalism has always had trouble taking the relatively right seriously. But we had better begin to take the relatively right seriously - for that's the only kind of right most of us bump into through our lifetime. Of course war is hell. But even within that hell there are standards worth contending for. We do not believe that a Red Cross ambulance should be bombed. Or that a UN inspection team should be fired upon. Or that prisoners of war should be summarily killed. Or that civilians should be lined up, tossed into a pit and slain.

Justice deals with the probably right, the relatively right in a given situation. If we Christians are to be helpful in a less-than-perfect world we must learn to be fluent in two languages - love and justice. It does not belong to justice to say of Lt. Calley, "We find no fault in him."

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I have chosen to preach on the Calley case not to criticize but to clarify. I am not keen on finding or fixing blame in order to vindicate a theological perspective, although I agree with an observer who wrote in the "London Times" a while ago that "the doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian Faith,"5

I am keen about the subject because I believe that justice partakes of the divine order. That it is not ours to manipulate. That justice is a lot more than man-made house rules or organizational by-laws. That it has a durability, an eternal quality about it.

I have long since given up golf. It is sour grapes with me, I admit. The game was getting the better of me every time out. I confess though to remembering rounds of golf with friends who were exceedingly generous. If I shanked a shot or dubbed one they would say, "Shoot again. We won't count that one." Desperate that I was, I would. Then mutual grace would exceed all bounds when we finally arrived on the green. One man would be lying seventeen feet from the cup. His friend would say, "I'll give you yours if you'll give me mine." They would look around quickly to see if heaven were watching and say, "It's a deal!"

My friends, there are duffers all around this country who take mulligans on every hole and "gimmes" on every green and think they are playing golf. But the question that keeps surfacing is this: "Who speaks for par?" Is there not in a very real sense a "third" involved when I play golf with a friend? Is it altogether mine and his to determine how many strokes we will count. Does "mutual consent" in sexual perversity make the action right?

Because we might happen to feel that yellow-skinned people are inferior to white, and that the imperial role of the United States in Vietnam is beyond question - is it then our prerogative to free a man with innocent Asiatic blood on his hands? Can justice be domesticated? Only sheer sentiment would keep us from identifying mass murder for what it is.

Most of all I am keen on the subject because I see no way out for Calley or for us unless we recover a sense of accountability. "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (I John 1:8) The gates of mercy swing on the hinges of contrition. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (I John 1:9)

CLOSING PRAYER

O God of men and nations, whose will
for us is peace,
Have mercy upon us that we have
bungled things so badly and drenched
the earth in blood.

Keep us from succumbing to the notion
that we are helpless pawns on the
board of life.

Fill us with a sense of worth
and accountability and a steady
loyalty to truth and justice.

For Jesus' sake - and our own.

Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. The New York Times, April 5, 1971
2. Higgins, James, "Horror Takes The Stand,"
The Nation, p. 6, January 4, 1971
3. Richard Lingerman's review of White Terror, by
Allen W. Trelease, The New York Times, May 8, 1971
4. The New York Times, April 9, 1971
5. Fisher, Wallace, E., Can Man Hope To Be Human?
p. 22, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1971

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