

"BUT EVERYBODY'S DOING IT...."

INTRODUCTION

To a nation saturated with scandals and disturbed by deception, came one more shocking disclosure back in the late Summer, when the fourteen year old winner of this year's All-American Soapbox Derby was disqualified because of the use of an electro-magnetic cheating device in his car. The boy's uncle and guardian later acknowledged,

"I knew that this was a violation of the official derby rules, and I consider it now to be a serious mistake in judgement."

If only he could have stopped there, with a forthright admission of responsibility. But he had more to say, in effect seeking to shift the blame to a climate of acceptance of such cheating. He went on to say,

"Anyone participating in derby races with eyes and ears open would soon learn, as I did, that in order to get cars to Akron for the All-American Derby and to seek to win...the derby rules have been consistently and notoriously violated by some participants without censure or disqualification".

In other words, "a serious mistake in judgement", but "everybody's doing it..."

DEVELOPMENT

That kind of reasoning has a familiar ring to it. It is precisely what many people - from high officials in government to ordinary citizens across the land - are saying about the dirt and the deceit and the deception that we read about daily.

"Tragic....clearly wrong....but after all" (their argument goes), "that's politics....both parties have their full bag of dirty tricks, and previous administrations have been equally skilled in illegal wire-tapping and covert break-ins". "Wrong, yes; but still....everybody's doing it...."

Taking clear aim at that kind of argument, Bishop John Wesley Lord, formerly the Bishop in our nation's capital, was recently quoted as saying in a sermon,

"Nothing of this magnitude and significance has ever before darkened the pages of our national history, but even if the Watergate disclosures are 'par for the course' then it is a call for people who will place truth and righteousness above such abject, unpatriotic and unchristian thought and action".

This sermon begins then with a deep concern about the downward levelling influence of average morality upon events in Akron and Washington and so many other places, but it quickly comes closer to home than those places. For what we see there, we see here - in lives all about us - and sometimes, perchance, in our own lives. How easy it is to excuse our mistakes and mis-steps with a comfortable rationalization, "wrong, yes....but everybody's doing it".

If a person is driving down the NY State Thruway and his foot gets a bit too heavy on the gas until a State Trooper pulls him aside and gives him a ticket for speeding, how difficult it is to simply say, "You're right. I deserve it". How easy it is to say, "Why pick on me? I was only keeping up with the other cars. Look at those other cars zooming by; go after them!"

In far more serious ways, people tend to reflect an average morality. If a person becomes involved in short-cuts and kick-backs, cheating and padding in his work, he may feel occasional jabs of conscience, but when he assures himself that "everybody's doing it". Or, if a person becomes dependent upon alcohol, or delinquent in his marriage vows, or de-humanized in his concern for persons, he can always claim that the culture is to blame, and that he is simply reflecting the prevailing moral temperature.

Young people are often highly critical of the conformity and the moral mediocrity that they observe in adults, and yet young people, too, have their own peer pressures and crowd morality to contend with.

How difficult it was for any cadet at West Point to challenge the "silence treatment" imposed upon one of their corps, even after he had been officially acquitted by an honor court of any breach of regulations, simply because a combination of traditions and consensus decreed that he should be further humiliated. And how difficult it is for any youth of principle and character to withstand the "creed of the crowd" today with regard to drugs, sexual permissiveness, and sometimes disrespect for persons and property.

Any person of sensitive conscience knows something about the tension between personal morality and crowd morality. And with what attractive clothes the average morality can dress itself - words like freedom, independence, modern thinking. But, for young and old and many in between, the outcome of blending with an average morality is generally apt to be the same,

"Who seeks to be somebody
By trying to be like everybody,
Is at last a nobody".

THINKING ABOUT THE CHURCH

As I said earlier, today is Reformation Sunday. We think of Luther and of his call to the church of his day to set high standards, to reform its own life, to be willing to live above the average.

I especially wanted us to think about this concern of average morality this morning, for this Sunday is a day in the year to point out that one of the great reasons for the continued existence of this church or of any church is its steady reminder of another standard, another star to fix our lives upon, and its call to live above the average.

Luther was deeply influence by Paul's Letter to the Romans, and this is part of what Paul was saying to those early Christians in the scripture lesson:

"Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mold,
but let God remold your minds from within".

Or as another version has it,

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds".

The distinctive word of the church of Jesus Christ is that God has given us Jesus to lift people above the average of their time and their place. This is what He did as He moved through Palestine in the first century and this is what He has done in the on-going centuries and wide-spread countries ever since.

There's a parable-like story about a sculptor who worked for several months on a likeness of Abraham Lincoln. Every night a cleaning lady swept up the chips and watched the slow unfolding of this project. When the statue was finally finished, she complimented the work and then asked earnestly, "But tell me, how did you know that Mr. Lincoln was in that rock?"

JESUS AND PEOPLE

I think you can say the same thing about Jesus' relationship to people. He saw some pretty common, crude and blemished people, but he also saw some magnificent possibilities of God's design in those people and worked with them to bring the possible into the actual. It could be said of Jesus, too,

"Some men look at what is and ask 'why'. Others look at what might be and say, 'Why not?'"

I think one could ask Jesus the question that cleaning lady asked the sculptor, "How did you know that Peter, the steady disciple, was in that rough, burly and tempermental fisherman that you called from cleaning nets to discipleship? Or, how did you know that Mary Magdalene, finally more faithful than the disciples at the cross and tomb, was in that tarnished woman you encountered?"

And on across the year. How did He know that Saint Francis was in that rich young man about the town of Assisi? Or, how did He know that Kagawa, the Japanese Christian saint of the slums was in that illegitimate son of a Japanese war lord and a dancing girl? How did He know that Helen Keller, one of the spiritual giants of this century, was in that wild, rebellious girl, sentenced by illness to a life of total darkness and total silence?

And coming closer to our own lives, how did He know what makings of goodness and influence were in some of our private saints, unheralded as far as the world was concerned, but unsurpassed as far as we were concerned in their demonstration that the Christian life is not something of an impossible dream, but a great and glorious reality. All of us have known lives that could so easily have stayed at an average or below average level of morality, of attitudes and actions, but which instead have been transformed into shining lives that have been considerably above the average.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

It is this fact - still evident in our world today - that provides us with hope as I think of the future of this land. Granted.....there hasn't been much that's hopeful in the news that confronts us now-a-days. Each day brings a new crisis. Somebody quipped earlier this week that the only hope that he found in the news was in the weather report, for at least the forecaster held out the hope that there will be a tomorrow.

But the real, solid hope on the horizon is to be found in some people who are enabled to live above the average. And here and there are those persons in whom the Christian interpretation of life is visible, and who consequently will not "let the world squeeze them into its own mold".

In the face of business and political pressures, there are still persons of integrity and conscience who cannot be bought and who "live above the fog in public duty and private thinking". In the face of crowd pressures, there are young people of deepening dependability in choosing the "hard right against the easy wrong". In the face of pressures upon homes to fold or to compromise values, there are families whose members deeply love each other as they love no one else,

and work out their problems in love and trust. In the face of pressures of personal troubles and crises, there are persons of strong hope and great courage - all about us, if we have eyes to see, not only in the church, but in our common ways, great examples of people who do choose to live above the average.

THE CALL TO LIVE ABOVE THE AVERAGE

A Christian, I believe, responds to the call to live above the average, because he has encountered the love of God in Jesus Christ, has seen what he can become as a person and has been given something of the power to move in that direction. What a compass is to a sailor, what ~~"Greenwich time" is to our clocks~~, what the "keynote" is to the singer, so is Jesus Christ to the life of a man. He ~~will never let us dottle down at some dead level of average respectability, or take refuge in the old excuse, -"But everybody's doing it...."~~

He asks us still, "What do ye more than others?" He shows us our better possibilities, and He works with us to turn the dream to the deed.

There's a story that has to do with the College of William and Mary in Virginia after the Civil War. Closed and damaged during the War, the college tried to re-open, but then went through another seven year period in which all classes were suspended. But a history of the college contains these sentences:

"Every morning during those seven barren years, President Ewell rang the chapel bell. There were no students; the faculty had disappeared; and rain seeped through the leaky roofs of the desolate buildings. But President Ewell still rang the bell".

That appeals to me, because it is after all the story of the Christian Church across the centuries. In good times and in bad, in persecution and popularity, the Church has kept ringing the bell of the Gospel of Christ, reminding us of higher standards.....to turn the glorious dream into the concrete deed. And it will continue to do so. Part of that reminder of the bell is in that persistent summons of Paul, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your mind from within".

PRAYER Grant, O God, that neither the longing to be liked, nor the need to be accepted, nor the desire to be popular or prosperous may divert us from our calling.

Through Jesus Christ, give us a clear view of what is right and what is possible both in our personal lives and in the life of our land, and then enable our witness to be above the average. In that name which is above every name, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen