

Justice in Love

sermon digest

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Romans 13:8-14

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The news media has been busy this month. Immediately following Hurricane Sandy and the election of a president, we have been subjected to yet another scandal in political high places. I won't bore you with the published details of the David Petraeus affair and public announcement, and our judgment calls should not add to the burden of guilt on the parties involved or to the difficulty of reconciliation in the marriages which have been compromised. For me, the most significant factor in the news cycle has been the business-as-usual approach to scandal. Everyone seems ready to compare the matter with the bad behavior of presidents with a so-what? assessment of the matter. Susan Milligan in *U.S. News* offered the standing judgment: "Why is anything involving sex considered so outrageous? Why is the Petraeus-Broadwell affair anybody's business but theirs (and their spouses)?" The answer? The refrain repeated by political pundits is that the problem is not about marriage, sexual misconduct, or morality. National security is the issue that strangely applies to CIA directors, but not to presidents.

The sexual revolution has arrived again in Washington. For folks who value ethical standards of behavior, this is indeed a big deal. Why do people in high places assume that they have a right to live by different standards than the rest of society? Is temptation greater at the top? What is the sexual attraction of power that seems always to be in the mix of sexual scandal? Perhaps everyone ought to be intent on avoiding places of power and influence. Most important, is there an ethical principle that should guide sexual behavior for all of us, regardless of our place or station in life and regardless of our sexual identity? I suppose that we should not assume in a secular context that Christian values ought to prevail, but a Christian ethic ought to be reasonable enough to embrace all of humanity.

"Love God, and do as you please." Margaret Farley's book on the ethics of human sexuality has the catchy title *Just Love*. The two words really drive to the center of the subject as Farley attempts to get to the foundations of a Christian ethic for the expression of human sexuality. She treats the most intimate dimension of human relationship, our sexuality, as an expression of love, and she defines love within the bounds of justice. Words like faithfulness, commitment, fairness, mutuality, and covenant seem to fall naturally into place in consideration of the bond of love we have in marriage. The book is surprising in many ways. Farley is a Roman Catholic nun committed to vows of celibacy. Anyone who reads must wonder as I did how a celibate nun can speak to a subject so remote from her experience. However, the reaction from the Vatican is indicative of the precision and insight of the author and her refusal to treat with medieval taboos a subject so central to human existence.

However, the issue of sexual misconduct is not the private domain of secular leaders. The Christian ministry has long been subject to the same temptations that fall to presidents and CIA directors. We need only cite the pedophile scandals in the Roman Catholic priesthood, or the 2004 incident of sexual misconduct that led to the resignation of National Association of Evangelicals president Ted Haggard, or we might still remember the 1988 Jimmy Swaggart expose' involving prostitutes in New Orleans.

Last week we attended the funeral of a dear friend and seminary professor in the church we served for fourteen years. When we moved to the church in 1974, we were faced with a problem of the sexual misconduct of two pastors and a minister's wife dating back to the early 1950's. I met with the interim pastor Old Testament professor Page Kelly at the seminary to ask if I should run for my life, or my marriage. Dr. Kelly recounted the lurid details of the incident that he had observed and then noted that if a young man, such as I was in 1974, could not live with self-discipline in the ministry he should not accept the pastorate of this church. In the following years, we struggled with the continued fallout from these incidents, the bad example adults had set for our children, and the scars that were left to be observed by the secular community.

I recall hearing Wayne Oates bemoan the fact that sexual sins in the church seem to be treated differently. He stressed the possibility of forgiveness and change in all people along with the fact that all of us live with the same temptations. We need not claim the role of righteous judge in order to call ourselves to live by higher standards than the secular world.

When Jesus was asked about the great commandment in the Law, he cited the *shema Israel* and the golden rule, love for God and love for neighbor as the basic principle for Christian behavior. We have adopted the principle from the Gospels for our Grace Covenant. This word of Christ was not so unique. A Gentile asked Rabbi Hillel if he could explain the Torah while standing on one foot. The rabbi replied with the negative form of the Golden Rule: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole

Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.” Some four centuries later, Augustine summed up the Christian ethic in the simple declaration: “Love God, and do as you please.” The famous bishop was anything but lax about human behavior, but, like Christ, he viewed love for God as a guiding principle that provides appropriate boundaries. If your love for God is real, you will not abuse your freedom of choice by abusing others.

The principle of radical love is derived from the traditional teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. Jesus laid down the principle of love for neighbor as the boundary to Christian behavior even to the extreme of loving one’s enemies. As Paul came to the ethical “therefore” of his epistle to Roman Christians, he summed up the commandments in the rule “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The context of Paul’s statement was the political situation of Rome, the role of government in human affairs. He was concerned with the establishment of justice for all in the secular world as he came to the guiding principle of Christian love. Love and justice are not alien concerns for someone who is seeking the good life. Justice is basic to authentic love. Christian love, whether in marriage, friendship, or with enemies, is concerned for the other’s welfare.

Christian love is marked by justice. Perhaps love is the problem. Farley associates sexual behavior with Christian love as the guiding principle for justice. Obviously, all forms of love are not sexual in nature. It is certainly possible to love the neighbor as oneself without intimate involvement in the neighbor’s life or the violation of one’s commitment in marriage. However, there is not place for sexual intimacy without love and respect for all of the people surrounding your relationship. Perhaps we are addressing the wrong problems here. If love is the problem, we need to understand the meaning of love.

Grady Nutt left a position in seminary administration for show business in stand-up comedy. He became a regular on “Hee-Haw” as the Prime Minister of Humor, telling funny stories that he had heard and lived about life in the ministry. For example, he cited the case of the pastor who moved so often that every time a pickup truck pulled into the pastor’s driveway the chickens laid down and crossed their feet to be tied for the next move. About a year before his untimely death in 1981, NBC ran a pilot episode of “The Grady Nutt Show” about the trials of a young minister named Grady Williams. The show revolved around his preparation for the funeral of the town drunk, known for his frequent misconduct with women of the evening. Every pastor who has been in the situation could sympathize with Grady’s struggle to frame a message that tried to find something of worth in the eulogy of a bad man. The town knew his meaning when he spoke of how the town drunk was filled with spirit, and they knowingly nodded when he referred to the way the man just “loooooooved everybody.” Of course, the problem was with the understanding of love.

When Paul called for Christians in the secular city of Rome to live up to the principles of life found in Christ, he spoke of love as treating the neighbor like you want to be treated. That is justice. He cites the Hippocratic Oath, “do no harm”; “Love does no wrong to a neighbor.”

The negative side of the Golden Rule found in Hillel and in Paul is valid when one considers the damage we do to one another when we violate justice in love. The pain inflicted within marriage or family is far greater than any suffering that might come from an attack by an enemy or a natural disaster or illness. The emotional pain of violated love is the core of moral failure.

In his Confessions, St. Augustine’s Christian conversion came at age thirty-two. He heard a child’s voice calling for him to read Paul’s counsel to the Roman Church (13:13-14): “¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” Augustine saw himself in the mirror of Paul’s denunciation of the secular world of Roman life. In his youth, Augustine had sowed wild oats. At age seventeen, he fathered a son and named the boy Adeodatus, “gift of God.” But his youthful misconduct never faded from his memory. Although he never married, he continued to care for his son and common law spouse after entering the priesthood.

A Christian ethic calls for a forward view of life. Paul looks to the completion of God’s creation in the end time, “the day is near.” Some have called this an interim ethic. Tom Long sees Paul’s ethical guide as a description of “the radical lifestyle of a community that lives in a groaning, decaying world but sees clearly and confidently the coming victory of God (*Interpretation*, Vol 58, No. 3, p. 274).” Long recalls the movie “Big Fish” in which three boys dared to enter the house of the town witch. According to legend, anyone who gazed into her blind eye would see the day of his/her death. Two of the boys were terrified by the vision, but one found freedom to live toward the day of his death. Nothing else in life could shake him because he

had seen the end. That is Paul's vision. We live not just for today, its pleasures, and temptations. We live toward the day when God is all and in all.