

Feasting on the Fruit of the Ethics Tree

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Our Scripture Lesson is taken from the first three chapters of Genesis:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was without form, and void, and darkness covered the face of the deep. . . .

Then God said 'Let there be light'---and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. . .

And God said 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. . . . And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants . . . and fruit trees of every kind. . . ' And it was so. . . . And God saw that it was good.

And God said 'Let there be lights in the sky . . . the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night, and the stars.' . . . And God saw that it was good.

And God said 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of creatures, and let birds fly above the earth . . . ' . . . And God saw that it was good.

And God said 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind. . . ' And it was so. . . . And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness' . . . So God created humankind in his image . . . male and female he created them. God blessed them and spoke to them . . .

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. . . .

And the Lord planted a garden in Eden . . . Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food---

the tree of life also in the midst of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. . .

And the Lord God commanded. . . 'You are free to eat of any tree in the garden

---but you must not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die'.....

Then the Lord God said 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner' . . . And the man and woman were both naked and were not ashamed. . .

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say that you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?"

The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden but God said 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"

But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the

tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. . . .

Then the Lord God said, 'See, they have become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, they might reach out and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever'----therefore the Lord sent them forth from the garden of Eden.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God).

It is a great honor to be standing before you as the very first Carl I. Lindberg Professor of Applied Ethics at North Park University.

Actually, I already tried out my new title this past Friday at the University of Washington School of Business where I gave a lecture at a Colloquium on Business and Technology. Maybe it was because the speaker who preceded me was from Boeing, but my audience thought at first that I was the "Charles Lindbergh" professor; I had to explain that actually my title was the "Carl Lindberg Professor," named after a great man who, in my judgment, soared even higher in the heavens than had Charles.

I guess I should add that I also had to clarify that North Park University---not Northwestern University---is now where the action is in the Chicago area.

But I was proud then, and I am honored now, to be the Carl Lindberg Professor at North Park. I want to salute the generous and visionary souls who have contributed this magnificent endowment. As we prepare to enter the next millennium, I believe North Park University is positioned to make a great and unique contribution to higher education in North America; this endowment will go far in enabling North Park to excel for decades to come.

As a topic central to human life and relationships, ethics is as old as the creation, where, as our reading from Genesis makes plain, God is creating and identifying things as "good" and, in one specific case, "not good." There is an ethics tree at the center of God's garden---a tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

As a distinct philosophical discipline, ethics goes back all the way to Socrates and Plato. Just in the past thirty years, applied ethics has become a more or less distinct area, or set of areas of study. Actually, it is curious that we have had to add the term "applied" to ethics; of what possible interest is "unapplied" ethics? Personally, I was drawn to the study of ethics thirty years ago precisely because I wanted to explore the practical application of Christian values and convictions to the messy dilemmas of everyday life, work, and politics.

In our contemporary context, ethics, especially applied ethics, has become a "growth industry." Everywhere in education and in the marketplace, it seems, we are asking about ethics and morality, about values, about right and wrong, and good and evil. Multitudes, it seems, are gathered around the "ethics tree"---feasting on the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If *feasting* is too strong a word, we are at least trying to stave off our moral hunger by reaching for its fruit.

Why is there this great interest in ethics today? On the one hand, it is because we are faced with a long and growing list of ethical quandaries, never before encountered by our forbearers. Genetic research, biotechnology, cloning, and the like, raise issues we have not faced before. Privacy, confidentiality, intellectual property rights, and other information and communication issues have a new and ethically-troubling aspect to them. Advanced technology and globalized business and politics raise the stakes and the potential for serious harm as well as good. In short, our ethics agenda is packed as never before with extraordinarily complex and difficult challenges, coming at us with a speed and unrelieved intensity that imperils their wise resolution.

On the other hand, our traditional communities of moral discernment are in disarray, unprepared to handle very well these new ethical challenges. The older moral wisdom of the church is not being effectively passed on, to say nothing of a creative and faithful new formulation of that wisdom. Meanwhile our cultural and moral diversity grows, leaving us wondering if we have any common moral ground at all. Our situation is a little like that of the Chicago Bears: the opposition is coming at us with powerful and unprecedented new challenges---these would be difficult enough to handle in their own right but everything is made worse by the fact that we are in a state of leaderless confusion.

We are very good in our culture at pursuing more goods---but we are lousy at pursuing the good. We proclaim endlessly our rights---but we don't know how to proclaim what is right. A culture that is consumed with interest in consumer goods and in individual rights, but doesn't know what is ethically good and right, is a culture in trouble. It is a culture that will only be restrained by laws---and litigation is a terrible substitute for moral persuasion.

Recently, for example, a Charlotte, North Carolina man, having purchased a case of rare, very expensive cigars, insured them against---get this---fire. Within a month, having smoked his entire stockpile of fabulous cigars, and having yet to make a single premium payment on the policy, the man filed a claim against the insurance company. In his claim, the man stated that he had lost the cigars in "a series of small fires."

The insurance company refused to pay, citing the obvious reason that the man had consumed the cigars in the normal fashion. The man sued . . . and won! In delivering his ruling the judge stated that since the man held a policy from the company in which it had warranted that the cigars were insurable, and also guaranteed that it would insure the cigars against fire, without defining what it considered to be "unacceptable fire," it was obligated to compensate the insured for his loss. Rather than endure a

lengthy and costly appeal process, the insurance company accepted the judge's ruling and paid the man \$15,000 for the rare cigars he lost in "the fires."

After the man cashed the check, however, the insurance company had him arrested . . . on 24 counts of arson! With his own insurance claim and testimony from the previous case being used as evidence against him, the man was convicted of intentionally burning the rare cigars and sentenced to 24 consecutive one-year terms!

Now this is a rather absurd case of appealing to the law in the absence of common sense and any moral guidance! But it points to a clear trend in our society to rely on the laws and the courts to decide what is and is not acceptable behavior---since we are ethically impotent. All too often, companies must be forced by the law to stop polluting the environment or exploiting employees or consumers---because they lack an ethical corporate mission and culture. Even our much-publicized concern over sexual harassment is driven far more by the fear of being sued than by a moral commitment to the safety or dignity of workers.

It is, thus, extremely important for us to participate in the renewed interest in ethics in higher education and in the marketplace.

Now there are actually two different ways to approach ethics. One way is the way of the ethics tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Much of the history as well as the contemporary character of ethics is a direct and specific continuation of what Eve and Adam began in the garden of Eden. The fruit of the ethics tree had a practical attraction---it was clearly "good for" something. It also had an aesthetic attraction---it was "a delight to the eyes." And it had a philosophical attraction---it was "desirable to make one wise." The study of ethics still has these three attractions: it meets practical needs, it gratifies our aesthetic sense (as Plato would say, the Good is also the Beautiful), and it responds to our philosophical desire to know and to understand.

It is important to notice in the Genesis account that it was God who made the ethics tree---the Devil didn't make this tree. And in the aftermath of the fall, God says "See they have become like one of us, knowing good and evil." In an important sense, then, the enterprise of ethics, of feasting on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, involves a quest for something substantial, and real, and beautiful, and practical, and true. Perhaps this is partly what St. Paul meant when he wrote to the Romans that the law of God is written on the heart. Perhaps this is why Peter and Paul and others could appropriate some of the vocabulary and the concepts of classical, even pagan, moral philosophy and teaching. Perhaps this is why it is sometimes gratifying and illuminating and helpful to study the ethical theories of Immanuel Kant, David Hume, John Stuart Mill, Mohandas Ghandi, or Carol Gilligan. This is the fruit not of an illusion but of an ethics tree created by God.

Pascal has often been quoted as saying that "there is a God-shaped vacuum in every human heart." We are born, in other words, to be in relation with God and we must try to find something to fill and to fit that God-space in our lives. My own corollary to Pascal's statement is that "there is an ethics-shaped vacuum in every human heart." That is, we are born to know and do the good and the right and somehow we have to find a morality to fill that need. Working from the ethics tree, that is from the history of ethical thought and from our daily experiences of good and evil, we try to find or create an ethics for ourselves and our communities.

And still, there is something missing in the philosophical approach to ethics. There was a much better way to do ethics than to seize the fruit of the ethics tree. The better way is to maintain the relationship to God, to listen for his identification of what is good and not good. This is the ethics of divine revelation---not the ethics of autonomous human reason, volition, or feelings. It is the ethics of faithful relationship---not the ethics of human self-assertion and hubris. It is the ethics that begins by saying "You are God and you are the Good"---instead of saying "we will be like gods, possessing and controlling our own knowledge and experience of good and evil."

The ethics of God is distinctive in several ways:

(1) it is an ethics that concentrates on the good, on pursuing the good, on overcoming evil with good. There is a radical imbalance here: the ethics of God is about promoting the good, not about reciprocity and balancing good and evil. It is an ethics without shame, without hiddenness, an ethics of innocent freedom in pursuit of God's goodness. It is an ethics of the Word that creates---not of the word that accuses, blames, and alienates.

(2) it is an ethics for the whole community of man and woman, made in the image and likeness of God. Together they stand before God and together they pursue the good. It is not an ethics in which the particularities of gender or race or age or nationality or economic class are allowed to trump the word of the one God and then alienate one person or group from another.

(3) it is an ethics that sets temporal and spatial limits within which our human freedom and creativity can truly flourish. In this ethic there is a time to rest---not just an uncontrolled frenzy of working. In this ethic there is a place that shall not be invaded, a tree that could be harvested but must not be---not just an uncontrolled exploitation of everywhere.

(4) it is an ethics of mission control---not just an ethics of damage control. The mission God gives is to live and to be creatively for life, to be fruitful and multiply, to have and raise the next generations, to care for the earth as stewards of something that belongs to God and is for all his creatures.

(5) it is an ethics not merely of an abstract knowing of good and evil, but of a doing of the good empowered by God and assisted by our partners. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve introduced us to the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but didn't get us connected to the tree of the performance of good.

We live in a world in which there are these two approaches to ethics: one, a theological ethics of God's Word, the other a humanistic ethics of an independent knowledge of good and evil.

The humanistic approach of seizing the fruit of the ethics tree can put us in touch with something helpful and wise. But it is also finally inadequate. Our quest to know good and evil is clouded by the finitude as well as the corruption of our minds. And our quest to do the good is frustrated by our selfishness and weakness of will.

Nevertheless, we cannot go back to Eden. We cannot somehow go back and re-hang the fruit on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That fruit is now in our hands and we have been banned from the garden of innocence. Nor is it our task to grab the ethics fruit out of our neighbors' hands and throw it on the ground leaving them with nothing.

Even outside of Eden God still speaks and acts and declares the good. We still have a word from God on what is good. The ethical task of the people of God is not to smash the fruit of the ethics tree but to add the Word of God to the moral menu of our world.

If our world holds forth autonomy and individual self-determination as the ultimate moral values---we must find a way to proclaim the richer texture of individuality and community.

If our world defines justice in terms of rights alone---we must speak of responsibilities and relationships, of wholeness and mercy and integrity.

If our world defends a reductionist view of people as producers and consumers---we must speak of people as meaning-makers and participants in history, as persons made in the image and likeness of God.

If our world says "first of all do no harm"---we must add "let us also do what heals and helps."

If our world says we should do what results in the greatest good for the greatest number (the moral principle of utilitarianism)---we must speak for the irreducible value of those who will not be found among the greatest number, that is, for minorities.

If our world says that our natural environment has economic value that should be efficiently used---we must speak also for the intrinsic value of natural beauty.

If our world says that we have an obligation to do our best for our employer's financial bottom line---we must also speak for the bottom line of distant peoples and future generations.

The ethics of God is an ethics that is holistic and far-sighted, it is deep and it is inclusive.

Our calling is not to take over the earth but to salt the earth, not to rule the world but to light the world. Our calling is not to damn the "moral fast food" of our culture but to offer the "gourmet moral banquet" of the kingdom.

There are, no doubt, aspects of our contemporary moral climate that are distressing and regrettable. However, this is also a time of great challenges in which many are looking for ethical insights from any source that might be helpful. Today's pluralism and diversity mean that there is more space and greater freedom today to articulate Christian perspectives than in many years.

To respond to this time of opportunity requires us to be committed to an ethics that is applied. To respond effectively and faithfully requires us to be committed to an ethics that is also deep. There is a deeper ethics than that of the ethics tree; it is the ethics of the Creator of the ethics tree. It is my prayer that I, and my successors in the Carl I. Lindberg Chair of Applied Ethics, will be on the forefront of such a quest for a deep as well as applied ethics.