

Pentecost 17 - September 27, 2009  
Holy Trinity Church, Buffalo, NY  
The Rev. John A. Buerk

## THE MIND AND MORALS

There were many exceptional speakers at Chautauqua Institution this summer. They included Supreme Court Justice Kennedy and Ken Burns.

David McCullough shared his latest work on the French-American connection – and he pointed out the importance of seeing the past as relevant to the present. He also emphasized that the past – in a sense – is the present. He said that Jefferson and Washington didn't walk around Virginia saying, "Isn't it fun living here in the past!"

Eli Wiesel, the famous Holocaust survivor who wrote the poignant book, **NIGHT**, spoke. He shared some remarkable insights about morality and life. He made reference to the story of Cain and Abel, and noted that the essence of this story of one brother killing another is that when you kill anyone, you kill your brother.

The theme of one week was, "What Makes Us Moral?" And a corollary question was, "Where do humans see themselves in the grand scheme of creation?"

For much of recorded history, humans saw themselves as being at the center of the universe. The sun, the stars the moon and the planets revolved around the earth and humans were the focal point of it all. And this worked pretty well until 500 years ago when Copernicus came along and challenged that assumption. And what a shock that was for the human race. All of a sudden the universe didn't revolve around us – humans were only a small part of the universe, and the earth wasn't the center of the universe, the sun was.

But humans are resilient and they conceded the point. They still reasoned that even if we weren't the center of the universe we were still the essence of all creation. After all, didn't God make man first? Humans were still at the top of the "food chain". And then 200 years ago Darwin came along and pointed out that it doesn't look like we came first. We have lots of evidence that life in some form has been around a very long time – about a million years - and Homo sapiens are relatively late in coming. In fact, we are even late in the primate scheme of evolution.

What a blow – but again – humans are resilient. O.K. – so we aren't the first of all creation, but at least we can think for ourselves. At least we are the captains' of our own souls!

And then – a hundred years ago - came Sigmund Freud. He pointed out that humans are very complex creatures and our minds are subject to a lot of influences. In fact, about eighty percent of our decisions and behavior are not rational, but subconscious. You may have convinced yourself that you are neat because you thought it through and realized that neat is better than messy – you can find things easier and you feel better about yourself if your life is organized – and your mother can come over to visit whenever she wants to and you don't need to panic. But, Freud pointed out, that the real reason you are neat is because you were toilet trained too early.

So here we are – human beings – a little unsure of where we stand in the universe – discovering that a lot of animals can do things better than we can – realizing that animals don't go around wantonly killing each other like humans do and then realizing that we humans aren't in as much control of our lives and our values as we thought we were.

And, of course, this brings to the fore the question of our morality because who we are determines what our value system is. Where does it come from?

Many immediately turn to the Ten Commandments for proper behavioral norms. And the Commandments work to a certain extent because they are basic rules for civilization. The Commandments are also pretty close to the Code of Hummerabi that was the moral basis for the Babylonians with whom the Hebrews lived for many years. But the Ten Commandments don't cover everything. They don't address the problem of drinking too much, or air pollution, or the proliferation of atomic bombs.

Unfortunately, however, many naively think that if you put the Commandments up in enough places people will behave differently. But, in case you haven't noticed, that doesn't work.

People don't behave because they are told to – they usually behave because it is in their best interest to do so – sometimes in the short run, and sometimes in the long run. In the short run you might obey the speed limit because you have noticed that there was a radar trap on the road you're on. But on a four-lane highway you let loose a little – or maybe a lot depending - on you age and your car and who is riding with you.

But again, different times produce different criteria for responsible behavior. For instance, when it comes to moral behavior there used to be a limerick that describes the limits of intimacy - it went:

*There was a young woman named Mild,  
who kept herself undefiled,  
by thinking of Jesus, and social disease,  
and the fear of having a child.*

That advice, however, is dated - today, many social diseases can be treated, and birth control is available, and I have a feeling that when vigorous young people with an early onset of hormones get revved up, they don't think about Moses or Jesus, and certainly they are not thinking about the Virgin Mary.

I've been told that in times past there were honorable men in business who were conscientious about their responsibilities to take care of other people's trust funds. If you were an investment counselor, you could be trusted. You did your homework. And then came Madoff, and company.

So, the rules don't seem to work – and they certainly don't if they are not enforced. And add to this the whole issue of the laws themselves because being “law-abiding” does not make a person moral. The laws you obey must be moral! This point was paramount in the Nuremberg trials. Too many people who did horrific things said that they were only obeying orders – the law of the land.

So what is the bottom line for behavior and morality? Well, it seems to me that it is the survival of the community. If you steal another man's food, his family goes hungry. If you commit adultery, you steal another man's family. If you murder, you rob someone of a person they love.

The community needs to have limits in order for it to survive. But one of the big problems today is that communities are hard to come by. To talk about a global community almost means that anything goes.

And so we are left with too much individual behavior. And that can be self-deceptive. There is a story about a lawyer going through a stop sign. He soon finds a police car in back of him with lights flashing. He thinks to himself that he should be able to talk his way out of this – after all he is well educated and really smart.

The officer approaches his car and says, “Sir, you didn’t stop for that stop sign back there”. The lawyer explains that he did slow down and wasn’t the purpose of the sign to help the flow of traffic and no one was coming – so did it really matter if he stopped or just slowed down?

The officer asked him to get out of the car, and he started to hit him with his club and asking him if he wanted him to slow down or stop?

Some years ago I brought together several faculty members at U/B to meet with my former philosophy teacher from Union College who was a guest lecturer at Canisius College. In the course of the conversation the subject of morality came up. One faculty member – a very good man who was also our resident atheist – said there were no fixed moral principles – everything was relative. But another member of the philosophy department who was a survivor of the holocaust said that his colleague was wrong – there were some basic principles that were universal and one of them was that you should not harm children.

And in that light we should remember that we are all God’s children. The bottom line for morals is that we are all God’s children – and we are responsible to see that no harm comes to the children of God.

And don’t forget that Jesus said, if we loved him we would keep his commandments, and he said that all the commandments were represented in these two –

**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and all your mind.**

**And the second was to love your neighbor as yourself.**

And that is where morality begins and ends.