

The Dark Side of Humanity – a Lutheran Take, a Pastoral Caution and Counsel

The following article is written by Paul Goetting. It was written originally for this July edition of THE LUTHERAN, but a time dead-line prevented it from being printed. Instead, it is appearing on THE LUTHERAN's Web Site. Dave Miller, THE LUTHERAN editor, has granted permission that it be posted here also. Ed Schroeder and Paul have been friends, very close, since their student days at Concordia, St. Louis, then as classmates, later as colleagues on the faculty at Concordia and Seminex. They have remained in close contact through these many years. Like Ed, Paul has traveled extensively abroad on behalf of the church. In addition to trying to write a book, he is serving in his eighth Interim ministry since retirement.

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Enjoy!

Robin Morgan

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The nation has stood in shame; shocked at scenes of atrocities

conducted and orchestrated by Americans. The pictures from Abu Ghraib prison are repugnant. Politicians scramble for superlatives to express their disgust. Many insist the prison behavior is not representative of Americans. Only a few among us are not surprised at what has been exposed.

The Jim Lehrer NEWS HOUR (Tuesday, May 11) featured four distinguished scholars in an interview, each speaking to the dark side of humanity. They were not surprised. They seemed to speak in unison, in effect, in every person you'll find a good and bad side. Every human is capable of succumbing to unanticipated, deplorable behavior when subjected to life in certain unique and particular conditions – especially where controls are absent.

At this moment, many of us are quick to insist “I would never allow myself to do that.”

Wait a moment; look again at a Lutheran understanding of our fallen condition, how radical evil within one can be a serious threat to each of us and to others, even within the local congregation, in fact, the Christian home. Let's also explore the role of God's law embedded within creation, and our hope through it all in the Gospel of Christ.

But first let's listen carefully to four scholars on the News Hour panel. They are keen observers of human nature in God's worldly Kingdom, the Kingdom on the left, as called by Luther. Dr. Lifton, Harvard psychiatrist, speaks first. His work centered on extensive interviews of Vietnam soldiers – those who were guilty of vicious atrocities. His conclusion: these men were persons displaying two sides. Back home they were known to be persons of quality. Unanticipated behavior so easily erupts when placed in what he calls an “atrocious producing situation,” often experienced in Vietnam. Indeed,

given similar situations in Abu Ghraib prison, there are no surprises that deplorable behavior would erupt. Let there be no question: each individual is still responsible for one's acts.

Dr. Zimbardo, Stamford psychologist, continues the point. He is known for his research on prison behavior, particularly a simulated experiment at Stamford University. Students were placed into a prison; some were identified as prisoners; others were prison guards. The professor was the prison superintendent. The students were carefully selected as persons of quality. Their instructions: absolutely no violence. Indeed, acts of violence were not seen while the warden was present. At night, the warden went to a separate room and slept. In those dark hours the guards became guilty of behavior strikingly uncharacteristic of their known campus character. As guards they displayed behavior toward their charges nearly as disgraceful as that at Abu Ghraib. They clearly acted without accountability – and for the moment.

Dr. Jan Wink, the panel historian was able to recite – what most of us do not like to read in American history – those shameful atrocities carried out by seemingly law abiding citizens. Remember the South prior to Civil Rights legislation. Perhaps most memorable and disturbing are those pictures made into post cards and mailed as souvenirs, showing a crowd of people, young and old, well-dressed, laughing and smiling as at a circus, only in these cases the focus was on a black man, hanging from a telephone post – a lynching!. On the following Sunday these white southern Christians would be in their churches, If you sat beside them in their living room (unknowing of the atrocities), you might easily find much to admire.

Col. Grossman, Professor, West Point, related that the US military is very cognoscenti of the capability of any soldier

committing an atrocity in certain combat conditions. For that reason he emphasized our military's insistence on strict discipline and accountability. Another important point he made – self-interest. It is assumed in any war, some of our own soldiers will also be taken captive. For this reason our military demands that those whom we capture and interrogate must be treated fairly and decently. We do not want to give the enemy any excuse for mis-treating our own when captured. Enlightened self-interest underlies most international treaties, especially evident in the Geneva Accords. As a result of Abu Ghraib our soldiers in the field understandably feel threatened by the possible reversal of roles should one be captured. This factor underlies the horror of what our nation's leadership recognize in the exposures, and its effect on the world scene, especially among Muslim people.

For Luther sin is always self-serving. In this earthly kingdom, God uses the drive of self-interest as an instrument for justice. However, God's law embedded in creation insists on our doing more: that we do good, live decently, see visions of life beyond the self, see the beautiful, avoid the ugly. President Kennedy's inaugural call: "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country" challenged us to go beyond the cynical; his call energized countless persons to enter politics and volunteer services to achieve noble ends. There followed government programs giving substance to the call – the Peace Corps, Head Start, and many others. Because our nation's history has at times held out such noble challenges, men and women became honorable as they sacrificed to achieve such goals. So, given one side of our nation's history, we can say Abu Ghraib is not expressive of American values. And yet in all honesty we must also say Abu Ghraib is expressive of a dark dimension of our history which we dare not sweep under the rug.

Here in this earthly kingdom the greatest gift for movement

from chaos to a better life is reason, and as Luther could say in his Small Catechism, First Article: for that we give thanks to God. Through working together reasonably we can achieve good government. We are humanly capable of organizing prisons and interrogations in a civil and decent manner. God wills it!.

So far we've been speaking of God's law that leads to civil righteousness as the Reformers identify the phenomenon. As Christians we also speak of the other use of God's law: the accusing law – the same law strips us naked before God, sheds us of our self-righteousness, and drives us to our only hope – God's mercy known in Christ. Here reason is the enemy. Faith is the treasure. Only faith grasps this wonder. Faith exchanges one's own sin for the gift of God's forgiveness and Christ's righteousness. Strange as it may seem, this is God's way of conveying the reign of righteousness on earth – the Kingdom on the Right. The Word, law and gospel, creates through the Spirit a holy people, a righteous community among the nations of the world. While the church is not itself the reign of God's Kingdom, it is the sign and instrument of God's grace and mercy entering this fallen world. The power of Christ's love calls us and moves us, not to live any longer as the fallen world lives – but to live for others, including those who would hate us, even our enemies. If the dominant character of life in the Kingdom on the left is self-centered; the Christian, made new in Christ, lives not for self but for others. Christ's love is the compelling drive wherever our calling and in whatever context we find ourselves.

Are persons who live in the righteousness of Christ free from the Dark side of human experiences? No, not at all!. While baptized into Christ's holiness, we remain flesh and blood, living, working, worshiping, suffering, serving in a world of sin and deception. We are indeed citizens of this fallen world (we sometimes know this all too well), even as we live in faith

in Christ's kingdom on the right.

Several illustrations (not in a military context) where Christians are just as susceptible to finding themselves in an unusual evil producing context that leads one to never-expected behavior.

A highly respected Christian, a father, from every viewpoint a decent, God-fearing person, happens home from work early one afternoon while his wife is at work and daughter should be in school. As he enters the house, he hears noise in an upstairs bedroom, concerned, enters only to find his daughter in bed with a student much older. He knows him to be a "trouble maker." He "loses it." Shouts "get out of the here!" Follows him through the kitchen toward the back door. The boy glancing back, curses the father who in turn, in his rage, picks up a knife on the table, and lunges toward the young man, stabbing him in the neck. A dark side? Every Christian should realize how extreme rage can engulf one, leading to seemingly uncontrollable actions.

When the unexpected happens, as soon as the situation allows, leave the scene; go into another room, lock the door. If possible, call a friend, a spouse, your pastor. Talk it out, try to cool yourself. Don't be afraid to express your darkest feeling, even the urge to kill. Tell them you need someone beside you and now! Don't re-enter the scene until you are fully in control of yourself; perhaps wait for the friend to arrive. Take seriously the prayer: Lord, lead me not into temptation! You are not a "chicken" to avoid the fray.

Another illustration, one so common in our churches. Highly respected Christian leaders, honored and elected officers of the church, are exposed embezzling church funds. Let no excuse be given. It is a crime! Although not an atrocity, it is an act

on the dark side! Judgment of state and of God is in order – whether Christian or non-Christian.

However, knowing the nature of our fallen world, as a congregation we may want to pray: Lord, let us not lead others into temptation. Leadership must insist on accountability as the West Point officer says of the military. Practices are proscribed: Let no one count the money alone; always two persons; never a married couple. All funds are to be audited annually. And let no one say: “We’re Christians; we trust each other.” The state has its calling to bring civil justice. The church, while supporting the state, has a calling to counsel each person with the God’s Word – judgment and assurance of God’s forgiveness. Shaken with embarrassment, the church – the Christian community – must welcome the murderer, the embezzler, the prison guards, the generals – each of us when confessing and repenting. Welcome to the community of Christ’s redeemed!

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