

LOYALTY VERSUS HONESTY

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Sunday, November 27, 2005
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Once upon a time there was an extremely loyal football fan. On Thanksgiving weekend he went to see his favorite team playing their most important game of the season. But his seat was *terrible*. And he could see that one of the best seats in the stadium, right on the 50-yard line, was sitting vacant. “What a waste!” he thought. So he made his way over and asked the man in the next seat, “Excuse me, but is this seat taken?”

“Be my guest,” said the man. “It was my wife’s seat. She was a fan, too. But she died.” “I’m *so* sorry for your loss,” said the man, sitting down. “But why didn’t you invite a relative or friend?” “I would have,” came the reply, “but they’re all at the funeral.”

My apologies! But loyalty can be an under-appreciated virtue until we see it misplaced. And I simply *had* to find a light-hearted way into a serious moral dilemma. You see, honesty and loyalty are both almost universally acknowledged as essential to good character; as key moral values. But they come from somewhat different moral traditions, as Jane Jacobs helps us to see. Which explains why they so often seem to come into conflict, in public life and in our personal lives as well.

Last spring ethicist Jim Lichtman did a survey of young adults entering the workforce. He found that over nine out of ten of them said that they value doing the right thing over getting ahead in their careers. 96% regarded honesty as very important in the workplace. But when faced with a series of moral dilemmas, some 43% were more likely to value loyalty to friends as even *more* important, and, when it came to whistle-blowing over a third called the cost of doing the right thing sometimes too high a price to pay.

Betty Jo Schuler, who writes young adult fiction, similarly says that hardest story for her to write was one called, “When is a Thief a Thief?” In it, a teen named Linda faces a

serious dilemma when her good friend, Danielle, starts shoplifting, and tries to taunt her and some other girls into doing the same. Taunted about being a 'chicken' if she doesn't play along, Linda feels not only intimidated, but caught between honesty and loyalty.

Working out such conflicts, of course, is largely a matter of spiritual and ethical maturity. But I sometimes wonder if all the many news stories about those who have resolved the tension poorly do more to teach what *not* to do, or just offer them more bad examples. Because when loyalty and honesty conflict in the news, the latter often seems to loose.

Retired Marine general Joseph P. Hoar observes that this true not only in corporate board rooms and executive suites, but all too frequently in our government as well. "Honesty," he writes, "has been a casualty . . . as our government [has] made major errors in planning and conducting the war in Iraq. Moreover, no one has been held accountable and there has been no acknowledgment of failure."

Because we desperately need examples of people resolving ethical dilemmas more positively, Jim Lichtman tries to provide some in a book called *What Do You Stand For? Stories About Principles That Matter*. This Thanksgiving, I've have cause to remember to be grateful that in my own family I benefited from parents who were such examples.

My father, for example, when I was 13, was hired to oversee the maintenance and repair of US Steel ships on the Great Lakes. One had cracked and sunk in a November storm. Teachers I had in high school were widows of that shipwreck. Classmates had lost their fathers. I remember Dad once showing me, when I was in college, the file drawer he kept of letters he had written to corporate headquarters, detailing what he felt were necessary repairs and maintenance expenses for the various ships. Just before I was to graduate, they tried to silence his honest assessments, demanding loyalty instead. He refused. Before another ship sank, he resigned, sacrificing his entire corporate pension.

He went to work instead for a Boston shipyard that did work for the Navy. And when I became an activist against the war in Vietnam, he both told me how the FBI had come to

see him about his security clearance – and made it clear that he had no intention of being called disloyal or of asking me to cease expressing my own honest convictions.

He understood, you see, something that I was just learning in theological school, namely the difference between more proximate loyalties and an ultimate moral, spiritual loyalty. Because only something akin to the latter makes possible peace and unity in one's active moral living. One should never say, therefore, "My country, right or wrong!" But rather, "Our country, when right to be kept right; when wrong, to be put right." [Carl Schurz] Certainly our nation deserves the thanks and loyalty of its citizens. But the policies of one's nation, even when intended to promote high ideals, or our national interest, may be self-deluding. Then, as theologian Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out, the honest "conscience recognizes that the moral obligation of the individual transcends one's community, [and that] loyalty to the community is . . . morally tolerable only if it includes wider values."

Last week Gwen and I went to see the movie, *Good Night, and Good Luck*, about broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow and his confrontation with Senator McCarthy. Dad had run a shipyard in Wisconsin when I was young. My parents met McCarthy when his wife came to christen a Navy ship they were building. My mother's opinion of his dishonest attempts to criticize the loyalty of other Americans was summed up when she told me that he seemed to her "just another self-made man -- who worships his creator."

But the illness didn't stop with him. That's why the movie is out. And why in the current *New Yorker* there's a cartoon of two men sitting in an office. "Encouraging dissent," one is saying, "is a good way of finding out who the traitors are." Sadly, I suspect some of you have experienced office politics very akin to that.

Judging by my own counseling over the years, conflicts between loyalty and honesty may be the most frequent issues people come to talk to their minister about. My one-time colleague Forrest Church once had a scrupulous young lawyer come to see him not once, but several times. Each time it was about his fiancée. He was entirely faithful to her, but what about his feeling that other fish were still in the sea? He loved her dearly, but what

about those little, but real character flaws he couldn't help but notice? He spoke honestly and openly with her, but how should he tell her about this issue or that? Should he marry her, despite his honest doubts that he was worthy of her, that he could make her happy. Forrest finally said, "Look, logically, there are really only four possibilities here. You'll either marry her and be grateful; or you'll marry her and regret it. Or you'll not marry and be grateful you didn't, or you'll not marry her and then regret it."

"Right!" said the lawyer. "But what should I do?" "I'm your minister," said Forrest. "Whatever you do: be grateful!" But when he reported this from the pulpit, he also added, "I told that story to my mother, and she said, 'Remind me not to send anyone to you for counseling!'"

But people do come. And the issues are, more often than not, related to the same conflict of values. How do I confront my loved one about the effects of their excessive drinking? How do I convey my loyalty but also be honest? How do I deal with my teenager's loyalty to those friends of hers I can no longer trust? Or be honest with my child about something difficult that happened in the family? Or confess to my spouse a serious lapse in a judgment or faithfulness? Or honestly come to terms with my own sexuality? Or face the fact that there is such a lack of integrity in my place of business that I feel queasy, while still keeping my obligations to those who depend on me to earn an income?

There are no simple answers to most of these complex dilemmas, of course. All I can do as a minister is to help people be grateful that they do have within, around, and beyond them resources that can help them find a more mature way of being one whole person, both honest and loyal in an ultimate sense. Which often means introducing the hard truth that none of us resolve these matters perfectly all the time, and that we all often stand in need of some forgiveness.

Again, this is true both at the public and personal levels. Witness the way that in a democracy we all need to be able to trust the journalism profession to inform us accurately on important issues. But when reputable journalists end up being more loyal to

their highly-placed confidential sources than to the public responsibilities that they have, then the only remedy is for news agencies and for individual journalists to admit mistakes and to try to win back public confidence. That may or may not be given, of course. And the same is true with our more personal failures of loyalty or honesty or both. All we can do is honestly, loyally, to try to start anew.

An editorial in *The New Yorker* once quoted the late Hannah Arendt, a Jewish thinker who, just 15 years after the Holocaust, in her book, *The Human Condition*, made a stunning statement about the primacy of forgiveness in being and becoming human.

“Without being forgiven,” she wrote, “released from the consequence of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever. Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can [humans] remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new. [Yet] No one can forgive himself, [just as] no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself. . . . Forgiving and promising enacted in solitude or isolation remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one's self.”

The editorialist then added: "True forgiveness is achieved in community: it is something people do for each other and with each other -- and, at a certain point, for free. It is history working itself out as grace, and it can be accomplished only in truth... Such forgiveness is never done once and for all."

Which may be why we gather in religious community, after all. To be honest to God humans here together, loyal to what is in us and among us and beyond us that is truly worthy of our loyalty. And to practice mutual forbearance and forgiveness as we grow in both honesty and true loyalty, by becoming more mature. Thanks for being loyal enough to be here this holiday weekend. Honestly, I needed you here. I love you. God bless. And amen!

UNISON CONFESSION

Vivian Pomerory

(led by Maria Cristina Vlassidis, Intern Minister)

Forgive us that often we forgive ourselves so easily and others so hardly;

Forgive us that we expect perfection from those to whom we show none;

Forgive us for repelling people by the way we set a good example;

Forgive us for the folly of trying to improve a friend;

Forbid that we should use our little idea of goodness
as a spear to wound those who are different;

Forbid that we should feel superior to others when we are only more shielded;

And may we encourage the secret struggle of every person.