

TWO CHEERS FOR COMPETITION!

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Sunday, November 20, 2005
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

First Reading

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might;
for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in the grave,
to which you are going.

For I looked again and I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift,
nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent,
nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all.

(Ecclesiastes 9: 10-11)

Second Reading

Success is as dangerous as failure,
and we are often our own worst enemy.

What does it mean that success is as dangerous as failure?

He who is superior is also someone's subordinate.

Receiving favor and loosing it both cause alarm.

That is what is meant by success is as dangerous as failure.

What does it mean that we are often our own worst enemy?

The reason I have an enemy is because I have "self".

If I no longer had a "self", I would no longer have an enemy.

Love the whole world as if it were your self;
then you will truly care for all things.

(Tao Te Ching, 13)

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When I was first starting out in ministry, back in the 1970s, there was a whole fad devoted to “non-competitive games.” At one liberal seminary they played “Zen softball.” The key rule was that every game had to end in a tie. And I remember vividly an inter-generational summer conference where some earnest opponents of the competitive spirit were teaching kids games like “Vampire Blob” -- an alternative to “Tag,” in which, within strict boundaries, the one who starts out as “It” must then stick with and cooperate with the first person tagged to add a third person to the blob, as the three together then add a fourth, *et cetera*. While I watched, several kids peeled off the blob and started their own game: racing against one another, down to the big tree at the end of the field.

“To be my best,” writes Mariah Burton Nelson, in her little poem, “Competition,” “I need you/ swimming beside me.”

The years have convinced me that pitting cooperation against competition can be a false dichotomy. Because we are social animals, cooperation is a universal value, needed just to learn skills, to be part of a team, or a community, or a business endeavor. But competition, far from being unnatural, is a natural outgrowth of social organization.

In her book *Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics* (1992), social thinker Jane Jacobs says something similar. (I’m grateful to George Rappolt for recently calling my attention to her work.) She argues that humans, like other animals, started out by hunting and gathering within a given territory, and developed a distinct set of values appropriate to that way of living together. But then we began to trade with one another, and that brought about another, competing set of values. Both sets of values have their place in human societies, because now we are both territorial and commercial, both tribal or national and part of a growing global inter-

dependence. Many of the conflicts and confusions of our time, she argues, stem from attempts to spread one value set the other into areas where it can become dysfunctional.

Here's how Jacobs lists the moral values associated with trade and commerce: *shun force* (it's bad for business); *come to voluntary agreements*; *be honest*; *collaborate easily with strangers and aliens*; *compete*; *respect contracts*; *use initiative and enterprise*; *be open to inventiveness and novelty*; *be efficient*; *promote comfort and convenience*; *dissent for the sake of the task*; *invest for productive purposes*; *be industrious*; *be thrifty*; *be optimistic*. In other words, many of what we might ordinarily call 'liberal' values!

The older set of values, associated with territoriality, she calls 'guardian values': *Shun trading*; *exert prowess*; *be obedient and disciplined*; *adhere to tradition*; *respect hierarchy*; *be loyal*; *take vengeance*; *deceive for the sake of the task*; *make rich use of leisure*; *be ostentatious*; *dispense largesse*; *be exclusive*; *show fortitude*; *be fatalistic*; *treasure honor*. In other words, many of what we might call 'conservative' values preserved in institutions like the military, politics, elites, and established religions.

But notice this irony: just as many of what we call 'liberal' values derive from commerce, so also 'guardian' values are concerned with preserving 'worth and dignity' -- often against the threat or potential humiliations of competition.

Two recent conversations come to mind:

"Can an economic conservative be a religious liberal?" asked the newcomer. "Sure," I replied. "There's plenty of room for competing ideas about how to get to the kind of future we want. We do, however, start with the basic assumption that *all* people, not just some, deserve a basic sense of worth and dignity."

The second conversation was with a friend who works for the US government. She is a senior advisor to US AID – the United States Agency for International Development – on the growing global problem called "trafficking in human persons" – often for economic or sexual exploitation. She was telling me about a book called *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*, in which a fellow named Robert Fuller argues that "much of what is now labeled racism, sexism, classism, etc., is actually triggered not by a difference in color, gender, or economic condition, but rather by a perception that the target lacks the protection of rank." "Power difference is no more

a valid excuse for discrimination than any other,” she argued. “The problem is rankism. That’s what stands between us and human dignity for all.”

Well, perhaps. But in response I told her a parable I learned from Martin Buber. “In the beginning of the modern world,” it is said, “at the time of the French Revolution, three values were said to walk hand-in-hand: *liberty*, *equality*, and what was then called *fraternity* (which today we might more inclusively *kinship*, the mystical sense that we are all somehow sisters and brothers, children of one great Mystery). But in the century-long Age of Revolutions, the three became separated. *Liberty* went West -- to America first of all. But it changed its character. Too often it became mere freedom, freedom to exploit – the land, slaves, workers. While *Equality* went East, and became the faceless equality of the gulag, of millions all waving the same little red book. While the sense of *kinship*, the binding element, the religious element, went into hiding, despised by elites, hiding in the faith of ordinary and oppressed peoples. Emerging only in the Civil Rights movement in America, in the Solidarity movement in Poland. Restoring to America’s ideal of freedom some greater equality of opportunity, to the state capitalism of socialist lands some greater concern for democracy and human dignity.”

The British writer E.M. Forster had an essay called “Two Cheers for Democracy.” Like his contemporary, Churchill, he essentially pronounced it the worst of all possible systems – except for all the others that have been tried. I have come to feel the same way about competition. I give it two cheers, but not three. One cheer because without it there is no incentive for excellence, for ‘self-culture,’ as Channing and Emerson called it. Another cheer, especially at this Thanksgiving season, because it is also demonstrable that without markets, competition, and trade, the produce of the earth would not suffice to feed, house, and clothe us all. Look at North Korea.

But I withhold a third cheer in the name of fairness, human dignity, and kinship. Since the end of the Cold War, more competition has been proposed as the solution to nearly every social and economic problem, as though the judgments, not of God, but of the marketplace, are always and everywhere true and righteous altogether. But are they? Pardon me if I am something of a skeptic. When I ponder the origin of the great religious, scriptural, and philosophical traditions, I’m reminded that all of them seem to have arisen along with market competition of differing myths, gods, customs, & measures of value.

The prophets of Israel, the Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, Jesus, the Prophet Muhammed – all stepped into markets to speak for a higher truth, a wider justice, a deeper sense of kinship. Now the very traditions they founded as guardians of order and peace are themselves competing. Among other things, they are being tested for their cultural effectiveness in promoting prosperity and peace. And who will win? Some cheer for Christianity to defeat Islam, or for secular humanism to abolish all the older religions, or for a non-violent Gandhian spirit to replace the use of force in global competition. I say, ‘History will judge; if we aren’t so foolish as to end history prematurely.’

Many of the moral challenges of our time have to do with where guardian values remain appropriate, and where competition and market forces are not. Protecting the environment, for example, often involves guardian values. So does help to victims of natural disasters. Public health. Many of the most contentious issues in political economy involve exceptions made to our supposed belief in free markets and open competition – and areas where the latter just don’t seem to work very well.

Take issues of free trade. As long as developed nations like the United States, Japan, and Europe dispense the largess of agricultural subsidies to their own farmers, aren’t we creating a world that is increasingly flat, as Tom Friedman puts it, through technology, but also increasingly unfair toward poor farmers in developing countries? And when we use patents and copyrights to protect intellectual innovations – another form of guardian largesse – for long, and how widely, should they apply, at the cost, say, of delaying access by the poor to drugs that could protect global public health?

Just this week I was in CVS, as senior citizens began signing up for competing drug plans under Medicare. “I don’t understand it,” even the pharmacist was saying. Rather than drive down costs, some forms of competition in our health care system clearly drive them up! And what sense does that make?

Often what Jacobs goes so far as to call ‘moral monstrosities’ are created when those who are already powerful and well-off use guardian values to protect themselves and talk of competition to shift risks and burdens to weaker, more vulnerable players. Sweetheart deals and no-bid contracts in Iraq or through FEMA; excesses in executive compensation; regressive taxes. “From those to whom much has been given,” said Jesus, “more is expected.” But in today’s world, inequality in both economics and opportunity

seems to be steadily growing – not only globally, but in countries like Russia, China, Mexico, and, yes, the United States.

Last week, in most mainline churches, the gospel lesson that was read was the Parable of the Talents. A rich man goes on a journey. He gives ten bars of gold to one servant, two to another, one to the third. The first invests wisely, earning ten more talents. The second does likewise. To both the master says, ‘Well done, thou good and faithful.’ The third, having little, and fearful, buries the talent entrusted to him. When the master returns, he is berated for living out of fear, not faith.

I say, let each of take the talents entrusted to us – in wealth, creativity, energy, and other gifts – and invest them wisely, productively. Not fearfully. And compete freely in the marketplace of ideas with those who want to shut down the conversation about the human future, by turning it all over to the fearful guardians, the rich, the military, and to those who already have their bars of gold piled up, freed of capital gains taxes.

But I would ask all of us who have reason to be grateful for what we have been able to earn or achieve on the basis of good parenting, sound training in human values (both competitive and guardian), good schools, good mentoring, and huge investments in the guardian structures of the government: Are we only self-congratulatory winners? Looking down on life’s so-called ‘losers’? Or is it possible that the ancient wisdom was right: the race is not to the swift, nor are our successes entirely of our own making. And success is just as dangerous as failure. It can lead to forgetting this: you may not owe all your sisters and brothers in this world an equal result; but you do owe them something akin to an equal chance, and some basic human dignity.

No matter what other topics you may discuss at the Thanksgiving table this year, across all sorts of lines of ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal,’ please keep this question in mind: the question of human kinship and the dignity owed to our sisters and brothers.

Amen, and amen.

