

“Dining With the Devil”

by Rev. Dr. Tony Larsen

When I was in college I had a philosophy professor named Father Albertini. When someone asked him a difficult philosophical question he would invariably say, “Wel-l-l-l, een ay certain way yes; and een ay certain way ... no.”

I’ve often thought that’s not a bad answer to a lot of questions in life. That’s why I’ve entitled this sermon “Dining With the Devil” because, although I don’t believe in an actual devil, I think that as a symbol, that word helps to put our moral dilemmas in focus.

Now, I’m always a little reluctant to use words like devil. I’m reminded of something I read about a German missionary in Africa who went home on leave and came back with some great big colored pictures to illustrate his sermons. And the people of his parish seemed to really like them. And one day his sermon was on hell and he had a picture of the devil with souls suffering in the fires of hell and his parishioners looked at it and started laughing and dancing and rejoicing. And he thought: What’s wrong? They should be somber and fearful. But they told him, “Look, Father. Everyone in hell is white!”

Well, as I say, I don’t believe in a literal devil or a literal hell.

By the way, for those of you, who don’t like theological language, think of the word “devil” as a variant spelling of “evil”; and, if you want, think of “God” as a variant spelling of “good.” (Add a letter, subtract a letter – whatever.)

At any rate, my thesis is that to do good – we sometimes have to accept some evil. And sometimes our only choice is between a bad thing and a worse thing. (As a matter of fact, almost every time I vote I feel that way!)

Abraham Lincoln understood this, by the way. That’s why he once said, “Much as I hate slavery, I would consent to the extension of it rather than see the Union dissolved, just as I would consent to a great evil, to avoid a greater one.” [*Selected Speeches, Messages and Letters, p. 80*]

One area that’s especially fraught with this kind of moral ambiguity, I think, is medicine. Several years ago I read an article in the paper about two twins who were joined at the heart, liver, and intestines. Doctors knew they couldn’t keep the two alive together, but they also knew that if they separated them, only one could have the heart and intestines. So both would die if they did nothing; but at least one would die if they separated them. As Doctor Howard Grant, at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia put it: “The question you need to raise is: Is it legally acceptable to cause the death of one of the babies in order to justify saving one ... when both of them can’t survive without a procedure at this point?”

The head of the surgical team (James O’Neill) said: “We’re trying to save the one that at least has a chance, because the one that does have a chance won’t go on forever supporting the other.” [*JT, 1-22-87*]

After consulting with the parents, and with the Philadelphia district attorney who promised not to prosecute them, they saved the child who had the better chance, thereby killing the one who didn't. The doctors in this case agonized over their decision, but in the end they felt it was the only moral thing to do.

Another example of this moral ambiguity is in the AIDS epidemic in Africa. Many pregnant women there who have the AIDS virus pass it on to their babies. Now, in the United States and Europe, doctors can generally prevent it from being passed on with months of intravenous drug treatment during the pregnancy; but most women in Africa simply can't afford that. So researchers decided to test whether giving just a couple pills a day, right before and after delivery, would help. So they gave half the women and babies sugar pills and the other half real pills (without either group knowing which was which). A number of critics pointed out that it was unfair to withhold treatment from people when you have one that could save their lives. But the researchers, who were from the UN AIDS program, pointed out that none of these women would have been helped if they hadn't done this study because none of them could have afforded the drugs. And the study did show that the short regimen of drugs, while not as good as the longer version, was still significantly better than no treatment at all. So many more lives will be saved because of the study, even though half of the women in it got no treatment, and the ones who did get treatment were not given the most effective treatment.

Was this an ethical thing to do? You can tell me what you think during the Talk-Back, if you like.

Another area where a lot of deals are made with the devil, so to speak, is politics. Suppose you are an honest politician, and you want to do good things for your community. But in order to do those good things, you have to get elected. And to get elected, perhaps you'll have to do or say some dishonest things. Is it ethical to do a little evil for a greater good?

As an example, in 1932 when Franklin Roosevelt was running for president, he wanted a strong civil-rights agenda – but he didn't want to lose southern votes, so he didn't say much about it. He also knew he needed to make the incumbent president, Herbert Hoover, look bad, so he blamed him for causing the Depression. He later said to an aide, "I didn't mean a word of it. Hoover didn't have any more to do with the Depression than you and I did." But the lie helped him get elected. Was it ethical to do that? And would your answer change depending on which party you belong to?

Here's an example from former Senator Warren Rudman, who wrote his memoirs in a book entitled Combat: 12 Years in the U.S. Senate. He admits in this book that he voted to confirm Clarence Thomas as Supreme Court Justice in 1991. Remember, Clarence Thomas was accused of sexual harassment by Anita Hill, and was (and is) one of the most conservative justices ever. Senator Rudman didn't actually want to back Thomas, but once he realized that Thomas would be confirmed whether he voted against him or not, he decided to vote for him in order to get leverage later on. Because of his vote, he was able to influence the appointment of a number of federal judges (including a Democrat) – and get money for his home state of New Hampshire. He says, "If my vote had been the deciding one, I would have voted against Thomas, no matter what the consequence. But once it was clear that he would be confirmed, I made a political decision." He says, "It isn't a vote I'm proud of, but it's a textbook example of how our system works." [JT, Apr. 12, 1996]

Was that right – or wrong? (Or is it “een ay certain way yes and een ay certain way ... no”?)

You know, if you look at history, you’ll see that a lot of things that were once considered O.K. were later thought to be wrong; and a lot of things that were once considered wrong were later thought to be O.K. Consider chemical warfare and the killing of civilians in war.

In 1944, about a week after D-day, when the allied forces invaded France during World War II, Germany launched a large rocket attack against Britain, killing almost 3,000 people and wounding about 10,000 more. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill wanted to use poison gas on German cities. But a number of his advisors questioned the morality of chemical warfare.

His response? “It is absurd to consider morality on this topic when everybody used it in the last war without a word of complaint from the moralists or the Church. On the other hand, in the last war the bombing of open cities was regarded as forbidden. Now everybody does it as a matter of course. It is simply a question of fashion changing as she does between long and short skirts for women.”

Wow!

In the end he didn’t use gas because he was afraid Germany might retaliate with the same weapons. But he did think of war-time morality as a rather relative thing.

I don’t agree with him that morality is nothing more than a fashion statement; but I can see how one might get to that position after watching ethical trends come and go.

Here’s another example: You may remember about ten years ago when Ingo Heinrich was on trial in Germany for killing a man in 1989. At the time he had been an East-German border guard, and his orders were to shoot anyone trying to escape to West Germany. He was commended for his action in 1989; three years later he was convicted of manslaughter. The judge sentenced him to 3 ½ years in prison, for following the laws of his country rather than the laws of his conscience. Is that just – to be punished for something that wasn’t a crime when you did it, but would be if you did it today? It’s an interesting question – and another example of how people’s ideas of morality may change with time.

Now, given the morass you can fall into when you accept shades of gray rather than black-and-white, some people are more comfortable arguing for moral absolutes. Or as someone once put it, people yearn for a “bleached-out faith where truth is never gray.” (I like that way of putting it.)

Pat Robertson, the founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network, once criticized “new math” for leading to a breakdown in morality. He told about a teacher who asked a student, “How much is 9 times 9? The kid answered, “81,” and the teacher said, “No, that’s wrong.” When another kid said, “Almost 76,” the teacher said, “That’s right ... we’re trying to develop your reasoning power.”

Now, I don’t know where Pat Robertson got that story – and what really happened – but he used it as an example of cultural relativity. He said new math teachers “do that because

they despise absolutes, and the multiplication tables stick in their throats because they don't believe in any kind of absolutes ... They're cultural moral relativists."

He got a big round of applause at the conference where he said that. There is clearly a yearning in America to go back to a simple time when things were black and white and choices were easier to make.

The trouble is, there never actually was such a time. As an example, the great Catholic theologian and philosopher from the 13th century, St. Thomas Aquinas, said he was in favor of legalized prostitution. (This surprises a lot of Catholics.) And he was not in favor because he was a civil libertarian or because he thought it was morally O.K. No, he thought it was evil. But he thought a society without it was likely to have even more evil. So to prevent a greater evil you allow a lesser one. (And this is from 800 years ago!)

Also, you should never assume that religious conservatives are always in favor of moral absolutes and liberals are not.

For example, religious conservatives generally oppose abortion, and they oppose lying – but they do not necessarily oppose lying to stop abortions.

There are a number of pregnancy counseling centers in various cities whose sole purpose is to get pregnant girls and young women to not have an abortion. They usually offer a free pregnancy test, but even though it takes only a few minutes to get the results, they hold back on giving it so they can tell the young woman about the evils of abortion first. There are a number of these in our area, like "Affiliated Pregnancy Counseling Service" on Monarch Drive. Their ad in the yellow pages says "Free Pregnancy Test/confidential counseling/referrals/post-abortion counseling." Now, you might think from that that they do abortions or at least refer you to places that do, but they do not. There is even a handbook that a number of these agencies use, called, "How To Start and Operate a Pro-Life Outreach Pregnancy Service Center." This book suggests renting office space in the same building as an abortion clinic, when possible, so that a young woman going in for abortion counseling will see their place first and might go in by mistake.

Here is some of the handbook's other advice: On naming your center: "We have discovered over the years that a neutral name such as 'Abortion ABC's,' 'Abortion Advice,' or 'Pregnancy Problem Center' is the most effective way to reach these women who are pregnant and who are considering abortion."

"Do not indicate you are pro-life. If she is seeking an abortion and indicates she won't come in because she knows we are pro-life, assure her we can still help her by giving her all the information on abortion."

"When a caller asks, 'Are you a pro-life center?' say, 'We are a pregnancy center.'"

"Pregnancy tests: Never allow a client to watch while you are doing a test."

"If the client asks how long it takes to do the test, tell her we offer the results in 30 minutes, you will have the results by that time. (You have not told her how long it takes you to run the test, but how long it will be before she has the results of the test.)"

“Make sure your décor does not expose your purpose.”

“Keep a few baby items hidden away in your Center, so that you are not advertising your pro-life views. But sometimes the gift of a little baby outfit before she leaves, is the very thing that will clinch the mother’s decision for life.”

Now, if these procedures seem somewhat deceptive or manipulating, remember that from their perspective, it is all for a higher purpose: They believe they are preventing murder. You get a clue for this when you read this next part: **“Questions: How far does a volunteer go to help a mother not to abort her unborn child?” Answer: “How far would you go to save your own life?”**

I mention this example for two reasons. One is that I want to say that liberals don’t have a monopoly on “dining with the devil.” [Although I think it’s a little ironic that a group which normally espouses black-and-white morality – I mean, the pro-life lobby says human life starts right at the moment of conception, no shades of gray there – would say it’s O.K. to shade the truth a little in the service of their moral absolutes.]

The other reason I mention this example is that if it troubles you that those people would manipulate the truth or seem to abrogate one moral law in favor of another one – just think how you and I appear when we accept (or even propose) a lesser evil in order to prevent a greater one.

Our causes may be different – we may come out on different sides of a social issue – but we may end up doing some similar gyrations in our moral ponderings. And at the very least, we might want to re-examine ourselves when we find ourselves getting overly judgmental about the specks in our brothers’ and sisters’ eyes, and missing the – if not logs, then toothpicks – in our own.

And now I’d like to hear from you – any thoughts you have on the examples I’ve given or other examples or comments you’d like to give.

TALK-BACK

I’ve always liked this quotation from a man named James Simpson: “Someone once said that to every complex problem there is a simple solution – and that simple solution is usually wrong.”

So, as much as I would like to tie things up at this point and give you a definitive answer about when to be morally absolute and when to “dine with the devil” – I’m afraid I’m going to have to leave that up to you. But I will say this: The danger in moral absolutes is hurting human beings in the name of principle; the danger in moral flexibility is ethical drift and muddled morality. We’ve got to steer a course between, I think – between ethical rigidity ... and anything-goes morality; between being true to our principles ... and being true to people; between “een ay certain way yes ... and een ay certain way no...”; and yes, between peace ... and unrest.