

Leader's Message March 2009

The Good

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The city just finished a renovation of South Street from Front to 8th Streets and some of the improvements have already been trashed and covered by graffiti. Obviously there are contrary visions of how South Street should look.

After the recent snow, I noticed how often shoveling went to the absolute edge of the property line – someone wasn't going to shovel an inch of his or her neighbor's property. But I also noticed how often some people kept going to shovel a good part if not all of their neighbor's sidewalk.

Everywhere you look you can see examples of people's different ideas of right and good. I prove that point by constantly being judgmental about other people's choices of behaviors. Although I'm confident that my idea of right is "the right," how can I be sure of my rightness? It would be nice if there were absolute rules with which to judge behavior. Maybe 10 rules or 613.

Except when it comes to moral behavior, we have no problem openly preferring the good. While there is divergence of opinion on what is preferred - say chocolate or vanilla ice cream - we still, unless we are just perverse, mean the same thing by good. Good is a quality of a thing or an action. Our particular take on good is unique to the person, but the quality called goodness remains the same. You may prefer sports cars to minivans but in different categories what makes the two cars good is the same - that they do what they are supposed to do well.

Why should moral behavior be different and more difficult than choosing the best from a used car lot? Well, when we reach for what is good or better from a collection of things or a list of possibilities, it is because we reach for what works – it does for us what we need. In moral decisions, it is not just what works for us, it is what also works for others or for everyone. It is something we do, we bring it out of a situation, it is a quality of our actions.

We don't need rules to recognize right and good. While there are some difficult decisions that can go either way, good behavior is relatively obvious; we (in the words of Immanuel Kant) feel it in our bones. The problem comes when self-interest starts complicating the situation with reasons, often "good" reasons, to prefer our needs over and above what our bones are telling us.

Maybe people don't actually want to be good, just so they are seen to be good. Yet the word good, the idea of good, is such a fundamentally positive quality, you would think we would all strive not just to be seen as good but to personify the quality of goodness in our living. But we don't. We individualize the good. The natural instinct that knows the good must live with the rest of our instincts, chiefly with our self-interest. The good gets twisted around and becomes what seems good to us, what is good for us. I guess that is one reason why we say, "life is an ethical experience"; living is always about deciding between what appears good to our indulgent self-interest and the greater good that could be created in any situation.

We live in a world that encourages self-expression ("I do it my way and that's my right"). In turn that encourages the attitude that what's good for me is the good. But our bones know better, and given a chance they can feel their way through the fog to identify the good in our situational, relational experiences. It is easy enough to appear to be good. I know I can play that game. But to actually want to be good in the sense of being a presence in touch with my surroundings and ready to encourage the best in those surroundings, that's harder.

