

Last week we began a three part sermon series on the spiritual journey and the human experience. Throughout the centuries a threefold pattern of human existence has emerged in the writings of numerous philosophers, psychologists and theologians. I don't know, maybe they're all reading each other's notes. At any rate, last week we talked about the aesthete – the individual who avoids choice in life by constantly distracting themselves with novelty and excitement. We ended last week with the admission that the aesthete becomes very uncomfortable in the face of commitment and responsibility – these things tie you down you see, and may become very dull – it is only moving through that discomfort and making the choice to take on responsibility and to serve others that the aesthete's view of the world is transformed. It is here we move into, what Kierkegaard called, the ethical stage.¹

When Jesus laments about Jerusalem in our passage today...For how many centuries has God sent prophets to your walls O Jerusalem, and all you do is reject them. Prophets, you see, are hard to swallow because their message often makes people feel uncomfortable, it tends to question the settled “way things are.” The social order, as it were. The problem is people who are in power don't care much for feeling uncomfortable or for rabble-rousers who question the way of things (especially when the way of things is doing very nicely for me, thank you very much.) So the prophets are often imprisoned or executed, and of course, this is what happens to Jesus in the end. Sorry to ruin it if you hadn't heard.

¹ The substance of the “ethical stage” is taken from notes from Dr. Diogenes Allen's course “Prolegomena to Theology” Fall 2001. Those interested in a far better description than what is written here can read his book *Three Outsiders*.

Caveat – Just touching this subject, I can't hope to really get into this in 10 minutes. So I hope this can become a conversation starter or an idea to kick around for you.

The establishment and defense of social norms is an extremely powerful thing – and it is the primary concern of the individual in the ethical stage. The ethical person has moved beyond material things and has begun to build and shape themselves according to something far more potent – their internally conceived ideals. These ideals can be almost anything, but usually involves social roles; being a good mother or father, brother or sister, a good doctor or teacher, a good child or nephew, a good citizen, a good friend and so on. These ideals are built into us through our culture and through our own individual experience. What's important is that the ethical person measures their worth as a person based on how close they come to reaching this ideal. Remember, an aesthete doesn't really care whether something is good or bad, they'll find a way to rationalize what they want, they're measurement is whether or not something is interesting. But for an ethical person, they recognize the inherent positive or negative position of things, usually based on social standards (but not always). For them, being the ideal mother...or whatever role it might be...is the important thing, and the only one that can know if they are meeting that ideal is themselves...through the level of comfort or discomfort they feel in playing that role.

By the way, their sense of what is right or wrong in these roles is often unanalyzed – it's often that they simply feel that what is happening is good or appropriate, or not good and inappropriate. When you ask "why" much of the time they have a difficult time answering. It's not necessarily for any practical reason that they feel

they or others should behave in a certain way, it's more because it just "is" because they feel it is right, or they were brought up that way, or that's the way it has always been, etc.

Now, there's nothing necessarily wrong with trying to be the best you can be at whatever role you might find yourself in life – just like there is nothing necessarily wrong with valuing material things at the aesthete level, but in both cases the problem begins when we allow these things to dominate our lives and thus become the focus and foundation of our lives. When our identities are built upon them. This is building on shifting sand, as Jesus said. There are two ways that folks who live from an ethical point of view run amok. The first is that the ideal role in their minds becomes projected out to everyone around them. So it's not just themselves, but their friends and families and co-workers and so on, who must live according to an idealistic conception of a role that they hold. So, that's no way for a doctor to behave, or so on. This begets the familiar pattern of the person who knows what's wrong with everyone around them, but can't see what's wrong with themselves. They live to correct everyone else's conduct and behavior because they desperately want to re-affirm their own role and ideal – this internal conception of how the world ought to be and to reaffirm their place in it. The hope is that by creating these ideal frameworks and stuffing everyone around them into it, they can validate their own life, their own identity. Now remember, an aesthete doesn't care about any of this, for them – other people are pieces on a chessboard. They just move other people around according to their own goals and cravings. That's why aesthetes are more fun to hang out with. The ethical folks though are driven by a sense of right and wrong, and so if you are not performing based on their accepted ideas of the role you ought to be

playing – well, they'll start feeling uncomfortable because it begins to tilt their conception of the world and the way everyone, including themselves, should be in it... and then comes that disapproving look, or perhaps even 'the speech.' Or, in the flavor of our local Minnesotan context, the passive aggressive remark.

Children

The second amokness for ethical folks happens to be the way through on to a different way of looking at the world. It begins when the realization starts to sink in that they simply cannot live up to their own standard. That they, and it seems the world around them, can never reach that ideal sense of what it is to be a parent, or a doctor, or a...fill in the blank. The world starts to look empty and pointless. It is here, at this precise junction, that a critical choice is made – either the individual grits their teeth, pushes out the depressing nonsense, and finds a new role, or a new way of being the old role – and so “reinvents” themselves – or, they begin to slip into a type of resignation. Which is the way forward? The reinvention or the resignation? The way forward, believe it or not, is through the resignation – but that is a very difficult choice for an ethical person. For them, it seems like giving up and that's very difficult for an ethical person to do because I've worked so hard to become what I am. To be regarded as who I am. It seems an impossible choice, and so their lives and identities slip into a pattern of repeatedly 'girding up their loins' again and again and again...because giving up is no solution. And like waves battering a rocky seashore their lives become a hardship – but a noble hardship, because they have lived their values and never given up and been true to themselves – but deep down, underneath the proud veneer is a profound unhappiness and a nagging sense of meaninglessness. They

have lived their values, it is true, but they never questioned whether or not they should be the author of those values. They never questioned whether or not God has a role in who you are, in your very self. But that makes no sense to an ethical person – for an ethical person is the author of their own lives, and the measure of their success is in whether or not they consistently follow that authorship and whether or not those around them follow their authorship.

You see, in both the aesthetical world and the ethical world the same error occurs, though one is external and the other internal, but ultimately they both work very diligently to be their own god – to be in control of their own lives. The aesthete denies the world and lives life on their own terms, objectifying everything and seeking novelty and excitement around every corner. The ethical transforms the world into their likeness and lives on their own terms, framing everything around them into their own conception of what the world should be like. And woe be to the person who questions this world, or behaves differently than expected, because you are not just questioning the role – you are questioning the very “self,” the very identity, of the ethical person who constructed it. They feel attacked, and will either defend that ideal or they will marginalize you as best they can.

Next week...Blessed resignation and the path to God.

Famous Experiment about shocking other folks in the name of science.