

More Than Quandaries: Character Ethics and Preaching

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In one episode of the television show, *M.A.S.H.*, viewers are treated to a typical modern, ethical quandary.¹ A zealous colonel is determined to capture a hill held by the North Koreans. However, his obsession with taking the hill is causing the death and injury of many young men. Over and over again he sends units to the hill, only to have them badly defeated, even slaughtered. The doctors at the 4077th have to deal with the aftermath of these repeated, reckless attacks directed by the colonel.

Finally, Hawkeye decides that he has had enough and develops a plan to put the colonel out of commission. The next time the colonel comes into camp, Hawkeye determines, he will “spike” the colonel’s drink with medicine that will give him a severe stomachache. Hawkeye will then inform the colonel that he has appendicitis, perform an appendectomy, and send the colonel packing back to the States. The plan, he thinks, is foolproof. However, when B. J. hears about Hawkeye’s plan he is appalled, though he himself agrees that the colonel needs to go. “You’re a doctor,” he tells Hawkeye, “and doctors do not remove healthy organs. Some things are wrong and they’re always wrong.” In addition, B. J. argues that there is no way Hawkeye can insure that the colonel’s replacement will be any better than the colonel himself has been.

The viewers are faced with a difficult moral quandary described through the two main strands of modern ethical argument. On the one hand, Hawkeye takes a “consequentialist” (or utilitarian) position, arguing that the consequences of his action make it right, even though doctors don’t normally remove healthy organs. B.J., on the other hand, argues from a “deontological” (or Kantian) position, asserting that some actions are wrong and they’re always wrong, no matter what the consequences, which are always impossible to predict anyway. Although Hawkeye does finally proceed with his plan by himself, the viewers are left to ponder the issues involved. Through this one concrete example, the episode of *M.A.S.H.* gets to the heart of much modern ethical debate. (How many times have we wrestled with just such quandaries in our ethics classes in seminary!)

However, the strength of the show at this point is also its weakness. Like much modern ethical debate, the television show, by focusing on a problem to be solved, simply looks at the tip of the moral iceberg. Other ethical dimensions of the situation are left beneath the surface. In particular, the show doesn’t invite us to reflect on the kinds of people involved in the story. However, apart from the presence of certain kinds of people—people like Hawkeye and B. J.—the problem would not even have arisen. For example, there is no problem for the colonel who is leading the troops. And there is no problem for Margaret Hoolihan. And there is no problem for Frank Burns. Further, stepping outside the cast of *M.A.S.H.* characters, no problem would have arisen here for most Mennonites or Quakers, who would not even find themselves in such a situation at all. The episode of *M.A.S.H.*, like modern ethics in general, focuses so exclusively on a problem to be solved that it neglects the kinds of persons involved in the story, apart from whom no ethical quandary would even arise.

I suspect that much of our “ethical preaching” takes a similar approach. When we think about preaching and ethics we usually think of preaching on specific moral issues: abortion, war, homosexuality, divorce, hunger, etc. We think about sermons dealing with those perplexing, controversial problems that people in our churches are facing. And we distinguish those kinds of sermons from others dealing with matters such as grace, hope, and joy. Ethical preaching, like modern ethics and the M.A.S.H. episode, tends to focus on the question, What ought we to do in the face of a particular ethical dilemma? However, when we think of the ethical dimensions of our preaching in this way, we are thinking far too narrowly. We are ignoring the important moral work that precedes decisions and actions, which may in fact be the most important moral work that our sermons undertake on a week to week basis.

Character Ethics

In recent years several important ethicists have turned their attention away from “quandary ethics,” with its rather narrow focus on problems and the question “What ought I to do?” Instead, these ethicists have sought to recapture the tradition of virtue ethics or character ethics, which explores a different question: “What kind of persons should we be?”² These “character ethicists” remind us that “morality” is much larger than a narrow concern for problem solving and decision making. Ethics is about living well; it “is not a solution we seek to a problem we wish we could avoid, but is our life lived in a certain way.”³ In Christian terms we might say that ethics is about the way we negotiate the journey of life faithfully, according to the purpose for which we have been created and redeemed.

As character ethics reminds us, the great majority of our moral life does not involve conscious, premeditated decisions at all. Most of our moral life consists of the things we do quite “naturally” because of the kinds of persons we are. While we all face from time to time significant moral dilemmas, these are relatively few and far between compared to the everyday habits and activities that both form and reflect our character and make up the great bulk of our moral life. Indeed, a person’s “character” is simply the consistent way he or she negotiates the various aspects of this day-to-day journey.⁴ The character ethicists have reminded us, in short, that morality is not an isolated part of life, limited to those moments calling for difficult decisions. Rather, ethics concerns the way we live our lives as a whole.

Equally important for preaching, the character ethicists remind us that before there are quandaries and decisions, there are persons; character ethics shifts the focus of ethical reflection from actions to agents, in line with Aquinas’s insight that “the form of an act always follows from a form of the agent.”⁵ Moral philosophers and Christian ethicists alike are coming to realize that there are no abstract, isolated situations or actions apart from the kinds of persons who are involved in the situation and perform the action. As I suggested through the story from M.A.S.H., apart from certain kinds of persons, certain moral dilemmas don’t even arise. Character ethicists, while not denying the importance of decisions and actions, have turned their attention to this “background” that lies behind specific dilemmas and actions.

The philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch, whose work played an important role in the renewal of character ethics, has captured the issues well. Reacting against the predominant existential, utilitarian, and behaviorist theories of her day, Murdoch directs attention away from isolated acts to what transpires between them. “The moral life is something that goes on continually,” she writes, “not something that is switched on and off between the occurrences of explicit moral choices. What

happens between such choices is indeed what is crucial.”⁶ Murdoch places the agent’s “continuous fabric of being,” rather than overt choices and actions, at the center of moral philosophy.⁷ The most important moral work occurs in the formation of the person—*before* the moment of choice even arrives.⁸

The Christian ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas, has similarly focused on the character and virtue of the moral agent, rather than on isolated, overt quandaries and actions.

Morality is not primarily concerned with quandaries or hard decisions; nor is the moral self simply the collection of such decisions. As persons of character we do not confront situations as mud puddles into which we have to step; rather the kind of “situations” we confront and how we understand them are a function of the kind of people we are.⁹

Through the language and practices of particular communities, including the narratives that shape the identity of those communities, we become certain kinds of persons; we develop a certain character and exhibit certain virtues, which shape our understanding of the situations we confront as well as our response to them.¹⁰ Apart from consideration of the kinds of persons we are and should be, the question of what we ought to do in a given situation simply makes no sense.

Character Ethics and Preaching

While the revival of character ethics has numerous implications for homiletics, I want to highlight two of these.¹¹ First, character ethics suggests that the ethical dimensions of our preaching are far deeper and broader than the occasional sermon on a moral issue. In fact, to the extent that our sermons contribute to the formation of a people, they are all ethical at the deepest level, even when they may not seem to be focused directly on moral concerns. In helping to form a people, preaching performs part of the crucial moral work that precedes specific choices and actions.

For example, consider a sermon on hope—not the kind of sermon that would normally be labeled “ethical preaching.” Now, by a sermon “on hope” I don’t mean a sermon in which the preacher talks *about* hope. Nor do I mean a sermon that tells people they *must* hope (how many of those have we preached!). Rather, I mean a sermon that enables or inspires hope, one that helps hope to “happen” in the imaginations and lives of the hearers. From the perspective of character ethics, such a sermon is profoundly ethical because it is helping to form a hopeful people. Christian hope “locates our lives in a new history, a new journey made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹² And a hopeful people live in the world differently from a people without hope. A hopeful people will negotiate the journey of life differently from a despairing people, a merely happy people, or a shallowly optimistic people. A hopeful people, for example, will be more patient in the face of the trials and challenges of life, less prone to frustration in the face of life’s setbacks and tragedies. Indeed, it is not surprising that “theologies of hope” accompanied the development of liberation theology. Involvement in the work of liberation, particularly in the nonviolent resistance to the powers of the world, requires hope. Thus, when sermons week in and week out encourage the formation of a hopeful people, those sermons are engaged in a profoundly moral task, one that is as deeply ethical as the occasional sermon on a moral issue.

While this broader understanding of the relation between preaching and ethics does not deny the importance of occasional sermons on particular moral issues, it

does suggest that *all* of our sermons have significant ethical dimensions, not just those sermons that are often thought of in moral terms. A good question to ask of our sermons is, “What kind of people are my sermons helping to form?” Such a question might even encourage the preacher to ask himself or herself, “How do my sermons reflect my own character, the way I undertake the journey of life?” The answers might be revealing not just in relation to preaching, but in terms of our own lives.

Second, character ethics not only suggests that the ethical dimensions of our preaching are far broader and deeper than we often imagine, but that preaching itself is a more complex activity than we often admit. In particular, character ethics challenges the narrow focus on form and technique that has dominated homiletical reflection in recent years. Just as character ethics has reminded us of the important moral work that precedes choice and action, so it reminds us that the Sunday morning sermon “event” is just the tip of the iceberg of the Word being faithfully preached and heard.

The tradition of character ethics is quite clear at this point: character is not formed just by sitting and listening to speeches or sermons. Rather, character is formed primarily through habits and practices, through repeated activities that shape the kinds of people we are.¹³ Consequently, any naive view about the power of preaching to “form a people” needs to be qualified. The kinds of persons who come to hear the preaching play an important role in what is heard. Just as a person’s character contributes significantly to the ethical quandaries within which she finds herself, so the hearer’s character plays an important role in the hearing of the sermon. The larger communal practices and disciplines that help form the hearers’ character are an important dimension of preaching that has too often been ignored in recent homiletical literature, despite the concern for the participation of the hearers in the sermon and the role of the sermon in forming a people.

Aristotle himself, whose work has influenced preaching through the centuries, wrote insightfully about the intimate relationship between ethics, rhetoric, and politics.¹⁴ While Aristotle had a profound appreciation for the importance of language, even emphasizing the sociolinguistic nature of human beings, he knew that speeches alone, apart from the character of the hearers, were inadequate.¹⁵ In contemporary homiletical terms, Aristotle reminds us that “word-events” alone are insufficient apart from the communal practices that contribute to the truthful hearing of God’s Word.

Similar insights have come from the Christian tradition as well. In an article that raises significant issues for preachers enamored with “story,” Marianne Sawicki has argued that Matthew and Luke discount the value of stories apart from specific communal practices. Stories alone, Sawicki argues, cannot create the recognition or experience of the risen Christ.

According to Luke-Acts, what makes it possible to grasp resurrection is a community whose members can be hungry, recognize hungry persons, and fill their needs. *According to Matthew*, what is required is to put certain ethical teachings into practice. Both Gospels expressly link these conditions to recognition of the identity and significance of Jesus, while at the same time they discount the efficacy of verbal identifications. This is highly ironic, for a text itself can hardly be anything other than words.¹⁶

Sawicki concludes: “These first evangelists find that they cannot bring anyone to the

possibility of resurrection through the mere telling of a story.” The gospel stories themselves, she suggests, are finally about “the futility of narrative.”¹⁷ Sawicki highlights in a provocative way the importance the Gospels place on Christian practices and Christian character for hearing the story rightly and “experiencing” the resurrected Christ.

Consistent with the Gospels, many in the early church also highlighted the intimate relationship between Christian character and the right hearing of the Word. Athanasius succinctly made this point at the conclusion of his classic work, *The Incarnation of the Word* :

...for the searching and right understanding of the scriptures there is need of a good life and a pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind to grasp, so far as human nature can, the truth concerning God the Word. One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life.¹⁸

In many Protestant churches a similar emphasis can be discerned.¹⁹ For example, one strand of the Reformed tradition, generally associated with Martin Bucer and John Knox, has emphasized ecclesial discipline as a “mark” of the church along with the Word and sacraments.²⁰ As this theological position suggests, apart from a disciplined community in which Christian character is faithfully formed, it is improbable that the Word will be rightly proclaimed and heard and the sacraments rightly administered. Here Bucer and Knox contribute an important insight for contemporary homiletical reflection. In fact, this insight has been confirmed by many pastors, who regularly comment on how much more congregation members get out of sermons when they are engaged in disciplined Bible study.

The Christian educator, Michael Warren, has also recently emphasized the intimate link between life practices and Christian worship. Noting the importance that the early church placed on the relationship between life practice and worship, Warren argues that a similar connection is vital to the church today; *lex vivendi* belongs with *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*.²¹

Unfortunately, the implications for worship of the early communities’ preoccupation with life structure has [sic] not been explored sufficiently. If we accept that worship is no “pure” realm of activity independent of the lived vision of the worshipers, and if we further accept that the actual vision of life brought to worship is influenced by the pattern of commitment worked out in one’s life practice, then everyday life practices of both individuals and of the local church itself need examination....As life structure goes, so go the enacted beliefs of the community; the quality of the community’s worship is determined more by the quality of the community’s life structure, than by the quality of the words spoken or the rituals enacted during worship. For a credible Christian life, the proper relationship among all three elements: life structure, worship, and belief, is crucial.²²

In short, the character of the participants plays a crucial role in Christian worship, including the hearing of the Word in preaching.

Consistent with the tradition of character ethics, these various representatives of the Christian tradition highlight the importance of the character of the hearers in

preaching (not to mention the character of the preacher). Form and technique are not enough, for the effectiveness of preaching cannot be isolated from the various activities, practices, and habits that form Christian character and shape the life of the community within which the preaching takes place. In theological terms, one might say that the Spirit works in the preaching and hearing of the Word not just in the discrete events on Sunday morning, but through all the communal practices that form the character of the people who come to preach and hear the sermon. It is this broader context of preaching, along with a more profound understanding of the ethical dimensions of preaching, that character ethics can help us recover.

NOTES

¹ I have borrowed the term “quandary” from Edmund L. Pincoffs’s important book, *Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1986). Although Pincoffs’s constructive proposal is problematic, his book contains one of the best critiques of modern, quandary ethics.

² The classic work in the field of virtue ethics is Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the contemporary renewal of virtue ethics, two of the most important philosophical works are Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); and Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970; reprint, London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986). In the Christian tradition virtue ethics has been more influential among Roman Catholics than among Protestants, largely because of the work of Thomas Aquinas. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II and II-II. Specific sections of the *Summa* related to virtue ethics have been published as separate volumes. See Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on Happiness*, trans. John A. Oesterle (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); and *Treatise on the Virtues*, trans. John A. Oesterle (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). In the contemporary renewal of character ethics among Christian ethicists, the major figure has been Stanley Hauerwas. See Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (1974; reprint, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986); *Character and the Christian Life* (1975; reprint, San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1985); *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). See also Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990); and Paul Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

³ Wadell, *Friendship*, 23.

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas defines character as “the qualification of our self-agency formed by our having certain intentions rather than others. Our character is the orientation that gives unity and direction to our lives by forming our intentions into meaningful configurations determined by our dominant convictions.” *Vision and Virtue*, 3.

⁵ Aquinas, *Summa*, II-II, 24, 2.

⁶ Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 67, 37.

⁹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 114-115. Like Murdoch, Hauerwas has emphasized the metaphor of vision in his discussion of virtue ethics; the way we act in the world is inseparable from the way we “see” the world. As Hauerwas writes, “The moral life is therefore not just the life of decision, but the life of vision—that is, it involves how we see the world.” *Vision and Virtue*, 20.

¹⁰ Hauerwas has stressed the narrative and communal dimensions of character. Particular virtues are embedded in particular communities and narratives. For example, a list of Christian virtues would differ considerably from those emphasized by Aristotle or by modern, liberal American culture.

¹¹ For a discussion of the character of the preacher, which is an obvious concern of character ethics but which I am not considering in this essay, see Stanley Hauerwas, “Clerical Character,” in *Christian*

Existence Today (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth Press, 1988), 133-48; and Richard Lischer, "Before Technique: Preaching and Personal Formation," *Dialog* 29 (Summer 1990): 178-82.

¹² Stanley Hauerwas, "On Developing Hopeful Virtues," *Christian Scholar's Review* 18 (December 1988): 111.

¹³ Aristotle, *NE*, 1103a11-1103b25; Aquinas, *Summa*, I-II, 49-55.

¹⁴ Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Rhetoric*, and *Politics* are meant to be read together.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *NE*, 1179a34-1181b25. For a discussion of the relation between ethics, rhetoric, and politics in Aristotle see Larry Arnhart, *Aristotle on Political Reasoning* (Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981); and Eugene E. Ryan "Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Ethics* and the Ethos of Society," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 13 (1972): 291-308.

¹⁶ Marianne Sawicki, "Recognizing the Risen Lord," *Theology Today* 44 (January 1988): 442.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 443.

¹⁸ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (1944; rev. ed. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1953), 96.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the important link between discipline and preaching in the Reformed and Methodist traditions see John Leith, *The Reformed Imperative* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 27.

²⁰ See *The Scots Confession*, Chapter 18. On Bucer see Kenneth R. Davis, "No Discipline, No Church: An Anabaptist Contribution to the Reformed Tradition," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 13 (1982): 43-58. "Discipline," as I am using the term, does not refer to the rather negative judicial form which it has often taken in the Reformed tradition, but rather to the practices, activities, and habits that help to form disciples.

²¹ Michael Warren, "The Worshipping Assembly: Possible Zone of Cultural Contestation," *Worship* 63 (1989): 4-7.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.