



**Proper 4, Year C – January 31, 2010**  
*Love in a Corporate World*

**A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham**

The following sermon is rated "P" for prophetic. It derives from the recognition that the Church needs not only to comfort the afflicted, but also to afflict the comfortable.

So, you better sit down.

Love is the ultimate four-letter word. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians makes it abundantly clear that whatever we do without love is a hollow gesture. And in reality, we do want to love God and love our neighbours. We do not always succeed, but we continue to try. And often we do succeed, particularly in interpersonal relationships, where love is – as Paul's letter suggests – fairly easy to define. Patient. Kind. Trusting. Enduring.

But this morning I want to venture into a realm where love is less easily defined. I want to talk about something that in itself is difficult to comprehend. And that is systemic evil. For some time, I resisted the notion of systemic evil. Systemic evil was, to me, nothing more than collections of individual evils. If all these individuals were truly loving, evil would disappear in that abundance of love.

But I am beginning to understand that, perhaps, it is not that easy – as I was reminded by a recent decision of the Supreme Court of the United States. The decision struck down a federal law prohibiting corporations and unions from using their funds to buy media time to advocate the election or defeat of a candidate for public office. The court held the law an unconstitutional prohibition of free speech. Consequently, corporations may, for example, buy television time to support or oppose candidates for public office.

Now this applies equally to Exxon-Mobil as it does to the Sierra Club. The concern arises, however, because Exxon-Mobile has fuller coffers than the Sierra Club. I am an uncompromising believer in free speech. We tread in very dangerous territory when we allow government to prohibit or penalize speech of any kind. And especially in the realm of political discourse, any form of governmental censorship in my book is anathema. Yet, having read the salient parts of the opinion of the court and the primary dissenting opinion, I remain ambivalent about this decision.

I think what troubles me – and what leads us back to notions of systemic evil – is not so much the fact that large multinational corporations may have more money to spend than an incorporated non-profit social agency. From my experience as a lawyer and lobbyist for one of the then richest and most powerful industries in the United States, I know the profits of profitable enterprises buy a lot more tools of influence than the donated funds of non-profit, public-oriented groups.

Yet my concern arises from the fact corporations are not people. They are an artificial creation of law. Yes, they are governed by people to be sure. But those people are obligated to protect and further the interests of shareholders. And the basic and overriding desire of shareholders is to make money. For-profit corporations are just that, corporations formed to do business and make a profit. To properly do their jobs, corporate directors must honor their obligations – what we call in law their fiduciary duty – to their shareholders and the shareholders' interest in maximizing the return on their investment by consistently attempting to boost earnings and the value of the company.

Some may call this view naïve and myopic. They may say that corporations provide considerable support for charitable activities. Granted, and God bless them. But it misses the point. Donating a portion of corporate profits to charity has no effect on what business a corporation is in or how it goes about its business. Who would be impressed by a weapons company that made flamethrowers, but made huge contributions to a burn hospital, or a tobacco company that contributed to lung cancer research?

And I would never deny that corporate directors and officers are human beings with consciences. But, again, when they function as corporate directors and officers, their obligation is not primarily to their consciences or to the public interest, but to the pecuniary interests of their corporate shareholders.

The nature of the corporation, of the corporate form of business organization, therefore, presents a systemic issue. It is difficult, if not impossible, for a business corporation to have a conscience or concern for the public good that overrides its fundamental interest in maximizing earnings and making a profit. In starkest terms, a corporation simply cannot afford to have a conscience. Not because corporate directors are malevolent or insensitive, but because their overarching obligation in the director's chair is essentially one-dimensional, the pursuit of the almighty dollar. As they say, where one stands depends on where one sits.

This rings of a harsh prophetic judgment, I know. And it is. But I do not presume to condemn anyone, even the corporate officers and directors among us. As a lawyer, I understand the seriousness of a fiduciary obligation, in the case of a lawyer to represent the client's interest, regardless of whether one agrees with it. As those of us who lobbied for the broadcast industry often said, "They can make us defend it, but they can't make us watch it." My complaint then is with a system that effectively robs individuals of their abilities to invoke their consciences or the public good in making decisions that often have significant effects on their neighbours, whether those next door or those around the globe.

Now, realistically, no government of a civilized country is likely to eliminate the corporate form of business organization in our lifetimes. So how do we resist and defy and even defeat systemic evil? What are we to do? How do we love in a corporate world?

If we are a director or officer of a corporation... We must do our best. Our consciences will follow us to the board room, even if the system is not designed to accommodate it. Jeremiah was not terribly enthralled with the idea of being a prophet, but he accepted his fiduciary obligation to the God that created and loved him. He spoke up, even when no one seemed to be listening.

Let me also offer some more practical less moralistic advice. When business turns a blind eye to greater interests than the bottom line, it invites government to impose regulations upon it that protect larger public interests. In my experience, however, government regulation is always well-intended, but often heavy-handed, always costly, but only sometimes effective, and even occasionally invokes the law of unintended consequences. So, remember, good corporate behavior usually will be preferable to – and less costly than – government regulation.

As mere shareholders, we must ask if the company is a good responsible corporate citizen? If not, do we really want to be an owner? Is there a way we can have some positive influence or effect some change for the better? We may be a voice in the wilderness at a shareholder's meeting, but if no one asks the hard questions, how

can we even begin to find answers? Jesus did not hesitate to endure the rage of his home town when he spoke prophetically.

As consumers, we must consider the implications of our choices of products and services. Are the employees and workers paid a living wage or exploited? Do executives command exorbitant salaries and bonuses? Does at least share of corporate profits flow to charitable causes?

Paul warns us that a world without charity – without love – means nothing. And the only antidote to the various systemic evils that plague the modern world is love. Even in the face of systems that seem to embrace little that love has to offer. Our love. Our love expressed. Our love lived. Fearlessly.

Amen.

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