



Come, Lord Jesus

George is a colleague ethicist. He's also a great friend. And I think one of the reasons George is such a treasured friend is because he doesn't run from life's ragged edges. I can tend to reduce ethical problems to intellectual puzzles; George—without checking his brains at the door—appreciates the "felt" dimension of those problems.

He tells the story of a medical student who came to him, distraught. She had been doing a clinical rotation with a respected member of the medical faculty. The doctor was teaching her how to do a rectal exam. He had first completed the rectal on a patient, when he waved the med student over, and, saying to the patient (a blind man), "We just need to check something more," instructed her to repeat the exam. The student came to my ethicist friend George, not because doing a rectal had traumatized her, but because of the way it happened.

She felt dirty because she had assaulted another human being, a blind man who hadn't been warned or asked. She felt ashamed of herself because she had meekly complied with the orders of the doctor. In the name of being a good student, she had perpetrated a deception, and undermined the basis on which patients of hers in the future would be able to trust her. As she saw it, her integrity—the deepest moral commitments by which she wanted to define herself—had been challenged and she had caved. And she felt betrayed by an authority figure on whom she relied for instruction and mentoring.

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George calls such moments experiences of moral distress. The emotion is foremost, but it is the cause of the emotion that defines it. Values have been compromised in a way that make one believe one has been wronged and done wrong. George could have tried to calm the student, and counsel her in any of a number of ways (“Don’t feel so bad, the patient wasn’t hurt; you learned; you had no real choice, don’t feel guilty; register a complaint with the Dean; etc.”). And in its time, I’m sure he did counsel her. But the feeling itself is important and valid. Had she felt nothing—as it seems many med students before had not—we would think less of her as a human being.

What would the doctor-teacher have said for himself, had he been asked? Would he have been able to give the student some background that she didn’t know at the time, such as that the patient had been asked before she arrived whether he would agree to help with student learning? We don’t know. I do know, however, that teachers can experience moral distress of their own.

I had been teaching at what was then Catherine Booth Bible College for a couple of years when word made its way back through the Army “grapevine” that I had been teaching students in my ethics class that premarital sex was okay. Since I did not, and do not believe that, I was puzzled as to where such a rumor would come from. But I wasn’t just puzzled. I had been misrepresented, that misrepresentation was believed, and consequently my reputation and the reputation of the College was damaged.

Had one of my students wanted to seduce someone else and therefore found it convenient to listen selectively in class? On being “caught,” had he or she found it convenient to transfer responsibility to a professor far away? Since everything operated

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behind the scenes as rumor and suggestion, I felt powerless to do anything about it. Except maybe stop teaching anything about sexual morality from then on—which would have been academically irresponsible.

These incidents have been in my mind recently because of what I sense to be profound moral distress within our Salvation Army right now. I think many Salvationists, many who look to the Army for care, many who look to the Army as an avenue of service, are suffering in one form or another, feeling that they have been wronged, or done wrong, or been powerless when the integrity that defines us has been tested.

As in the cases of the “blind rectal” or the “misunderstood professor,” I’m sure that there are God-honoring, integrity-preserving ways forward. But, as my wife says, I need to be on guard against over-intellectualizing. Life is complex. Life is messy. Even people who confess Jesus hurt each other—wrong each other. And at this moment, as much as any moment in my life, I am feeling a need for God, not just another moral principle.

Don’t get me wrong. Moral principles are essential, and the true principles come from God. But you know what I mean. It is grace we need. It is for grace we must plead. Grace to admit we don’t have it all together. Grace to listen before speaking. Grace to forgive. Grace to seek forgiveness. Grace not to be judgmental. Grace to widen the horizons of our love. Grace to lift up the fallen as we are lifted ourselves. Grace to receive assistance. Grace to see every living human being as someone for whom Christ lived and died and rose again.

This is Advent. We sing once again of Jesus’ coming to Bethlehem. We read the Magnificat, Mary’s heart cry that the world be set right. At the end of the Bible we read the

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heart cry of other people who know the hurts and bruises and moral distress of living in a world of skewed values—"Come, Lord Jesus." Come as you did to Bethlehem, they say. Come and set things right. Come and strip away the evil that we do and the evil that we experience. And, I cry, Lord, if you tarry, leave your Holy Spirit with this army of salvation, please!

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