

MORAL ISSUE

Rev. David C. Bloom 2/11/05 Real Change

Is the fact that 8,000 people in King County do not have a place of their own to go to at night a moral issue?

Is the fact that a person can work full time in Seattle and still live in poverty a moral issue? Is health insurance a moral issue?

Is it a moral issue when a mother takes her sick child to an overcrowded emergency room instead of a local clinic or doctor because she lacks medical insurance, along with 44 million other Americans?

If we listen to the religious right, these are not moral issues. The only morality that seems to matter to them is private sexual behavior. According to many who voted for George W. Bush for President, they supported him because he opposed abortion and gay marriage. Are these really the critical moral issues facing our society today?

It seems to me that we need to have a serious conversation about what constitutes morality. To narrow our focus to the realm of the sexual, while disregarding the massive human suffering people experience every day due to homelessness, poverty, mental illness, chemical addictions, and domestic violence, not to mention the violence being carried on in our name in Iraq is, in a word, immoral.

I am a Christian. I believe that moral behavior is a critical component of the Christian faith and is also critical to our health as a society. Treating one another fairly. Doing the right thing. Working for the common good and not just my narrow self-interest.

Community, honesty, equality, openness... all of these have to do with moral behavior. They are important. And they are essential to the preservation of our democracy.

When Robert Taylor, Dean of St. Mark's Cathedral, asked a group of activists and service providers about the most important thing the church should do to address homelessness, their resounding response was "moral leadership."

They were talking about stepping forward into the public arena with all the passion of the Old Testament prophets to declare that in God's sight, homelessness is morally wrong, and that as a society we have the moral obligation to eradicate it. We have the moral obligation to work so that every person in our society has a place of their own, food on their table, care for their physical and mental health, a livable wage, financial assistance if they are unable to work, and most important, the clear and consistent conviction that they are valued as a member of our society.

The Rauschenbusch Center that I direct is named after Walter Rauschenbusch, who has been called the father of the "social gospel" in America. Simply put, the social gospel was a revolutionary idea that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the wake of the worst abuses of industrial capitalism, an idea that God is concerned not only about people's spiritual welfare, but also the social and economic conditions that oppress them.

The Old Testament prophets and their persistent demand for justice within ancient Israel was one of the bedrocks of the social gospel. Writing in his seminal work, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, the best-selling religious book in America between 1907 and 1910, Rauschenbusch said that "The morality which the prophets had in mind... was not merely the private morality of the home, but the public morality on which national life is

founded. They said less about the pure heart for the individual than of just institutions for the nation.”

If we are going to talk about moral values, then we need to be clear about what we mean by “moral.” Certainly, morality is not limited to the realm of the sexual. A concern about morals is essentially a concern about what is right and what is wrong in all aspects of life. If the conversation does not include poverty and war and homelessness, then we will have failed truly to comprehend the depths of legitimate moral concern.

Worse, by our obsession with private sexual morality, we will have failed to address the broad range of issues that affect our nation as a whole — issues that will have a long-lasting impact on the lives of our people and the fate of our democracy.

David Bloom is director of the Rauschenbusch Center for Spirit and Action, which equips local congregations and their leaders for social ministry with an emphasis on spiritual reflection and social action.