

# *Imitations of Morality*

**Rev. David E. Bumbaugh**

**The Unitarian Church in Summit**

**Oct. 11, 1998**

I have known since last January that sooner or later I would have to deliver this sermon, a sermon I really have not wanted to deliver. It is a sermon rooted in deep anger and frustration, bordering on despair. And yet, it seems to me that if religion is to be relevant, it must respond to the issues of the day, even when it seems that little will change as a result. And so, I am going to speak with you this morning about the issues of morality and the imitations of morality which have paralyzed our national government over the past few months -- the crisis created by presidential indiscretion and the response to that indiscretion.

Let me begin with a confession. I am something of an anomaly, one of the minority in the country who has not followed every twist and turn of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair with avid and insatiable interest. I do not own a copy of the Starr report; I have not read the report; I do not intend to read the report. I have not tuned into any of the cable news presentations of the titillating and salacious tidbits describing the sexual encounters of the President and the White House intern. What I have learned about the matter is what is in the air all around me and therefore unavoidable -- snippets of conversations, occasional sound-bites, and the news reports carried by National Public Radio. Nonetheless, this has been sufficient to generate strong opinions and reactions.

The first of these reactions centers on the behavior of the President of the United States -- the admittedly "inappropriate" behavior of the President of the United States. Like most people who have expressed opinions, I find the President's behavior inexcusable and irresponsible, reckless and despicable. I come to that judgment after a significant amount of experience dealing with cases of sexual misconduct.

As some of you know, during the decade that I have served as minister of this congregation, I have been deeply involved in the life of the Metro New York Chapter of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association, the local unit of our national professional group. For several years, I served as president of the chapter and in more recent years, I have been honored to have been selected by my colleagues as a "good officer." That rather stilted term is not, at least directly, a judgment on the manner in which I have performed my duties and my responsibilities. Rather, the good officer is the "minister to ministers," the person designated as a resource, a counselor, a friend to ministers who find themselves in difficulty. The good officer mediates conflicts between ministers, and sometimes represents the minister in conflicts within the local church. More to the point, the good officer is also the person charged to be especially mindful of the code of professional conduct by which all members of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association are bound. It is the good officer's duty to remind ministers of the

ethics of our vocation, to caution against violations and to admonish violations when they occur.

On at least three occasions during my years in this district, ministers in Unitarian Universalist congregations have been accused of inappropriate sexual behavior involving members of their congregations. One of those ministers was removed from fellowship by the Unitarian Universalist Association; one was reprimanded by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association; and one resigned from his position. Nor are these the only instances when Unitarian Universalist ministers have been disciplined by our denomination for violating a code which assumes that the sexual relations between ministers and members of their congregation, or interns, or counselees, are inherently problematic, because they often involve violations of trust, and inevitably represent an inherent imbalance of power between the individuals involved. We, as ministers and as a movement, take issues of trust and integrity very seriously and do not excuse sexual misconduct lightly. I have seen a number of valued colleagues across the country removed from their positions and from the profession when it has been demonstrated that they have been engaged in unethical and inappropriate sexual behavior. Always it saddens me, but it is clear to me that the integrity of our ministry demands that we guard against these kinds of betrayals.

It is this mindset I bring to bear in my personal response to the behavior of President Clinton. While his position, however exalted, is not the equivalent of that between a minister and a congregation, in engaging in sexual activity with a young intern in his White House, the President has violated a fundamental trust in which the inherent imbalance of power in the relationship placed upon him the responsibility to say "No." I cannot accept that this is a case of "Boys will be boys," or a situation to be excused by the claim that "Everyone does it," or by the assumption that men, by nature, are too weak-willed to understand and resist the advances of a young woman. In fact, my experience leads me to believe that what we are dealing with in this situation, and in most similar situations, is not a matter of sex. It is a matter of power -- the exercise of power, the lust for power, the coveting of power, the insecurity of power. And that is what makes President Clinton, not Monica Lewinsky, primarily responsible for all that has flowed from their liaison. He is the person in the position of power; regardless of her behavior or motives, it was his responsibility to say "No" to inappropriate behavior, and he is the one who failed that central moral obligation.

I am angry; I feel betrayed by this President for whom I twice voted. But this is not the first time I have felt betrayed by this President. I watched in dismay as the Man from Hope, Arkansas, the man who promised to secure the rights of gays and lesbians in the military and throughout the society, walked away from that promise when it became inconvenient. I watched him attempt to promote a policy of "Don't ask, don't tell," of firmly locking the closet door, as somehow the moral equivalent of open advocacy of the civil rights of gay and lesbian citizens. I watched him waltz away from proposals to legalize and recognize the monogamous relationships between gays and lesbians, as if affirming lasting unions between gays somehow undermines heterosexual marriage.

Nor was this the only disappointment. I watched him walk away from any plan to provide single-payer health care for the American people. I watched him advance to a program designed to savage the poorest of the poor under the rubric of "ending welfare as we know it." My disappointment with and anger at this President predates his sexual folly. Nor am I surprised that he would attempt to obfuscate when his sexual indiscretion was about to be made public. He seems to me to live by a very convenient morality, a very plastic set of values, a very flexible standard of integrity. Unfortunately, in this regard, he is not much different from many people who achieve high position within our political system.

Having said this, I must hasten to add that my anger and disappointment is not exhausted by the behavior of Mr. Clinton. I find myself outraged by the moral posturing of Congress and the special prosecutor. I wonder on what basis Kenneth Starr believes himself justified in expending millions of taxpayer dollars to propose impeachment based on a tawdry charge of sexual impropriety and the understandable if not laudable effort to keep that impropriety from becoming public knowledge. It does not in any way exonerate the President to agree that the private lives of few, if any, of us could withstand the intense scrutiny of a special prosecutor backed by the limitless resources of the federal government. For the special prosecutor to use his position to serve a personal vendetta and then to wrap his behavior in the sanctity of the Constitution is as despicable as the acts he has uncovered and broadcast to the world. This is not about law, this is not about morality. This is about power; this is about a personal agenda; this is imitation morality.

And what about the Congress? This is a Congress which proclaims to the world that it is "shocked, shocked to discover such behavior in the White House." Of course, similar behavior on the part of congressional leaders is dismissed as "youthful indiscretions." (I suppose that from the point of view of Strom Thurmond, such indiscretions might be called youthful; I am more inclined to regard them as evidence of a failure to grow up.)

Worse than the sexual peccadilloes of those who would stand in judgment over the President is the behavior of the Congress itself. This guardian of governmental morality is the same body which has failed to pass any kind of campaign reform law, or make any significant effort to level the playing field between the rich and the poor as they seek to influence the government. It is a long-standing truism that "Americans have the best government money can buy." But despite the public outcry, Congress continues to dither, failing to reform a system which by any objective view can only be defined as corrupt and immoral.

This is the same Congress which has presided over an era in which enormous wealth has been concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, in which vast sums of wealth have been transferred from the poor to the rich. This is the same Congress which lusts after the federal budget surplus, however illusory, hoping to pass a pre-election tax-cut bribe. This is the same Congress which, while forcing people off the welfare rolls, refuses to increase the minimum wage from \$5.15 per hour to \$6.15 per hour, thus ensuring that many people working full time will continue to live in poverty. This is the same Congress which cannot find the moral stamina to pass health care reform despite the fact that

statistics continue to point to a growing number of Americans who have no health care insurance and who cannot afford even minimal health care services. This is the same Congress which, being responsive to the demands of money and power, has slipped anti-environmental legislation into bill after bill. This is the same Congress which, because so many of its members are on the tobacco dole, has been unable to find a way to pass anti-tobacco legislation. This is the same Congress which is currently contemplating legislation which would require states to treat 15-year-old offenders as adults and to house them in adult prisons.

And this is the same Congress that is so busy with moral posturing that it has little time and little desire to confront the real issues of our time. Wrapping itself in imitations of morality, this is a Congress which has no stomach to do the public business: to create a government in which the voices of all may be heard, to create a government which sees as its first obligation to serve and protect and advance the interests of those least able to protect themselves; to protect the environment against the greed of those who would degrade the earth for a quick profit; to advance a vision of global community which is not fettered to market forces, but which seeks to redress an imbalance which supports a system in which the world's 225 richest individuals have a combined wealth equal to the annual income of the poorest 47 percent of the world's population. There are profound moral issues confronting us and our government, but Congress has chosen to focus on issues of relative insignificance.

And worst of all, in a few weeks we will have the responsibility of electing a new Congress. Because we have allowed ourselves to be gulled and cozened and diddled by the media, by our own prurient fascination and by a Congress spouting imitation morality, the odds are we will elect more of the same, assuring that hard-won gains will be reversed and the long-term vital issues will continue to go unaddressed. I am angry at a President who repeatedly failed his opportunity for leadership; I am angry at a system which allows the pettiness of an independent prosecutor to derail the government; I am angry at a Congress which refuses to see beyond the scramble for power in the next election; I am angry at myself for remaining too long silent and for failing to find the time and the energy to hound my representatives until they weary of hearing my name and receiving my communications.

There is a story told in the Gospel of John which seems inescapably appropriate to the times in which we find ourselves. It is my favorite story in the entire New Testament. Most scholars -- even those who are convinced that Jesus actually lived and that the New Testament contains a reliable account of his life and teachings -- agree that this is an apocryphal tale, one that only John recounts and one which doesn't even appear in the oldest copies of John's Gospel. But like most mythic stories, this teaching does not rely upon its historicity to make its point.

According to the account, one day his opponents brought before the Rabbi a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery and asked of him what should be done with her. It was clearly intended as a trick question, since the law on this matter was very clear and it was reinforced by ageless tradition. According to the law, a woman caught in adultery

was to be put to death by stoning. (Boys being boys, the man involved received no such harsh treatment.) Sensing that something dramatic was about to happen, a crowd soon collected about the miserable captive and her accusers and the Rabbi. One can almost see them jostling for position, looking around for a good heavy stone so that they might be ready when the time came to pummel the life from the woman's body.

The Rabbi, says the story, was silent. He knew that this was not a question of law; this was not a question of morality; this was a question of power. Without a word he knelt down and began to scribble something in the dust. The woman's accusers, who had hoped to trap the Rabbi in an awkward position, refused to be put off by this silent gesture. "Come on," they taunted. "You are a wise and learned man. Surely you know the law and what it demands. We've presented you with a simple question. What shall we do with this wretched woman?"

The Rabbi remained silent and continued to write. The story nowhere tells us what he was writing there in the dust, and, of course, messages written in the dust have no permanence, so we have no way of knowing if there was some special wisdom in the words he wrote, or only a stalling for time. The crowd, hefting stones and waiting for an opportunity, shifted from foot to foot. The accusers demanded an answer. The poor woman, with nothing to hope for, stood in silence. At last the Rabbi looked up and said, "Let him who is without sin among you hurl the first stone."

There was a long silence, punctuated by the sound of heavy stones dropping to the ground, and feet moving quietly away. At last the Rabbi stood up. He and the woman were alone. Looking at her, the Rabbi asked, "Who accuses you?" She looked about in surprise and replied, "No one."

"Then neither do I accuse you," said the Rabbi. "Go and sin no more." And the woman went away, disappearing from the pages of history and mythology into whatever she finally made of her own life.

It is a story we would do well to remember as we confront the imitations of morality which mesmerize our national life. The issue before us is not an issue of law, though some will attempt to treat it as such; nor is it an issue of morality, though many more will mistake it as such; it is an issue of power and at stake is the question of whose voice will be heard, whose needs will be met, whose whims will be catered to. It is that which we should keep in mind as we evaluate the circus which will be presented to us in the coming weeks.

Our Universalist forebears used to insist that we are not punished *for* our sins; rather, we are punished *by* our sins -- that our acts carry their own inescapable consequences and our lives are shaped by the courage or cowardice, the integrity or the falseness with which we live them. I submit to you that Mr. Clinton's foolish, destructive, despicable behavior with a White House intern falls more in the category of sin than high crime or misdemeanor. I submit to you that Mr. Clinton's foolish, perhaps illegal attempt to keep his behavior from becoming public is more a matter of sin than high crime or

misdemeanor. I submit to you that we have more important things to do, as a nation and a people, than trying to determine what should be the punishment for such sin. Let the sin punish the sinner, and let the nation get on with the people's business.