

April 29 Message from Mary Lou

Greetings! MS U * LV U * C U SOON I HOPE!

Ah yes, the notion of “rules” and “obedience”. This example is from a Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget and deals with a child's concept of right or wrong, permitted or forbidden. He went out into the streets of Geneva, approach children playing marbles, and ask the three questions:

How old are you? How do you play marbles? How do you know that is the way to play?

What he came away with was the attitude of children at various ages to rules of any kind, to religious and secular authority, to the seriousness of breaking rules and the procedures for changing them.

Piaget discovered 3 stages in the evolution of the child's sense of authority.

Young children see the rules of a game, and by extension all the rules they are given, as having been handed down by an unquestionable authority. This is how you are supposed to play/ behave, and it never occurs to them to do things differently. Piaget would ask these young children. “Why do you have to do it that way? Suppose you played the game some other way?” They would stare at him uncomprehendingly and say, “But that's not right. If you did that, you wouldn't be playing marbles.” Rules are rules, and one becomes part of the system by accepting and obeying them.

As children grow older and approach adolescence, Piaget found, they begin to question those rules, as indeed they begin to question all authority. Now they don't have to be prompted by an adult's question. They themselves say “Who says we have to do it that way? It's our game; why can't we make any rules we want?” Typically, children then go through an irresponsible phase, inventing a lot of silly rules, sometimes making the game too easy until it is not fun anymore, sometimes making it impossibly hard, before coming to the conclusion that they do have the power to change the rules, but the rules they invent have to be fair and reasonable, or else playing the game won't be any fun.

At this point, they are at the threshold of maturity. They understand that the rules don't come from “on high.” Rules are made by people like themselves, tested and perfected over the course of time, and can be changed by people like themselves. Being “good” no longer means simply obeying the rules. It now comes to mean sharing in the responsibility of evaluating and making rules which will be fair to all, so that we can all enjoy living in a fair and just society.

Piaget suggests that these attitudes toward a game of marbles are a paradigm of our attitudes toward all rules, all authority. When we are young and weak, we picture the source of rules as being all-powerful and all-knowing. We show appreciation for guidance by accepting and obeying the rules.

Children enter into adolescence, and they are suddenly no longer interested in being “good.” Obedience, winning the approval of their parents, is no longer their highest value. Piaget's second-stage subjects did some silly things with their marbles until they realized that really wasn't all that much fun, Adolescents do a lot of foolish things, sometimes hurting themselves or others, in the process of showing how free of rules they can be. They will reject good advice rather than be in the position of listening to parents and other authority figures. That is their notion of being “free.”

And here it is that Piaget has something to teach us not only about the mind of a child but about the future of religion and the quest for a good life. We learn from him that *obedience is not necessarily the highest religious virtue*. A religion that defines morality as obedience to its commands is appropriate to children and immature people, and may have been appropriate to humankind as a whole when civilization was immature. The Bible may speak in terms of “Thus says the Lord”; it may promise rewards to the righteous and punishment to the wicked, because it was addressed to people in the earliest stages of their moral development. A religion which persists in understanding “good” to mean “unquestioningly obedient” is a religion which would make perpetual children of us all.

There is a part of us that wants to remain a child. There is a part of us, especially in times of stress, that wants to be cuddled and taken care of, to be told, “There's nothing to worry about; I'll take care of everything for you. That wish for someone to step in and take over when life starts getting complicated is the child in us speaking from our adult bodies. When religion panders to that wish, when religious leaders keep us in childlike submission and dependence, telling us what to do and asking our obedience and gratitude in return, it does us a disservice.

This is where the religion of Ecclesiastes' day failed him.

Authentic religion should not listen to us when we say “This is too hard. Tell me what to do so that I don't have to figure it out for myself.” It should encourage us to grow, to leave childish patterns behind even if we would rather remain spiritual children. (“Encourage” is such a good word.) Religion should not be in the position of giving us answers. It should give us courage to find our own way.

The conclusion then leads us back to an earlier message. Our relationship with God. Finally, Ecclesiastes decides that all of life is meaningless and empty without God.

***We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.
1 John 4:13***

Next Week: Empathy & Kindness