Was discussing a couple of recent local murders with the Walmart cashier. One, a recent alleged murder of an aunt by her 15-year-old nephew. Another, a son of a mother. Yikes. One wonders: if not safe with family, wherefore art thou “safety”?

The discussion meandered to speculation about family situations and company kept. One can’t help but think that such coldness toward human life cannot be the fruit of good moral conditions and examples, but rather a hardness toward the good and moral developed over years and maybe decades. If not by family, perhaps by companions or mentors—real or fictional.

Then I recalled a recent discussion about a certain TV series in which the criminal family/gang does a lot of bad things—killings, intimidation, theft, etc.—and yet the individual character is very likable in their own way, struggling with the intra-family relationships and challenges that we all have. One participant in the discussion quipped wryly: “They don’t kill anybody unless they have to!”

Ummmm…

Back in the “old days,” villains were frequently portrayed as really bad, and good guys as really good—conveniently attired with black and white hats, respectively. But more recently in such dramas, there tends to be the delving into complexities of human relationships and problems of both the good guys and bad guys, blurring the lines between the two ever increasingly. Someone might argue that such is perhaps more in line with reality, but also perhaps it engenders confusion between right in wrong, especially in persons who develop to idolize power, wealth and deceit over morality.

And then the question may come: What is morality? What constitutes it? Who is to say what is moral and what is not? If there is no “standard” for morality, then selfishness can become as “moral” as altruism and self-sacrifice.

Of course, thousands of years of religion and philosophy tend (strongly) toward the direction that morality is based in equity, fairness, justice, kindness, etc.,; as St. Paul writes: “…the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22-23) And this isn’t necessarily what “bestest for the mostest” (e.g., two wolves and a lamb voting on what’s for dinner), but also includes individual rights which we in this country are so jealous to protect. But it seems that “looking out for #1” regardless of the cost to others—if not becoming increasingly accepted, is at least more prevalent. One need only check the spam folder in email to find any number of scams that may rob you blind, and who has not heard of some of the more trusted elderly left impoverished because of some smothered-tongued slickster. And, of course, things like mass shootings rise (or, rather, descend) to a whole new level; think “Dante.”

One’s family situation when young is, of course, beyond our control, or even influence. For example, some families we’ve encountered actually teach their youth how to get away with crimes—not just big-time organized crime families, but even within small communities. This is simply a sad reality. One can only think, as with those in prisons as well: “If they had only channeled all that energy and effort toward the good…”

How much more important, then, for families and friends in our day to be good influences and examples for the young, and on all whom they meet, live and work with; this benefits not only ourselves, but perhaps even more so those whom we may influence. Hopefully that little seed of a kind word or act will take root in the other’s conscience and memory, and spread to their own personal value system. But, the unplanted seed with never grow, and after planting the good gardener cultivates and waters with consistency in attitude, kindness and consideration.

We are reminded of St. Paul again: “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company ruins good morals.’” (1 Corinthians 15:33); and “…what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?…Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean …” (2 Corinthians 6:14-17) Yet Paul also writes: “I wrote to you … not to associate with immoral men, not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.” (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). So … hmm, what to do? Come apart, but don’t be apart?

We find our example in Jesus dining with tax collectors, who were considered terrible s…...