

Wesley United Methodist Church
February 5, 2017
Who are you?
Title: Live with Integrity
Text: Isaiah 58:1-12
I Corinthians 2:1-16
Matthew 5:13-20

The story is told of John Smith who “was a loyal carpenter, working for a very successful building contractor who called him into his office one day and said, ‘John, I’m putting you in charge of the next house we build. I want you to order all the materials and oversee the whole job from the ground up.’

“John accepted the assignment with great enthusiasm and excitement. For ten days before ground was broken at the building site, John studied the blueprints. He checked every measurement, every specification. Suddenly he had a thought. ‘If I am really in charge,’ he said to himself, ‘why couldn’t I cut a few corners, use less expensive materials, and put the extra money in my pocket? Who would know the difference? Once the house is painted, it will look just great.’

“So, John set about his scheme. He ordered second-grade lumber, but his reports indicated that it was top-grade. He ordered inexpensive concrete for the foundation, put in cheap wiring, and cut every corner he could, yet he reported the purchase of much better materials. When the home was completed and fully painted, he asked the contractor to come and see it.

“‘John,’ said the contractor, ‘what a magnificent job you have done! You have been such a good and faithful carpenter all these years that I have decided to show my gratitude by giving you this house you have built, as a gift!’”ⁱ

Sadly, while we may laugh, and think he got what he deserved, we also likely have to admit that this is not really terribly shocking. Living with integrity has always been and will continue to be a challenge for humanity.

Will Rogers once said that we should “Live in such a way that you would not be ashamed to sell your parrot to the town gossip.”ⁱⁱ

Living with integrity has a lot to do with how we live when no one is watching, but it also has a lot to do with how we live when we know that people are watching.

In the passage we heard from Isaiah, we heard a description of living without integrity. It describes the people complaining about what they believe to be God’s lack of attention. The prophet says, “You wonder why the Lord pays no attention when you go without eating and act humble. But on those same days that you give up eating, you think only of yourselves’ and abuse your workers. You even get angry and ready to fight. No wonder God won’t listen to your prayers.” (CEB Isaiah 58:3-4)

Then the prophet explains what God really wants from them. “I’ll tell you what it really means to worship the Lord. Remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly. Free those who are abused! Don’t mistreat others or falsely accuse them or say something cruel. Give your food to the hungry and care for the homeless. Then your light will shine in the dark...” (CEB sections vs. 5-10)

There is a clear message that there cannot be a chasm between what we say and do when we claim to be worshipping God and what we say and do when we are living our daily lives. The two must go together.

Jesus tells us that we are to be like salt for everyone on earth. We use salt as a flavoring and we describe things as being salty. Medical people tell us that we need to be cautious about ingesting too much salt

and warn that most of our diets have far too much salt in them. Salt becomes a danger for those with high blood pressure.

In Biblical times, however, salt was more than just a seasoning, it was also a preservative used to keep food from going bad. Salt loses its saltiness when it is diluted or when it absorbs impurities and so it loses its value. Salt exists not for itself but to enhance others. So, we are called to be salt for the earth. We are called to be disciples who serve Christ and preserve and enhance the message of God.

One of the commentators put it this way, “Jesus is calling the Israel of his day to **be** Israel indeed, now that he is there. What he says here can now be applied to all Christians, but its original meaning was a challenge to Jesus’ own contemporaries. God had called Israel to be the salt of the earth; but Israel was behaving like everyone else, with its power politics, its factional squabbles, its militant revolutions. How could God keep the world from going bad – the main function of salt in the ancient world – if Israel, his chosen ‘salt’ had lost its distinctive taste?”ⁱⁱⁱ

This idea of being the “salt of the earth” has become so much a part of our language that when I typed the previous sentence, my computer encouraged me to consider avoiding overused expressions and suggested that I replace “salt of the earth” with “a very good person.” But Jesus means more here than just being a “very good person”, he is challenging his hearers to be those who are part of the world but at the same time, add something good to the world by preserving God’s word, by pointing toward God and keeping God’s word from being diluted or contaminated in ways that point to something other than God. .

I sometimes think of this when I hear people using God and country together. I believe that we need to be careful about creating a civil religion.

According to the New World Encyclopedia, a “civil religion is the folk religion of a nation, often involving ritual expressions of patriotism.” Christianity is for many a civil religion – and with it goes the message that God and country are the same. They are not!

There were several things that jumped out at me in President Trump’s inaugural address, but I think the piece that disturbed me the most was aligning God with our nation. Please do not get me wrong. I love the United States and I am grateful that this is where I live.

Please let me explain why what he said bothered me, and why I think it is important for today. The president quoted the Bible (Psalm 133:1) when he said, “The Bible tells us how good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity” and then went on to say, “we must speak our minds openly, debate our disagreements honestly but always pursue solidarity.” I absolutely agree that it is pleasant when we live together in unity. I further agree that we must speak our minds openly, and debate our disagreements honestly. I think whenever possible, it is good to pursue solidarity. However, it is also important to recognize that there are times when we cannot stand together on certain issues. Can we all agree that we want what is best for our country and for our world? Probably. Can we all agree on exactly what that is and how to attain it? Definitely not!

The solidarity that our President called for had to do with national solidarity as he said, “When America is united, America is totally unstoppable.”

He went on to say: “There should be no fear. We are protected, and we will always be protected. We will be protected by the great men and women of our military and law enforcement.” I have no quarrel with this and I honor those who have served our country through the military and law

enforcement. It was the next words that had me rising from my seat, “And most importantly, we will be protected by God.”

This is where I feel that to live with integrity, to be salt to the earth, I need to say that there is a difference between God and country. I do not believe that anyone – including the President – no matter who that is – has the authority to declare that “We will be protected by God.”

He closed his speech by twice saying, “God bless America.”

I believe that it is important for us to look first to what God is calling us to be and to do. We cannot ask God to bless us personally, or our country, or any other group if we are not doing what God asks us to be doing.

I believe that if we are going to invoke God’s blessing and ask for God’s protection, then we need to be asking whether or not we are doing the things that God blesses.

God has created each and every one of us, and God loves all of us – individually and collectively. However, God is not at our beck and call to bless everything that we say or do.

I guess, I think that this is one place where we may have allowed the saltiness that we are to be as followers of Christ to be diluted with the things around us. I believe that God does not protect people from getting cancer. I believe that God does not put a protective bubble around us to protect us from either evil or the actions of ourselves or others. I do believe that God is with us and helps us to face whatever happens in life.

To claim that God will protect us because we are America is, for me, a dangerous statement. As a pastor, as a theologian, and as a Christian I believe that first each of us in our daily lives needs to be asking God if we are doing the things that God wants us to be doing.

We are to be salt for the earth – and that means preserving it, and preserving God’s word from being diluted or contaminated. Mark Twain once said, "It's not the parts of the Bible that I can't understand, that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand." The sermon on the mount contains some of the things that I do understand – and some of the things that bother me because they call me to actions that are sometimes uncomfortable.

Jesus didn’t stop with telling us that we are to be salt for the earth, he went on to call us the light of the world. That’s a common image in the Bible. We heard in the reading from Isaiah that if we are worshipping God in the right way and doing what God wants us to do, then our light will shine in the darkness. The commentator wrote, “Israel was the people through whom God intended to shine his bright light into the world’s dark corners, not simply to show up evil but to enable people who were blundering around in the dark to find their way. But what if the people called to be the light-bearers had become part of the darkness? That was Jesus’ warning – and also his challenge. Jerusalem, the city set on a hill, was supposed to be a beacon of hope to the world. His followers were to be like that” their deep, heartfelt keeping of God’s laws would be a sign to the nations around that the one God, the creator, the God of Israel, was God indeed, and that they should worship him.^{iv}

Salt and light – powerful images to describe a life lived with integrity. Powerful images to describe a life lived by following God first and everything else second. I believe that following God first helps us keep all the other good priorities and wonderful things of our lives in perspective. It also means that sometimes we need to challenge conventional wisdom or the words being said by others.

This is where I find the reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians to be helpful because I don't want to be the one standing up and leading a group in protesting something. Paul writes, "You'll remember, Friends, that when I first came to you to let you in on God's master stroke, I didn't try to impress you with polished speeches and the latest philosophy. I deliberately kept it plain and simple: first Jesus and who he is; then Jesus and what he did – Jesus crucified. I was unsure of how to go about this, and felt totally inadequate – I was scared to death, if you want the truth of it – and so nothing I said could have impressed you or anyone else. But the Message came through anyway. God's Spirit and God's power did it, which made it clear that your life of faith is a response to God's power, not to some fancy mental or emotional footwork by me or anyone else." (Message, I Cor 2:1-5)

We are not called to be great orators or to speak with words of wisdom. We are called to remember that the wisdom and the way that Christ has shared with us is often not the same as the wisdom and the way of the world. We are called to live each and every day in integrity – living out our faith wherever we are and no matter who is watching – or not watching.

I had wanted to show you a brief video but it didn't work out. It is said that one picture is worth a thousand words, but I am going to use words to try to describe the picture. (I'll try not to use a thousand).

Two young men are driving down a country road in a Jeep with the roof open. They look like typical teenagers in a western or southern rural area complete with sunglasses and cowboy hat . The music is blaring from their radio and they are clearly shaking their heads and moving in time to the music. Ahead of them is a truck from a beverage company. Suddenly

one of the sliding side doors on the truck flies up exposing the stacked six packs of beverage. One of the guys says to the other, “Whoa, dude! You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?” Meanwhile the music is playing “People see you havin’ fun.” The driver pushes up his sun glasses and responds, “Yeah, I’m going to cut the gap.” He quickly passes a car on the right and then pulls back into the left lane heading for the truck.

As they come alongside the truck at a stop sign, the passenger starts to reach up saying, “I’m gonna get it, I’m gonna get it.” He rises almost to a standing position as his fingers climb each row of bottles and then says, “I’m going in.”

What do you think happens? Probably not what you expect. As he reaches higher and higher, his fingers touching each row of bottles, he finally grabs hold of the strap for the door and pulls it down, shutting the door. The young men then take off passing the truck and continuing on their way as they proclaim, “Saved the Day”

The screen then shows the words, “Integrity, pass it on.”^v

Let each of us live with integrity so that others may see and know who we are and whose we are.

ⁱ Illustrations Unlimited, James S. Hewett, Editor, Tyndale House, 1988 p.288

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p.55

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew for Everyone, Tom Wright, Westminster, John Knox Press, p.40

^{iv} Ibid, p.40

^v <http://www.values.com/inspirational-stories-tv-spots/78-reach>