

"HONESTY AND INTEGRITY"

INTRODUCTION In the life of every minister there come some sermons that preach themselves. By that I mean that they seem to emerge in spite of the plans and desires of the minister himself. This was the experience I had this week as I prepared for this morning. The week after Easter I decided upon the general theme for today. I was planning to tie this sermon to the fact that Summer is here, and for many this is a time to take a break from the routine, to enjoy a change of scenery, as well as a change of pace. In fact, I had three ideas ready, and when I'm at that point I feel I'm on my way.

But for several weeks now another theme has been gently poking itself into my consciousness. If you believe, as I do, that the pulpit is to be responsive to the events that the people in the pew are reading about and experiencing in their daily lives, perhaps you will think this is the explanation. It is part of it; Karl Barth once said that sermons should be prepared with the Bible in one hand and the daily paper in the other. I felt myself drawn away from my original intent and pushed down another line of thinking. Strange how this can happen. In view of what we've been reading and hearing and seeing, I knew that I needed to put away my previous idea for today and spend some time talking about honesty and integrity in life.

DEVELOPMENT I need to say as I begin that I do this very humbly. I do not have the answers to complicated national and international problems. But I do believe that the standards by which a nation lives are often a reflection of the values which its people hold. In this sense, I believe that Watergate is both a window and a mirror. If integrity is not one of the values of our society, perhaps this would be a good time to ask ourselves "why not?" In recent weeks, I have found myself asking how it is that a society gets to the point where anything goes as long as you don't get caught at it, and that the end justifies the means.

And the more I thought, the more I began to be aware that integrity does not emerge full blown. It is built out of thousands of little acts and decisions over a great many years. What we do and the way we do it becomes the basis of our character, and stamps patterns into us that have serious consequences for our entire lives.

Think for a moment about the cheating at West Point. Why is cheating more of a scandal there than any other place? Perhaps only because we expected more. But if we expect more there, we get it by making sure what happens long before.

When the cribbing scandals broke out at one of the Service Academies a while back, there was a newspaper article about why young people get mixed up in this kind of trouble. The report pointed out that when he is six years old, a youngster sees his father slip a five dollar bill to a policeman to forget a speeding citation. When he is eight, he hears his parents discussing ways to cut corners on their income tax, and explaining "everybody does it". When he is twelve, he breaks his glasses and hears his mother tell the insurance company that they were stolen, thus collecting the price of a new pair. When he's out for the high school football team, the coach shows him how to catch hold of his opponent's shirt while blocking or to swivel a surreptitious hip into a pass receiver. When he gets his first job in the supermarket, he learns to put the firm tomatoes on top of the box and the overripe ones underneath.

Maybe he gets himself into the Service Academy, though he's only a marginal student when a friend who is in the top 3% of his class is rejected because he doesn't play football. Then an upperclassman sells him some exam answers. He is

caught in a cheating scandal and washed out. Meanwhile the commandant is passing out his press releases about cleaning out the bad apples from the barrel and his folks wonder how he could ever have done a thing like that! And the newsman adds with a note of sarcasm, "If there's one thing the adult world can't stand, it's a kid who cheats!"

I suppose what that article was really telling us is that honesty begins early on in life, and that it begins at home. Not many of us would take a bribe or be a partner in fraud, but almost all of us, I suspect, are involved in that first step - in the area of misrepresentation and little white lies of convenience and accomodation. They seem so harmless as we begin. Why do we do it? How and why does it all come about? I have three suggestions to offer, and I do this quietly and humbly, hoping that they will provide all of us with some clues to answers for these questions.

WE LOSE OUR INTEGRITY WHEN WE LOSE
THE SENSE THAT THIS IS A MORAL WORLD

We lose our integrity when we lose the sense that this is a moral world. I believe that one of the key issues is how you see the world. If it is a world where it's every man for himself, then it is only sensible for each of us to get all he can, and it's tough for the man who is left out.

Now the early pages of the Old Testament are filled with stories which indicate that this was pretty much the world view with which its people lived. Cleverness was regarded as far more of a virtue than honesty. And you can tick off those familiar stories. Here's Jacob, for instance, deceiving his father in order to win a birthright by putting on some of his brother's after shave lotion... the great inheritance swindle. Here is Laban, Jacob's future father-in-law, refusing to give the young man the bride that he has worked seven years to gain... the broken contract. Here is Jacob as an old man, deceived by his sons who have sold his favorite son into Egypt as a slave. These stories read like the "God-father" all over again. The cycle goes on and on and on for generation and generation because nobody is breaking it. You can see the truth of that old proverb, "Unhappy is the man who tells a lie because he can never believe that anyone else is telling him the truth".

I believe the key question is really whether you understand this to be a world where privatism is the name of the game...where the aim of the successful life is to get all you can no matter how you trample other people, or use them. If that is the kind of world you think this is, then I can see why you would feel free to lie, to cheat, to deceive, to steal until you get caught.

But the very fact that you have come to worship means that this is not the truth about the world as you understand it. The man of faith believes that he lives in a moral universe, where a lie will not endure forever, where integrity and trust are the real name of the game. He believes that the goal of life is not just to get, but to give. He believes that people are responsible for one another under the one God who is the Father of us all. The man of faith believes that there are some objective truths built into the fabric of this universe that cannot be brushed aside, and that there is a judgement on our lives which we cannot evade.

Earlier this week, as I settled myself into a seat in a cab, the cabbie began to expound his philosophy of life. "Yes, sir...this is a dog-eat-dog world...you gotta get the other guy before he gets you. And I'm gonna get mine, and get it now. I'll lie, I'll cheat, I'll do anything, but I'm gonna get mine, mister, and you can be sure of that!"

I began to feel somewhat uncomfortable, and remarked to him, "Well.....In that case I better keep my eye on the meter". That threw him for a second or two, and then he said, "Naw....I wouldn't do a thing like that to you...if I was to do that, the worms would gag on my bones".

Well, that's a rather picturesque way of putting it, but it says it. He had the sense that something in this universe, even if only a worm, would stand in judgement over him for his dishonesty. Perhaps the first question that we need to ask about mass dishonesty is in whose world we really think we are living. And that is a religious question.

THE SECOND CAUSE FOR THE LACK OF INTEGRITY IS
A FAILURE TO ACCEPT OURSELVES AS WE REALLY ARE

The second cause for the lack of integrity is a failure to accept ourselves as we really are. Much of our deception, I feel, hangs on this. We can't believe that we are enough as we are so we want to present ourselves in a better light by distorting the truth just ever so lightly.

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We lower our golf score in order to make a better showing, and we raise our bowling score for the same reason. Ask a fisherman the size of his best catch and watch him struggle with honesty. Ask a clergyman how many people were in church, and he faces the same problem. I'm reminded of the story of the woman greeting her pastor after church saying, "Pastor, your sermon on telling the truth was....was....was awful". We all find it hard to be really honest. None of us seems to be immune at some level. We fall into a style of life that is built on falsehood and distortion of the truth.

And then we see what it looks like written in capital letters in living color. A soup company puts marbles into its cups to make the soup appear more meaty and rich in the ads on TV. And we say how awful it is to deceive us like that. You know how the misrepresentation goes. But remember it begins with little things, and it stems in part from wanting to appear better than we know ourselves to be, and so we fall into the pattern of deception and misrepresentation to cover us up.

There are many stories about the stormy career of Talullah Bankhead. She lived flamboyantly and larger than life, and there was always another story circulating about her. One time she was playing in The Skin of Our Teeth, and she met a girlhood friend and fellow actress, Estelle Winwood. Talullah immediately launched into that kind of monologue for which she was famous. "Dahling" she purred, "You must come tonight to see me in the Skin of Our Teeth. I'm divine. There isn't another actress who could play it with such vitality and warmth.... be so irrepressible and irresistible....be so breezy, give the verve and vivacity and sparkle and sardonic wit it needs". She rattled on and on and then her friend suddenly seized her by the shoulders and said, "Tallulah, how can you stand there and boast about yourself like that? Have you no modesty?"

Suddenly Miss Bankhead collapsed in her arms and became the little girl she had once known and confessed, "I said all those things, Estelle, because I'm not sure I am any good at all in this part".

Often it's that way with us. We use deception to cover up our own sense of inadequacy, to make others think we are worth more than we think we are. But this, too, is an issue with religious overtones, for it exposes our real commitment and where it is placed. Reuel Howe has remarked that if we truly believe that God loves us as we are, we would then be able to live before the world as the people we really are on the inside. We would be free from worries about what anybody else thought of us. If we are acceptable to God, of whom should we be afraid?

I believe that there is no greater "good news" in the Christian faith than this - that God does love us as we are. He does not wait until we are good enough to love. He does not ask that we wait until we are good enough to love Him. He loves us now. And the knowledge of this fact is what separates the person of faith from others. They know they are loved. And if you believe it, you are delivered from trying to be what you are not. You can be honest and open about yourself without sham and hypocrisy and deception.

WE TRY TO PRETEND THAT WE HAVE THE WHOLE TRUTH

Now normally I would stop here at the top of page four of my notes, but I'm going to give you a bit more this morning since I didn't get to preach last week and since I won't be preaching next week. I want you to get your money's worth. Let me suggest a third reason why there is so much trouble about honesty and integrity today. It stems, in part, from the fact that we try to pretend that we have the whole truth.

There are far too many people around making the claim that they have the only truth there is. I think we see it in the religious realm, in the political one, and in the scientific world. Perhaps once and for all we could acknowledge that no one of us has the total truth about anything and anybody who say he does is suspect at once.

A look back over history could appall you at the way people have acted as if the truth were close up and there was no more to be had. For instance, in 1832, the people of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, refused the use of their school house for the discussion of the desirability of a railroad for that locality because the school board felt that,

"Railroads are impossible and a great infidelity. If God had intended that his intelligent creatures should travel at the frightful speed of seventeen miles an hour by steam, he would have foretold it in the Holy Prophets. Such things as railroads are devices of Satan to lead immortal souls to hell".

Bruno, the great Italian astronomer, was burned at the stake by the Inquisition because he told of worlds other than those approved by the established church, which saw itself as holding all the truth there was.

One hundred years ago, the Commissioner of Patents sent in his resignation to President Lincol, as he felt that everything worthwhile had been invented and he wanted to take up a new occupation which would provide for his old age.

We smile at all of these because they tell us that there is no way in which truth can be limited or be the property of any one group. There is more than one level of truth, and it comes in more than one form and from more than one place.

Alan Paton says that man's intellect is like a searchlight by which he seeks the truth. He shines its beams here and there and describes for others what he sees caught in the beam. But he sees what is in his beam, and he needs to know what is being seen in the beams of others in order to complete his full picture of the truth. I find this a helpful simile. It suggests to me that the person who is deeply concerned for honesty and integrity in our time had better cultivate openness to listening and hearing opinions which differ radically from his own. I think we need to know what others are seeing and understanding because they have something to teach us. We do not know it all. Part of integrity is to be open to the opinions of others without necessarily agreeing, but hearing them, not shutting them out.

During the war in Southeast Asia, things got to such a fever pitch that any person who cared to speak against the war somehow became the enemy of America. When that happens we begin to lose our perspective, to lose the chance to have a corrective on our own behavior.

A Christian can never believe that he has all the truth there is. He believes that "the Lord has yet more light to be revealed", and that the truth can stand attack because in the long run it does not need to be protected by friends. We need to be open to hear those who do not agree with us, because they may have something to tell us that will be helpful to us. Nobody has all the truth for himself.

WHAT CAN WE DO? How can we be part of the solution, and not part of the problem? I think we can do three things.

One, we can cultivate with great care those virtues of honesty and integrity and practice them in our relationships, in our homes, in our society. And part of that cultivation is the development of the religious dimension of life so that we feel responsible to someone beyond ourselves.

Second, we can learn to accept ourselves as we are so that we have no need for false images to project to others. We find that as we accept ourselves more, we can accept others more, too, and help reduce the hypocrisy.

And third, we can work at keeping our belief systems open, by being willing to have our truth examined and insisting that others do the same, knowing that ultimately it is the truth that will make us free.

PRAYER Give us, O God, ~~the spirit which will enable us to hold passionate convictions and yet exercise dispassionate judgements.~~ Give us more tolerance and less temper. As we direct our thoughts to the problems of life, help us, O God, to think clearly, and then lead us out of ourselves toward him who is the purpose of all men, that we may show forth in our lives something of his life, that the world through us may be reconciled to thee. Amen