



“WISE UP...ABOUT INTEGRITY”

Bishop. Laurie Haller
First United Methodist Church
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Scripture: Proverbs 10:9, 16:11, 12:3, 19:1,12:20

Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but whoever follows perverse ways will be found out. (10:9)

Honest balances and scales are the Lord's; all the weights in the bag are his work. (16:11)

No one finds security by wickedness, but the root of the righteous will never be moved. (12:3)

Better the poor walking in integrity than one perverse of speech who is a fool. (19:1)

Deceit is in the mind of those who plan evil, but those who counsel peace have joy. (12:20)

The Servant Song:

**Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.**

When Gary and I were appointed to Birmingham First three and a half years ago, I was thrilled at the opportunity to be one of the pastors of this great congregation. But another part of me was scared stiff. Why me, Lord? I'd heard that Birmingham was not only the largest church in the Detroit Annual Conference, but it was located in a rather well-to-do suburb of Detroit.

“How am I going to fit in?” I asked God. “I don't wear make-up or jewelry, which honors my Mennonite background. I don't drink alcohol or even coffee. I don't have fancy clothes, and I'm not well-versed in social graces.” To top it off, when Gary and I met with the Staff-Parish Relations Committee for our introductory meeting, I didn't notice until we had reached Birmingham that the top button of my purple suit was missing.

“Oh, no,” I thought. “I’m doomed.” As it turned out, the SPRC Committee was most gracious, and I remembered something that a friend told me shortly before we moved to Birmingham. She said, “Just be yourself and love the people.” It’s the same phrase that many folks shared with me as I offered my name as an episcopal candidate this year. I said, “I’m not as smart, eloquent, theologically well-versed or social media savvy as many of the other candidates. What do I have to offer?” Again, the same response came back. “Just be yourself. Be your true self.”

Our theme for today is integrity, which comes from the Latin word *integer*, meaning whole or complete. *Integrity* is an inner wholeness which derives from qualities such as honesty and consistency of ethical and spiritual character.

Few would dispute that what our world yearns for the most in the year 2016 is integrity. What we desperately want and need from our leaders, whether in politics, business, education, the Olympics or the church, is character, fairness and honor. Yes, skills and effectiveness are very important, but none of that matters if we lack trustworthiness or if our inner and outer lives do not align. This challenge is not just for leaders, however. Each one of us is called to be a person of integrity, as well.

The Servant Song #2:

**We are pilgrims on a journey; we’re together on this road.
We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.**

In the book of Proverbs, wisdom is a product of integrity. What the wise teacher says over and over is that a holy life comes down to concrete practices that demonstrate grace and truth. That’s exactly what Jesus taught his disciples. Jesus was not only a living example of integrity, but he preached about character, honesty and generosity. Jesus encouraged people to be true to themselves and joyfully affirmed those whose actions were a positive example to others.

How do you and I model the integrity of God as well as the life and ministry of Jesus? First, integrity means that we are consistent, reliable and real. At first glance these characteristics may not seem too exciting. I was passing through the living room one time when our kids had the TV on. All I heard was one of the people in the sitcom saying, “Are there two duller words in the English language than trusty and reliable?”

Integrity may mean dull and boring, but I ask you. To whom do you turn if you’re in trouble and need help? I suspect you want someone with integrity. You want someone who will be there for you. Integrity means that our inner and outer lives are the same. There’s a unity of character, a steadiness that we can trust. Our words, actions and heart are congruent. We are real people.

Many years ago I walked into the hospital room of a woman who had had surgery the day before. She wasn’t a member of the church I served but was the chief executive of a community organization of which I was the Personnel Committee chairperson. I don’t think this woman was expecting me because as soon as she saw me, she covered her face with her hands and exclaimed, “O my gosh, I don’t have my face on.” What she was referring to was the fact that she wasn’t wearing any make-up. Of course, that didn’t bother me at all, but she felt exposed and vulnerable without her mask, so to say. She didn’t feel comfortable being real.

Have you ever read the book *The Velveteen Rabbit* to your children or grandchildren? It's a classic children's story about a velveteen rabbit given to a boy for Christmas. After playing with the Rabbit for a few hours on Christmas Day, the boy forgot all about him because he wasn't as nice as some of the boy's more expensive, mechanical toys, who were full of modern ideas and even pretended they were real.

The old, wise Skin Horse was the only one who was kind to the Rabbit, so one day the Rabbit asked the Skin Horse, "What is REAL? Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?" Skin Horse replied, "Real isn't how you are made. It's a thing that happens to you." "Does it hurt?" "Sometimes. When you are Real, you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, or bit by bit?" "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." To have integrity means that we refuse to be separated from our own soul. We are real.

The Servant Song #3:

**I will hold the Christ-light for you in the nighttime of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.**

Integrity also implies an internal disposition of stability. Proverbs 10:9 says, "Whoever walks in integrity walks securely." Now most of us tend to think of stability as a personal, psychological state. One of the most important roles that I will have as a bishop is to make appointments of clergy to local churches. At the same time, it is the role of the Board of Ordained Ministry here in the Detroit Conference as well as in the Iowa Conference to interview and evaluate candidates for ministry.

All candidates have to take a battery of psychological tests. When the Board of Ordained Ministry gets the results back, one thing they look for is stability. Will the candidates be able to withstand the rigors of pastoral ministry? Will they be able to receive feedback? Will they be able to engage conflict in the church with emotional intelligence? Will they be able to weather the inevitable crises? Or will they fall apart or alienate others by their defensive reactions?

Stability goes far deeper than personality traits, however. Psalm 26:11-12 says, "But as for me, I walk in my integrity; redeem me, and be gracious to me. My foot stands on level ground; in the great congregation I will bless the Lord." The psalmist says that those who are righteous are rooted and grounded in God, who is the source of integrity. Proverbs 12:3 says the same thing, "No one finds security by wickedness, but the root of the righteous will never be moved." They are stable.

Did you know that stability is one of the three vows, along with obedience and conversion of life, that form the basis of the sixth century Rule of St. Benedict? Benedict was the architect of European monasticism. For Saint Benedict, the heart of stability is found in this statement, "God

is here, not elsewhere.” As a monastic vow, this statement refers to a commitment to serve God and neighbor from within a particular community, and for some to spend a lifetime within the walls of the monastery.

For ordinary Christians, the concept of stability means that you and I accept our present life and situation, even with its limitations and struggles, as providing all that is necessary for a full and whole life. The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen talked about what it would mean to experience such stability, “Wherever I am, at home, in a hotel, in a train, plane, or airport, I would not feel irritated, restless, and desirous of being elsewhere or doing something else. I would know that here and now is what counts and is important because God wants me at this time in this place.”¹

Of course, this idea of stability counteracts the well-trod path of our upward mobility in America, a mobility that often leaves in its wake broken relationships, shattered dreams, disappointment, distorted causes and misplaced values. We also find it in people moving from church to church, always trying to find the perfect pastor or congregation.

Inner stability is essential for a life that is whole. We cannot be people of integrity, we cannot do good, we cannot change the world and we cannot give our lives for others if we are constantly chasing after one more thing for ourselves. Even, especially in a world that is constantly on the move, integrity means having the faith to be stable and rooted in God.

The Servant Song #4:

**I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh, I'll laugh with you.
I will share your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through.**

There's one more thing. Integrity means living by the grace of daily obligation. Integrity means doing what is right. Proverbs 12:20 says, “Deceit is in the mind of those who plan evil, but those who counsel peace have joy.” Those who plan evil do it in their minds and their hearts, for the heart is the hidden center of the person. But the heart's deceit includes self-deception as well as the distortion of reality. To have integrity is to be aware of what is going on in our hearts, constantly questioning our motives, and choosing to act in ways that honor God.

One of my favorite novels is *Father Melancholy's Daughter* by Gail Godwin. In the book, Adrian Bonner, an Episcopal priest, is talking with Margaret Gower, whose father is also a priest and is Adrian's mentor. Adrian talks about Father Gower in words that typify the essence of integrity. “He's not trendy; he doesn't pose. He's neither a self-transcendent guru nor one of these fund-raising manager types who have become so sought after lately by our Holy Church. He's just himself — himself offered daily.

“He worries about people, he worries about himself... He baptizes and marries and buries and listens to people's fears and confessions and isn't above sharing some of his own... His sermons have real substance; you can tell he wrestled them into shape with his whole mind — and he delivers them with conviction. He makes his services beautiful, he reminds you that the whole purpose of the liturgy is to put you in touch with the great rhythms of life. He's a dedicated man, your father. He's lonely and bedeviled like the rest of us, but he has time for it all and tries to do it right. He lives by the grace of daily obligation.”²

Do you know what I love most about Birmingham First? We are not Olympic champions or celebrated heroes. Nor are we perfect. Instead, our lives are lived by the grace of daily obligation. We are continually becoming who God created us to be, which in the end, is what is going to change the face of this planet.

There are dozens of ministries here at Birmingham First to which you freely offer your gifts and resources. Your lives are lived in the quiet corners of the ordinary, like the Velveteen Rabbit. You build tiny hearth fires of the Holy Spirit, sometimes barely strong enough to give off warmth. But to the person lost in the darkness, the small and steady flame of your integrity, your love and your acceptance of all, is the road to safety, the path to wholeness and salvation.

It is not given to us to know exactly who is lost in the darkness that surrounds us or even if our light is seen. We can only know that even against the smallest of lights, darkness cannot stand. When you and I bring hope to every place we go, whether it's Haiti, Costa Rica, West Virginia or the Baldwin Center — that's integrity. When you and I have the courage to be ourselves, whether we're interacting with our SOS guests, tutoring at a school in Detroit, serving dinner at Ruth Ellis or delivering Angel Tree gifts — that's integrity. When you and I are content to be rooted in the love of Jesus and live by the grace of daily obligation at work, at school, on the playing field, in our family or in this church — that's integrity. Why is all of this integrity? Because you are real. You are real.

The Servant Song:

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pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.**

1. Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, p. 83.

2. Gail Godwin, *Father Melancholy's Daughter*, New York, Avon Books, 1991, pp. 198-199.