

January 26, 2020
Rev. Dr. Jane Florence
Title: Heart of Integrity
Text: Luke 11:37-44



My first pastor appointment was a small church just west of San Antonio, Texas. There are modest 'hills' in the region north west of San Antonio and Austin, so the area is known as the Texas Hill Country. The lower Colorado River, San Antonio River, Guadalupe river and others wind through the hills headed to the Gulf of Mexico. Several man-made lakes make it a desirable recreational and residential area. I was on vacation in CA my second year at the church visiting my oldest daughter while my younger daughter stayed home in Texas to work a summer job before going to college. I was sitting at an outdoor concert in San Diego California on the evening of July 3rd when my cell phone rang.

Cell phones weren't used as much then as they are now, so it was not routine or casual for it to ring- more emergency only use. I answered. It was my daughter calling from home. It was late in the evening in California, a quick calculation, meant it was later in the night at home. I heard my daughter's voice, "Mom it's been raining for days. Water is spilling over the dam. They just announced that 'the integrity of the dam is uncertain.' They are evacuating the whole town. What do you want me to do?" I was 1300 miles away from my daughter, my home, my church. I could do nothing about the integrity of the dam. If the dam's integrity failed, the whole town would be gone in a wall of water. Integrity took on a whole new meaning that night. I don't know if Integrity has ever been any more important to me in that moment. Integrity had to do with life and death of people I loved.

We might first think of integrity as something to do with our moral character. The Random House Dictionary defines integrity as:

- 1 Adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty.
- 2 The state of being whole, entire or undiminished.
- 3 A sound, unimpaired or perfect condition.

When we look at those, they all really do mean the same thing. You could say that integrity is always doing the right thing, even when no one is looking, and even when the choice isn't easy. Or, you might see integrity as staying true to yourself and your word, even when you're faced with serious consequences for the choices that you're making. The last definition which is likely meant for structures, such as the integrity of a building or a dam can just as easily apply to ourselves as well. When we have integrity, we're whole and in perfect condition, and we're not compromised- in danger of falling apart, crumbling under too much weight. Integrity does have to do with life and death. It comes as no surprise then when we see teachings about integrity in all the world's religions.

The Talmud, a central text of mainstream Judaism pertaining to Jewish law and ethics, says that at first a bad habit enters our lives as an invited guest but before long it

becomes a member of the family and ultimately ends up taking over the house, and we have lost a precious part of who we are and who we want to be.¹

The Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” The shape of our character is where today’s step takes us. The shape of our character is not in a single grand moment of fame; it is in the everyday decisions that move us toward or away from our potential. That’s integrity.

The story is told of the boy Rahula who told a deliberate lie. When his father, Buddha learned of his son’s lie, he meditated then went to his son. Quietly, he showed his son a bowl with only a bit of water in it and said, “this is the spiritual life of someone who is not ashamed at telling a deliberate lie.” Then he threw out the water and said “thrown away like this is the spiritual life of someone who is not ashamed at telling a deliberate lie.” Then Buddha asked his son, “what is a mirror for?” The boy replied, “for reflection.” Buddha taught his son to reflect before acting. He taught that the things we do will either detract from or support the direction in which we want to go. ² That’s integrity.

In the eleventh chapter of our Christian text in Luke, Jesus is invited to dine at the home of a Pharisee. He accepts the invitation, arrives and seats himself. The Pharisee is appalled. The text said, “Jesus did not wash himself.” Jesus did not conform to the ceremonial rituals of purification, and that upset the Pharisee who follows the letter of the law. Jesus was upset as well, and he confronts the synagogue leaders. He recites a litany of the many ways they are not practicing what they teach. They wash. They “clean the outside of the cup, but on the inside they are full of greed and evil.” He could have stopped there; I think they got his point, but he continued. They pretend to tithe even down to the spices in their cabinets, but in truth they neglect justice and the love of God. Jesus continued; they strut around in pride and importance seeking their own gains, not God’s glory. They make laws which impose hardship on the people, that they themselves don’t even follow. They are fake. They lack integrity. Hypocrisy is the opposite of integrity. Then Jesus warns the crowds against hypocrisy.

Hypocrite comes from the Greek word used to describe actors on stage. Actors put on false masks and pretended to be someone other than themselves. It’s fine for the stage, but Woe are we when we live behind masks in real life. Jesus warns the crowds; the truth will come out; you will be found out. Jesus said, the truth will be “proclaimed from the rooftops.” I suppose our modern day interpretation would read the truth will be “plastered in the headlines” or spread across social media. Jesus teaches against hypocrisy because lying, cheating, pretending to be something other than truthful will destroy our integrity and that destroys our relationships, and Jesus is all about relationships. Lack of integrity erodes our trust and our relationships with others, and it will destroy us.

¹ Harold Hushner. *Living a Life That Matters*. New York; Anchor, 2001. p 28.

² <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/the-buddha-as-a-parent/>

Integrity is important- and it is not easy. We have an innate human desire to rationalize our behavior to avoid negative consequences and justify our actions. For example, if you ask high school students whether or not it is right to cheat, most will say that cheating is wrong. Yet research suggests that as many as 95% of such students admit to having engaged in some form of cheating. In hindsight, the students justify their actions as “not really cheating,” “no big deal,” or something that “everyone else does.” In other words, they rationalize their situational behavior, and this way they can still consider themselves to be honest. The reality is that all of us face integrity-based choices on a daily basis. Will we hold up under stress or is our integrity uncertain : when the waitress gives us too much change, when the clerk at the checkout fails to ring up one of our items, when we are invited into a conversation trashing a friend or co-worker, every time we take a test at school or fill in our tax return in April. Every time we want to back out of a commitment to a friend or decline an invitation, when the phone rings and our boss wants us to come into work again, there’s tension stress testing our integrity.

I remember when my niece was young, maybe 5 or 6. It was back when we all used home phones that had curly cords on them and attached to a wall- and we didn’t have caller id. The phone rang and she ran to answer it. She listened a minute then she held the phone out and yelled across the room to my brother, “Daddy, are you here this time? It’s your boss again.”

Integrity is a factor in all we do- work, family, - it is who we are. It is more than a civil law, it is more than a work or school rule; it is who we are. We can hide behind the masks - pretending to be otherwise - saying what we believe yet acting quite the opposite- But the longer we live behind the masks of hypocrisy- the harder it is to take it off.

We might put on our mask at first to avoid getting caught, then we are afraid to take the mask off believing no one will love us if they see the real us, the one we know behind the mask. But Jesus says the real us will be seen. Only when we see the real us, will we be free of our own deceptions. Jesus teaches that truth will set us free from false-self, and we can trust that the Divine Love of the Universe created and loves and knows us. That’s the integrity of God. God has integrity.

Scriptures are full of stories of the tensions between beliefs and actions. Peter is one of my favorite biblical characters. Peter is full of faith and zealous to do good. He is bold to speak and not afraid to act. Peter is named as the one in conversation with Jesus the most. Peter asks questions and shouts out the answer when Jesus asks a question. Peter means well, but Peter doesn’t always get it right. Peter shouts out the wrong answer at times. He sinks when he tries to walk on water. More than once Peter tells Jesus that Jesus has it all wrong. Peter falls asleep when Jesus asked him to stay awake and pray. After pledging to follow Jesus’ way of peace, Peter is first to pull out a sword.

When Peter is under stress and the pressure is intense, his integrity cracks; three times on one night, while Jesus is on trial for his life, Peter denies even knowing Jesus. Peter is the

rock but Peter isn't flawless; he isn't perfect. Maybe that's why I like him so. He wants to do right and he tried to and some of the time he succeeds, but some of the time, we don't.

When Jesus was killed, Peter's hope died on the cross with Jesus. After Jesus died, Peter went back to his old life. All the disciples did. Peter and the others climb back into their fishing boats. They fish all night on a dark, dark sea, of despair.

At daybreak, the sun is just coming up, the water is lapping against the side of the boat, the shoreline mist makes the beach somewhat blurry, but the guys in the boat see a figure on the sand. Peter knows; he just knows it in his bones. He knows Jesus! He jumps overboard and swims to shore. Drenched and cold he pulls himself out of the water, waiting for him is the warmth of a charcoal fire and grilled fish and smell of warm fresh bread.

The story is told, three times Jesus asks , "Peter, do you love me?" And three times, Peter has the opportunity to affirm his vow, "You know I love you, Lord." Peter claims and names his love in this wonderful scene rich in symbol and overflowing in Divine grace. Peter's integrity is made whole again; Peter's wounded spirit is healed. His pain is resolved as he speaks the truth in the dawning of a new day, and he experiences God's presence with him still. That's God's integrity- always welcoming us back - always loving us home.

Our greatest pain is the suffering that we incur when we have not been true to who we are and what we believe. We are not perfect; we are flawed. That's what it means to be human. We can look at all our failings and poor choices and: we can rationalize our behaviors, or blame others, or deny them and lie or play victim. OR We can learn from our mistakes, acknowledge the truth of our imperfections, and allow a new dawn to set our course again. We can claim and name hearts of integrity renewed by God's grace.

The dam's integrity held that night. The rivers overflowed, the town flooded, some homes were lost, but the town did not wash away. Integrity matters. it is life or death of us. As we strive to have integrity of heart and soul, God will meet us with Grace and peace will be upon us.