



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. David Fleming
July 21, 2019 Sermon

Our Moral Compass

The story of Job is very familiar and has been the subject of many references in the world's literature including Handel's quote in his famous oratorio: "I know that my redeemer liveth." And Job was a favorite of Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky. One of his biographers wrote: "that it put him into such a state of "unhealthy rapture" that he almost cried." Dostoevsky went on to write of that experience in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

In the Bible Job is first introduced in the Book of Ezekiel where Job is identified as a representative of true righteousness, but Job's story may date from many years before that. Its' classic theme is the posing of the question of why the righteous suffer. I'm interested in the idea that the same God who has given Job morality and righteousness is the God presented as accepting Satan's challenge to test whether Job will forgo his integrity in order to relieve his afflictions.

In the thirty-first chapter Job concludes his self-defense to God. He describes in poetic form a catalogue of righteous behaviors that cover many aspects of human life in his time and in ours.

Read Job Chapter 31

New Testament Lesson II Peter 1.3-14

Because I flunked retirement, I regularly lead worship at a variety of congregations whose pastors didn't flunk retirement and are thus able to take exciting vacations in far off places and leave me with preaching responsibilities. This often happens in the summer months. Therefore, I am in the habit of having several sermons in the works at one time, including this one. It was already in the mixing bowl when I attended worship here on June 30th. That Sunday Richard preached an excellent sermon that included multiple references to the moral economy. If anyone thinks this sermon, on a similar topic, is other than a sheer coincidence I have a story for you.

It seems a young preacher was accused by an older parishioner, probably a person who had heard many, many sermons in his life, of preaching the identical sermon three times in a row. The parishioner said: "Young man, don't you have any other sermons?" The pastor replied, "Yes, but you haven't done anything about the first one yet."

Several weeks ago, the Beavercreek Rotary Club had as its weekly program a presentation by Dr. Mark Smith of the political science department at Cedarville University. Dr. Smith gave an interesting presentation on his review of some of the projections about the 2020 national election. Members of the club asked several interesting political questions and then from the back of the room the only clergy currently a member of the club asked his. I said: "Dr. Smith, what about morality?"

There was a murmur in the room, some of it in humor, which is too frequently the reaction to my contributions. Dr. Smith's reply was both troubling but unfortunately not completely surprising to me. He said: "I don't believe morality will be a factor in the 2020 election cycle."

How disappointing. Even with all the lying and chicanery that seem part and parcel of American politics, maybe politics world-wide, there has still been an element of morality if not even, sometimes, a moral outrage at the behavior of some politicians and other high-profile citizens. The list of persons recently indicted for serious crimes reads like a who's who of the political, business and entertainment world. Our children and grandchildren risk living in a society in which immorality is a new normal.

It has been suggested that our nation has lost its moral compass. But is not national morality the incorporation of our collective, individual ethical bearings? Does that mean that your morality and my morality and John's and Jane's and Lucy's and Ted's moral postures have tilted? If not in regard to politics, in respect to other aspects of our lives as well?

One might argue that it is still there but muted by other factors, like partisanship, which some would say has become a scourge in our political system and even in our relationships with one another. Loyalty to tribe or party or alma mater must never replace right in the decisions we make or the actions we take. When 90,000 attendees at an Ohio State University football game collectively issue a loud, verbal signal that they disagree with a referee's appropriate decision or make a large noise in an effort to distract the opposition quarterback, I am disappointed. And I hold a degree from Ohio State. Fortunately, Buckeye better angels seem to be at work when an injured player from the opposing team regains his footing and is able to walk off the field and the fans express their pleasure. We express our partisanship in many other ways than by our support of national political parties. But, in whatever form, does it adversely affect our moral decisions?

I know, from my seminary education, that the Book of Job is about the testing of a man's faithfulness to God. And there is a lot of speculation about whether Job's friends were helpful or not. Even his dear wife, who bore as much of the brunt of Job's challenges as did he, is recorded as encouraging Job to give in and curse God. I submit that the book is as much about Job's character as it is about his relationship with God. I want us to think for a moment or two this morning about the source of Job's integrity.

We recognize the persistence of Job, the patience of Job, even Job's accusation in the ninth chapter that God is immoral. And some of us may have been at that place. But I'm suggesting that we look at the morality of Job and why he did not buckle in to the offer Satan proposed.

Job is presented as a very righteous man, a very moral man. The readers of this ancient piece of literature are posed with the question of whether Job, a righteous man, can be deterred from his intrinsic morality if enough adverse conditions persist to persuade him. He is not. Why not?

There are many philosophical theories about the source of human morality. Charles Darwin comes at it by way of the “social instincts” that any social animals, including humans, exhibit. This leads presumably, to the development of a conscience because of an innate propensity “to take pleasure in the society of its fellows, to feel a certain amount of sympathy with them, and to perform various services for them.” Of course, we know that we humans can also have anti-social or selfish motives as well as positive social motives.

But are we just social animals? Was Job acting on his natural tendency to do good rather than evil? Maybe Job was the beneficiary of good parenting. I remember some important lessons from my own parents about the difference between right and wrong. A mouth full of soap is an effective teacher about the choice of appropriate words, especially when addressing one’s father.

Well, after all, we do have the Ten Commandments. From our parent God through God’s servant Moses we have received and cherish great dictates concerning moral behaviors. All we have to do is follow the rules. Voting and other important decision-making must be very easy. And if you do not wish to struggle through moral application for yourself, just ask your pastor what to do.

A parishioner in a congregation I served came to me and inquired about a local medical practitioner who was scheduled to perform a significant procedure on her. She and I had knowledge of some personal behaviors of the physician in question and she wanted to know if I thought she should go through with the surgery. I also had first-hand knowledge of the individual’s professional skills and understood, or thought I understood, the parishioner’s dilemma. Not wanting to speculate whether morality, in that case, would compromise professional judgment on the part of the doctor, I shared an analogy. You need to know that I am disinclined to seek automobile or home repairs from persons I know to have a validated history of poor judgment let alone dishonesty, so beware! And that’s what I told Margaret.

She gently explained to me that she was not concerned whether the surgeon’s moral lapses would adversely affect his technical skills. She was concerned about her own moral compass. Could she, in good conscience, appear to endorse the immorality of another? Do we ever do that? Do we regularly risk doing that? Do we compromise our own integrity when we do not address moral lapses? In doing so, do we deny who we were created to be as children of God?

The second of the two letters attributed to Peter, leads us, directs us to a source of our personal morality that is way beyond social or psychological or philosophical or legal. Job did not receive moral instructions. There is no reason to believe that he read scriptural admonitions to not steal or bear false witness or covet his neighbor’s wife. Job was a person, as are we, who was a child of God, created in the image of God and he therefor apparently had a moral compass.

I find a compass to be an interesting analogy. There is in a compass an internal component that aligns itself with an external element, a magnetic pole, but the two are inter-related. Created by God and in God's image we are related to God. God is the source of our life, but also our north pole. Living out our lives as creation means we are, in a sense, living out the life and attributes of God in us.

As children of God we are moral because God is moral. Our compass is internal, part and parcel of our being created by God. Paul's words: "*We have everything we need to live a life that pleases God. It was all given to us by God's own power, when we learned that God invited us to share in God's wonderful goodness.*" (II Peter 1.3)

The issue is not just our personal goodness, noble as that may be. The German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote sections of his monumental work, *Ethics*, between 1940 and 1943. Some parts were in garden hiding places and others were already in the hands of the Gestapo before his arrest in 1943. They were later compiled and published after his death. Bonhoeffer was executed in a Nazi prison camp just two weeks before it was liberated by American military forces in 1945.

He wrote, in *Ethics*, that we must disregard the question of "how can we be good" and instead ask the question: "what is the will of God?" In his words: "Where there is faith in God as the ultimate reality, all concern with ethics will have as its starting-point that God shows Himself to be good, even if this involves the risk that I myself and the world are not good but thoroughly bad."

Where do people of faith begin? What powers our personal moral compass? It is God. Since it is God who gives us morality surely that lifts its practice to a much higher plane than personal integrity or the maintenance of community values.

So, what are Christians to do? And how boldly shall we speak or act? In the living of our lives? In the decisions we make? In being good citizens of this world, which God has given us as a home? Of course, there is a huge risk in being labeled judgmental if we publicly call out wrong when we believe we are seeing it. But what about our private, tacit approval? Is Dr. Smith's assessment correct? Will morality not be a factor for us in the 2020 election or in all others after that? In what direction points our moral compass? And how far will it take us?

In this and in all things, thanks be to God, the ultimate reality. Amen.