

Integrity in the Midst of Plausible Deniability
Mark 10:13-16; Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26

Psalm 26

¹Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.

²Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind.

³For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you.

⁴I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites;

⁵I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.

⁶I wash my hands in innocence, and go around your altar, O Lord,

⁷singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling all your wondrous deeds.

⁸O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides.

⁹Do not sweep me away with sinners, nor my life with the bloodthirsty,

¹⁰those in whose hands are evil devices, and whose right hands are full of bribes.

¹¹But as for me, I walk in my integrity; redeem me, and be gracious to me.

¹²My foot stands on level ground; in the great congregation I will bless the Lord.

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

^{1:1}There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

^{2:1}One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. ²The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it."

³The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason."

⁴Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. ⁵But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." ⁶The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

⁷So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. ⁸Job took a potsherd with

which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. ⁹Then his wife said to him, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” ¹⁰But he said to her, “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Mark 10:13-16

¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

The Sermon

Would you bow with me, as I share this prayer composed by the Rev. Dr. Laurie Ann Kraus, Coordinator of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance?

God of our life, whose presence sustains us in every circumstance,
As the sound of gunfire again echoes over a college campus
we seek the grounding power of your love and compassion.

We open our hearts in anger, sorrow and hope:
For those who have been lost: brothers and sisters, neighbors and friends
Your children, who sought to learn and grow together
whose lives have been cut off in the midst of new learning and hopeful growth.

We pray for those who have been spared
and those whose lives are changed forever
that they may find solace, sustenance, and strength in the hard days to come.

We give thanks for first responders:
who ran toward gunfire, rather than away
who dropped everything to save the wounded and comfort survivors

We pray for doctors and nurses and mental health providers
who repair what has been broken

who to try to bring healing and hope in the face of the unchecked principalities and powers of violence.

We ask for sustaining courage for those who are suffering and traumatized.

Once again, Holy One, we cry, how long, O Lord?
We wonder, when will it be enough?

We pray you will forgive our tolerance of cultures of violence
and impel us by your Spirit to renew our commitment
to work for an end to gun violence in our nation.

In the wake of an event that should be impossible to contemplate
but which has become all too common in our experience,
open our eyes, break our hearts,
and turn our hands to the movements of your Spirit,
that our anger and sorrow may unite in service to build a reign of peace,
where the lion and the lamb may dwell together,
and terror no longer holds sway over our common life.

In the name of Christ, our healer and our Light, we pray, Amen.ⁱ

Job's wife looked at the once robust man she had married, such a wonderful father, a good provider, a decent and hardworking citizen, now sitting in an ash heap with sores all over his body. He'd had it all, and had achieved it with integrity. And now he had lost just about everything—but that one thing would not be taken from him.

Maybe he was using the pottery shards to scratch the itches, or clean his skin, or maybe he's doing a kind of self-mortification.ⁱⁱ And he's sitting there in the ashes—some scholars think he was sitting in the community dump outside of town.ⁱⁱⁱ

The story of Job asks the question, Why do good people suffer? It's not about a conclusive answer as much as it is about dismissing as inadequate the possible answers that are available to us—namely, all of them.

As unrealistic as the stage-setting that pretends that God would ever abandon any mortal to a lesser authority just to prove a point—as unrealistic as that—is the supposition that you would ever see a perfectly righteous person who is not God.

But, asks the book of Job, what if you could?

What if a perfectly righteous person took everything you could possibly throw at them? What if even God handed that person over to a ruthless and all-powerful tempter?

In the face of all that, would that perfectly righteous person still hold on to their integrity?

Steven L. Carter, the Yale legal scholar who wrote a book called *Integrity*, began with something like an apology. “It must seem odd,” he wrote, “to find a book by a lawyer—still worse, a law professor—on the subject of integrity. So let me make clear that integrity is something I only think about, not something I exemplify.”^{iv}

One of my best friends works with an architecture firm in a major city. A few years ago, he was telling me that they had been commissioned to create a public memorial to a historical event. There were several families contributing to the memorial but the family who were giving the lion’s share suddenly presented the design team with a dilemma: they liked the design; they would support the project; but they wanted their family names to go on a giant plaque right at what would be the visual opening point of the memorial.

Well, this wasn’t really supposed to be about that; there were a lot of people being memorialized and this family wasn’t really part of that. But they wanted their names chiseled in stone and prominently visual.

So the firm was in a huge dilemma. This was partly a question of morality. Should the firm say no to the family, and risk losing the project for their firm and depriving the community of an important monument to people who had made heroic sacrifices? Or should they acquiesce to the donors’ request, which would more or less ruin the intended effect and undercut the moral underpinning of the whole thing?

When my friend told me about this dilemma at his work place, I said to him:

You know, I am part of an organization where people contribute their money trusting that the Holy Spirit speaks through the congregation to lead, guide and direct what we do—which we call the mission of the church.

Members don't talk about themselves as "donors," giving their money as a grant to an organization, but as people who want to participate in God's plan by returning God's money—of which they see themselves only as stewards—for God's purposes.

They share what they can, because they're grateful to God—
for who God is, and for the gift of life,
and for what God has done, and is doing,
and what they trust and believe God can and will do.

They give because they want to participate in what God is doing in the world; they *want*—nobody talks them into this; they *want* to be part of what God is doing: in conflicted communities, in broken lives, in hungry households, and for everyone whom God loves—which is everyone.

I said all this, and after a few seconds, my friend at the architecture firm said, "Bully for you." Or words to that effect.

Sure, sometimes, we are better at thinking about integrity than exemplifying it. But we strive for it, we reach for it, we try our best to live in it, because for us, it's a matter of faith. Integrity is a theological matter; it shows what we believe about God. We will *not* curse God and be done with it, no matter where we're sitting, because we believe that there is a God who rules this universe, and God is good.

I was attending a funeral service for a man I'd never met, and the preacher told about all the different areas in which this man had been known. The preacher said the man was genuine, authentic: the same person in church, at work, in town, with his family, with his friends, on committees, in the community. All these things, said the preacher, were integrated—which is the root word of "integrity."

Integrity is when thought, word, and deed are all related; when what we believe is evident in every aspect of our lives, whether it's convenient or inconvenient, even when it costs us something; even in the age of plausible deniability, when we always have reasons available to us to explain away decisions we could make that would be less than consistent with what we believe.

We are told that the longtime producer of 60 Minutes used to keep a cartoon in his office. A man and an attractive woman are alone on a desert island, and she's keeping her distance and saying, "because *I* would know."

A long time ago I was moderating a session with a great guy who had very definite and sometimes cantankerously shared views about a lot of things.

Some issue came up that was not perhaps the most crucial consideration regarding the survival of the kingdom of Christ—I think somebody wanted to donate an artificial tree for use in the sanctuary in Advent—and my guy David was firmly on one side or the other of allowing that. I can't even remember which side, but the majority of the Session ended up voting the other way.

On the Sunday morning after that Thursday evening session meeting, I overheard him in the hallway, just outside my office door, talking with another parishioner, and he was passionately articulating the position of the majority who had voted the opposite of what he had voted. And when he talked about how and why the session had arrived at its decision, he spoke in first person: *We* came to this conclusion.

He and I found ourselves coming from sometimes polar opposite viewpoints over the years. But I never, ever questioned his integrity.

You may have heard of the young woman from Pakistan, just turned 18, Malala Yousafzai. She was, from childhood, an advocate of children's right to be educated, girls as well as boys. For this, the Taliban had threatened her, targeted her, and eventually found her. She was on a bus when the gunman came in and demanded to know which one was Malala. He shot her in the head.

She survived, and is now the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. She said, in a speech at the United Nations, "I am not against anyone, neither am I here to speak in terms of personal revenge against the Taliban or any other terrorist group. I'm here to speak up for the right of education for every child. I want education for the sons and daughters of the Taliban and all terrorists and extremists."^v

On an American talk show recently, the host said to her, "You say that you're not mad at the men who shot you. How do you maintain that spirit of forgiveness? What is it that leads you to that?"

And she said, as she has said before: "I think of the world as a happy place, and I believe that I should treat others the way I want them to treat me."

“And it’s a very simple rule, already there: the Golden Rule, to treat others the way that you want them to treat you. And I want everyone to be kind to me, to love me, to take care of me, to forgive me if I have done something wrong.

“And that’s what I have chosen in my life. I have forgiven them, and I am hopeful that they will change. And it’s not just them, but many of the people who are picking up guns, I’m telling them, ‘Put down your guns, and try to do things in a peaceful way.’”^{vi}

There is integrity in this world. This same world that has such beauty, so many people of integrity and good will.

And meanwhile, in this same world, kids are being shot.

Kids are being shot.

And I’m going to go home from here, and eat lunch...

Sometimes, I have no idea what I’m doing.

And that is my prayer.

O God, sometimes, I have no idea what I’m doing. Amen.

“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

O God, sometimes, I have no idea what I’m doing.

I’ve got nothing.

I have no plan, no ingenuity, no winning or commanding personality.

I don’t have the resources to do what I would really like to be able to do;

I have nothing like the knowledge base that I feel like I am supposed to have, and even less wisdom.

I come to your table with pretty much nothing.

All I can offer, if anything, is my integrity.

And, more often than I care to admit,
integrity is something I only think about, not something I exemplify.

I will try to wash my hands in innocence.
I'll do my best to sing aloud a song of thanksgiving.
I'll try to tell all your wondrous deeds.

And sometimes, that's about all I've got.

At the end of the day, each of us has to determine the integrity of our own actions
and our own selves. Outside of ourselves, only God can judge.

Is what I am doing in accordance with what I honestly, fervently, joyfully believe
that God wants me to do?

Are the things that I do the things God wants me to do?

Is the amount that I give the right amount in God's eyes?

Am I looking after people the way God has charged me with doing?

Am I attending to the Word of God the way God has invited me to do?

The answers to those questions can only be between us (individually) and God.

Lord, I love the house in which you dwell,
and the place where your glory abides.

And on the day when I look back
at what I have done with the days you have given me,
I pray that, more days than not,
I will have walked in my integrity,
and will have trusted in you without wavering.

And Jesus took the children up in his arms,

*laid his hands on them,
and blessed them.*

A prayer by Jan Richardson for World Communion Sunday:

And the table
will be wide.
And the welcome
will be wide.
And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.
And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.

And we will come
as children who trust
there is enough.
And we will come
unhindered and free.
And our aching
will be met
with bread.
And our sorrow
will be met
with wine.

And we will open our hands
to the feast
without shame.
And we will turn
toward each other
without fear.
And we will give up
our appetite
for despair.
And we will taste
and know
of delight.

And we will become bread
for a hungry world.
And we will become drink
for those who thirst.
And the blessed
will become the blessing.
And everywhere
will be the feast.^{vii}

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October 4, 2015

ⁱ <http://pres-outlook.org/2015/10/prayer-after-the-shooting-at-umpqua-community-college/>

ⁱⁱ Wayne Meeks, ed., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993; p. 753 (n. Job 2:8).

ⁱⁱⁱ R.A.F. MacKenzie, S.J. in Brown et. al., eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968; p. 515.

^{iv} Steven L. Carter, *Integrity*. HarperCollins, 1996; p. ix.

^v Michelle Nichols (12 July 2013). "Pakistan's Malala, shot by Taliban, takes education plea to U.N." Reuters.

^{vi} *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, CBS, September 25, 2015.

^{vii} Jan Richardson, "And the Table Will Be Wide: A Blessing for World Communion Sunday." <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/09/30/and-the-table-will-be-wide/>. See also <http://www.janrichardson.com/>.