

4 October 2015 (19th Sunday After Pentecost/27th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“A Partnership of Integrity”
Mark 10:2-16

Integrity is one of those qualities that even the most jaded or corrupt find valuable, even if wistfully as a lost or distant memory. But while admiring integrity as a quality of character, many people consider a life of blamelessness and uprightness to be impossible, even naïve. They would say that you simply can't survive that way in a world that is essentially capricious and unfair. To fight against forces of evil that sooner or later will overcome everyone, in the end you have to look out for yourself. Only a fool would cling to his or her integrity when wrongly accused, when personally attacked, or when victimized by a bully. What parent doesn't feel pain when their child is betrayed or victimized in school? What parent doesn't secretly want their child to fight back and win rather than to sit there and take it? What is integrity, anyway? The author of the Book of Job goes to great lengths to describe Job's blameless character, noting that he went so far as to consecrate burnt offerings to God on behalf of his children, not for sins they had committed, but to cover those they might have committed against God in their hearts. And so, Job's integrity is the dramatic axis on which the Book of Job spins. What will he do in response to disaster and devastation? Will he curse God and die, or will he remain blameless?

Today's reading from Job is an interesting and fitting framework in which to consider Jesus' teaching on divorce in Mark's Gospel, and the explanation of Christ's suffering offered in Hebrews. Job makes us face the world's injustice as we squirm over that unsavory conversation with Satan in which God strikes a bargain over Job's testing. Of course, we want God to be sovereign, and we really wish that God had not struck that bargain. What kind of God is it anyway who can be swayed and appealed to by Satan? Poor Job. Couldn't God at least have protected him from disaster, or even better, rewarded him for all those burnt offerings consecrated in anticipation of his children's sins? In all fairness, that should have counted for something. And the author wants us to feel that way. From the very beginning, the stage is set to honor a life well led. Job deserves God's blessings in exchange for living a life of integrity, and we fully expect God to hold up the end of that bargain, not some other bargain with Satan. But that is not what we get. And so, the question of what Job will do in response to disaster and devastation is also ours. Under such circumstances do we curse God and die, or do we remain blameless?

This past week's incredibly sad events in Oregon remind us that Job's story is not an ancient relic. We are just now learning that the world lost several blameless lives on Thursday, people of various ages whose only sin was to show up to class that day to teach and to learn. In the wake of their loss, do we curse God and die, or do we look for a different partnership that will help us function in the world as peacemakers, as people of integrity?

One day during his ministry, Jesus was approached by some Pharisees who asked him a question about the legality of divorce under the Law of Moses. The Pharisees were not asking Jesus this question because they didn't know the answer. They asked him to see if he would implicate himself and thereby enable them to declare him a heretic and a blasphemer. The question had "trap" written all over it. But the way Jesus ends up silencing the Pharisees is not only by getting them to answer their own question. It is also by turning their answer around to bite them. He explains that the Law of Moses was God's way of bridling their hardness of heart, for it required the man who sought to divorce his wife to issue her a certificate—in other words, he couldn't simply dismiss her. The Law of Moses merely mitigated callousness, it didn't restore the image of God in which human beings were created to live out their relationships, and it didn't address the inner life of self-centeredness and faithlessness that plagues human beings' closest relationships. By that standard, Jesus says, not only is legal divorce under the Law of Moses evidence of humanity's brokenness, most marriages also are broken as a result of adultery of the heart. Whether the brokenness is an internal matter, or whether the brokenness is external in the form of a certificate of divorce, almost no one lives a life of integrity when it comes to marriage.

And so, integrity in life and in relationships is an admirable quality, but if all of us are broken within, how can we be people of integrity? In math, an integer is a whole number. In human life, integrity is wholeness. The Book of Job raised the question, 'Will Job's integrity be broken when the deck is stacked against him, and will he eventually curse God and die? Can Job, a man of integrity, endure in a world where even God makes a bargain with the devil?' But the Gospels raise a different question. Through the life of Jesus, they ask, 'Can human beings' integrity be restored? People want to live lives of integrity, but they continually fail. They can't even remain faithful in heart to those they love most in the world. How can human beings, created in God's image, become whole?' Job leads us to acknowledge the world's injustice and unfairness, and suggests that God may well be complicit. Jesus leads us to acknowledge our complicity in the world's injustice and unfairness, and invites us into a partnership of integrity with God that transcends the Law of Moses, transcends the limits of human love, and transcends even our most enduring relationships. Jesus leads us to the Kingdom of God where our brokenness can be made whole and our integrity restored.

In these days of war and violence, and on this Sunday when we celebrate this sacrament with all of Christ's followers all over the world, we are called to be peacemakers. But the only way we can make peace with others is to be at peace within ourselves. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews explains that God made the founder of our salvation perfect—whole, complete—through suffering. Why? Because only someone who was himself whole, unbroken, could enter into humanity's suffering and emerge our redeemer. It is into a partnership of integrity with Christ our redeemer that God calls us, in full acknowledgement of our need for wholeness, and our continued failure to live faithfully with each other the way God intended, and in the way God remains faithful to us. The bread and the cup on this table represent for us the living reality of that partnership in a capricious and fallen world. In peace, therefore, let us

commit ourselves to peace with God and peace with each other through our Lord Jesus Christ, who restores our integrity and makes us whole.



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