

“Integrity” – Stephanie Wing, 10.4.09

Today, the first Sunday of October, we are celebrating World Communion Sunday, and in conjunction with it, collecting the Peacemaking Offering. World Communion Sunday was started in the Presbyterian Church in 1936. By 1940 it was being promoted throughout the world and throughout many denominations as a day to celebrate our Christian unity and communion together. The Peacemaking Offering component was added back in 1980, highlighting the link between our call to unity as a church and our call for peacemaking throughout the world.

Of course, Peacemaking is a huge task. Unity is a universal aim. We at the United Presbyterian Church have a very proud tradition of unity, going back to 1913 when we were the first church in the country to reunite after the divisions brought about by the Civil War. That is very significant. I think throughout our history and into our present we can find significant signs of our inclination towards unity, working across divides and building bridges rather than letting our differences divide us. But unity is never something to be taken for granted, and peacemaking is a continual task. It is important work that we are called to as Christians.

Honestly, as I thought of peace and unity, I thought less about global peace than about the battles we wage in our personal relationships. It is often easier to idealize and promote unity than it is to get beyond our personal differences with

friends, family, and neighbors. I don't know what went on in your household this morning, but it seems like Sundays can be filled with battles punctuated by the hour-long truce of the worship service. When I was growing up, my Dad would go to church very early each week, leaving my mom, sister, and I to get ready and get ourselves out, and it wasn't always pretty. It always struck me as ironic that the hours just before and just after church were some of the most stressful, argumentative hours of the week.

Peace and unity in our daily relationships can be difficult to establish and even harder to maintain. And I think our readings from this morning point to one of the reasons for that difficulty. The problem, in one word, is integrity. The root word for integrity is "integer," and the definition of integer is "a complete entity," something that is "untouched, hence undivided, whole."¹ Integrity is a good thing. It is something we want to strive for, and both Job and the Psalmist in our readings maintain and defend their integrity.

Job's wife mocks him for persisting in his integrity. She tells him to give up, curse God, and die. That isn't very supportive. His response to her, that she speaks "as any foolish woman would speak," sounds like fighting words to me. None of us is blameless, but Job seems to get closer than anyone else in the Bible – except for Jesus, of course. Most of the book focuses on Job's conversations with

¹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/integer?db=luna>

his wife and friends, all of whom say to Job that he must have done something to deserve this, or that he should curse God. Throughout the book Job is steadfast in his defense – not just of God, but of himself. He has more integrity than just about anyone, but even he goes a little too far in trying to maintain it, to prove his innocence. It causes arguments and division with literally the only people left on earth who will still speak to him. Job is more right than they are, but his friendships and his marriage endure great strain because of his continued defense of his own integrity.

The Psalmist says, “Vindicate me, O God, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted the Lord without wavering.” We can relate to this sentiment. We have also been at the receiving end of poor treatment or unfairness, and vindication sounds really good. When we are cheated, treated wrongly by others, or otherwise hurt, when people say things about us that are hurtful, judgmental, or dishonest, we call on God to show our innocence, and we trust that, at least in the end, we will be vindicated. This is especially the case when our integrity is at stake. We want to be vindicated, proved right and innocent.

I can understand this urge all too well. When we asked my dad to preach our wedding sermon, I should have known what I was in for. The primary text was from the 4th chapter of Ephesians, and one of the points my dad made was concerning humility. It means we don’t always have to be right. And then he said,

“I’m talking to you, Stephanie.” Those on the bride’s side of the sanctuary laughed just a little too knowingly, and then he continued, “and I’m talking to myself, and others, of course.” I’ll be the first to admit that, while I don’t always have to be right, I sure like to be right!

Of course this can make for some challenges in keeping the peace and maintaining unity. How many arguments have you seen that never end, because even after a truce and forgiveness, each person has to keep making their final point, their final defense? It is hard to admit when we are wrong, especially if we continue to believe that we are right! But if we continue to insist on our own integrity, and if we continue to persist in pursuing our own vindication, we leave less and less room for peacemaking in our relationships.

Our passage from Mark seems to have very little relation to the rest of this. The Pharisees are trying to trick Jesus once again, asking him about the laws of divorce. At heart they are trying to vindicate themselves as guardians of the law and pious people of great faith. They are trying to trip Jesus up, or make him look bad, but of course he doesn’t take the bait. This is one place where not much has changed. Divorce has been and still is a divisive issue for the church. Arguments over divorce and how to treat those who have experienced divorce break our peace and unity, even as divorce itself is a breach of peace and unity, even if it is sometimes necessary, and even when good comes out of it.

More could and has been said about that, but what is even more interesting to me is why these two stories were put together. On one hand, Jesus is talking about divorce, and on the other, chastising the disciples for trying to keep children away from him, saying, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” It seems totally unrelated. All of this seems totally unrelated. You might be wondering where I am going with this right about now.

Of course children aren't always peaceful, but there is still an important difference between children and adults. Children might want to be declared right, but they also expect to be wrong. They expect to learn new things, and there is a receptivity that children have that most of us seem to lose along the way. There is an innocence in the approach of children. The Pharisees approach God trying to be as righteous and right as they possibly can be. This self-righteousness misses the point that none of us is righteous on our own, but only through the grace of God. Children approach God without trying to prove themselves at all. When we try to prove our own integrity, we miss the whole point of the Gospel.

It is one thing to recognize that we don't need to prove our integrity to God, but another to recognize that our integrity doesn't even need too much defense here on earth. It is one thing to recognize that we are all sinners, falling short of the glory of God, but another thing to recognize that sometimes we really are wrong, at least partially, in our dealings with others.

One of the overarching lessons from the book of Job is that we are not God. We don't have a God's eye view of anything, and we don't have God's understanding, nor can we ever hope to attain it, nor should we try. But in our relationships with friends, family members, and neighbors, we also need to remember that we don't have the whole story.

My sister is an amazing mother. I don't understand how she has so much patience with her two boys, who are certainly wonderful, but also require a lot of patience. She told me recently that sometimes when she feels her temper start to rise, she has to stop and hold herself back so she doesn't snap at her boys, and how each time she does that, she sees something new. There was the time when Grant, who was then 5 years old, was eating some chocolate covered raisins for an afternoon snack, and Sonya told him to put them away since dinner was approaching. About 20 minutes later, she saw him going back and getting more out of the cabinet, and rather than immediately punishing Grant for disobeying, she calmly said, "Grant, I asked you to put those away. Why are you getting them back out now?" He said, "Well I know Daddy is going to be home soon, and these ones are his favorites. I was going to put some in a cup to surprise him when he got home." The whole story was so much better than her initial read.

We don't know the whole story. Humans are complicated and relationships are complicated. When we defend too quickly our own integrity and get hung up

on proving that we are right, we lock ourselves into one small part of the story.

We create divisions and make peacemaking an even more difficult task.

On this day as we celebrate World Communion Sunday and collect the Peacemaking Offering, I challenge all of us to strive to make peace in our daily lives, and in our personal relationships. I challenge all of us to seek unity not only with those who are vastly different from us, but with those with whom we are most closely linked. Let's worry less about maintaining our own integrity, and worry more about maintaining true integrity – that which is whole and undivided, a complete entity. Let us swallow our pride, give up the fight to prove that we are right, and instead approach each other as we are called to approach God – that is, as children – innocently, receptively, and just as we are. And may we be makers of peace and builders of unity, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.