

# "FAITHFUL INTEGRITY"

a sermon by

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Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

New Testament Lesson: I Corinthians 2:6-10

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 5:33-37

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Each new day presents numerous opportunities to pause and reflect upon the extravagance of God's love. The glory of nature, the changing seasons, and the majesty of the heavens declare the ongoing grace of our Creator to anyone who pauses long enough amid their daily routine to contemplate the blessings of life bestowed by God.

Sadly, far too many humans "walk blindfolded through the glorious theater of God's creation" as John Calvin put it, and fail to take the time to appreciate the phenomenal love God displays all around us each day.

Every human chooses his or her response to God. And rarely do any two individuals respond in the same way to anything, be it the world of nature, a series of events, or God. No two people respond the same way to a sunrise or sunset. And it is perhaps a result of this human diversity that such a great diversity exists among the Churches of Christendom. Each bears the mark of a given tradition or "way of being" in a distinct way. It is wonderful to appreciate the unique qualities of differing religious traditions expressed in specific churches—for each "way of being" among the churches of Christ has its own ability to meet individual needs. The true ecumenicist values the differing traditions among the Christian family. There can be little doubt that a great variety exists among religious organizations. This was brought

home to me recently by a humorous piece entitled: *The Building's on Fire!*

*During a recent ecumenical gathering someone rushed into the church and shouted, "the building's on fire!"*

*The Methodists called the District Superintendent to ask what should be done in such circumstances.*

*The Baptists cried out, "Where's the water?"*

*The Quakers quietly praised God for the blessing that fire brings.*

*The Lutherans posted a notice on the door declaring 95 theses why fire is evil.*

*The Roman Catholics passed the collection plate, to build a new Catholic Church after the fire, even though they were meeting at a Protestant Church.*

*The Episcopalians formed a procession and marched out.*

*The Jews posted symbols on the door, hoping that the fire would pass over.*

*The Congregationalists shouted, "It's every man for himself."*

*The Fundamentalists declared, "It's the vengeance of God!"*

*The Christian Scientists agreed among themselves that there was no fire, it was merely a state of mind.*

*And the Presbyterians? They appointed a chairperson who was to appoint a committee to look into the matter and make a written report after the fire was over.*

Genealogy Workshop, Eaton County Historical Society  
Saturday, June 10, 1995 in Charlotte, MI  
Speaker: Jean M. White (She copied it from a church bulletin in Sun City, Arizona.)

We Congregationalists celebrate the diversity of faith experience which encompasses humanity, for we recognize that every child of God is unique, and that the pathway to God is conditioned by our own experiences, needs and background. Yet we also affirm that much which enriches and gives joy in our living are the things we hold in common: family, faith, special holiday celebrations, the traditions which mark the passing years, as well as the loves we've shared over the years. The greatest things in life are often not the possessions we supposedly "own," but the intangibles of love we share as we relate with others.

It is in fact our relating to each other which, more often than not, shows our values, our character, our loving, and our faithful integrity. A beautiful story about a teacher and Thanksgiving speaks to the issues of how our relating can "touch" another person's life in a dynamic and beautiful way, as well as being the means of expressing what's important in our faith.

*A Thanksgiving Day editorial in the newspaper told of a school teacher who asked her class of first graders to draw a picture of something they were thankful for. She thought of how little these children from poor neighborhoods actually had to be thankful for. But she knew that most of them would draw*

*pictures of turkeys or tables with food. The teacher was taken aback with the picture Douglas handed in . . . a simple childish drawn hand.*

*But whose hand? The class was captivated by the abstract image, "I think it must be the hand of God that brings us food," said one child. "A farmer," said another, "because he grows the turkeys." Finally when the others were at work, the teacher bent over Douglas's desk and asked whose hand it was. "It's your hand, Teacher," he mumbled.*

*She recalled that frequently at recess she had taken Douglas, a scrubby, lonely, forlorn child by the hand. She often did that with the children. But the touch of a friendly hand obviously meant so much to Douglas. Perhaps this was everyone's Thanksgiving, not for the material things given to us, but for the chance, in whatever small way, to give to others . . . to touch another's life.*

Source Unknown  
*Chicken Soup For the Soul*, p. 133

Jesus asks that our relating to each other have integrity. He asks that our lives show forth such moral character and ethical demeanor that when we give our word—be it a "Yes," or "No," that others will accept our word at face value because of the integrity of our lives as well as the integrity of how we relate to each other.

By implication, Jesus also asks that as people of faith, our faithful living should show forth integrity as well. As members of a church tradition which exalts freedom, it is imperative that we Congregationalists recognize that freedom exists only when people live, act, and think responsibly. There is, after all, no freedom without responsibility.

Therefore, it is imperative that we not only act responsibly, but that our theological reflection upon life have integrity too.

Congregationalists have, over the years, been accused of having no theology merely because we refuse to endorse a single creed or set of creeds as binding upon the individual conscience. Therefore, we hear phrases such as: *'It's every man for himself'* applied to us. The fact is, we do affirm the importance of the classic creeds of the Christian faith. They are to be studied that individual belief might be tested and strengthened until every covenanted member of a Congregational Church is able to write a statement of their belief as fully as the Nicene Creed itself or perhaps one of the great confessions of faith developed by the leaders of the Reformation. To be able to do so requires more than merely holding an opinion. Even the most uninformed person can hold opinions. That is hardly adequate for accurate theological awareness. No, we Congregationalists have freedom that we might fully develop an informed theology. In the earliest days of the history of our churches on this continent, no one could be admitted to church membership until they stood before the elders (according to the Cambridge Platform, 1648, the term "elder" is used to describe what we now call Deacons) and made an *"acceptable public profession of faith which bore witness to deep religious experience."* How would you do if required to present such a testimony today? Each member of a Congregational Church is free to develop a well-informed, theologically well-founded faith—and nothing less.

It is imperative that we "own" our faith as the Pilgrims and Puritans used to say. And "owing" our faith requires that we "know" our faith.

Congregationalists also recognize that creeds and confessions have their limits. And that it is far more important to live in a right

relationship with God and our fellow humans, far more than it is necessary to know the fine points of a given creed. Jesus once told the people that they would be able to recognize his followers by how they lived. *"By their fruits (the fruits of their living) you shall know them."* It is of primary importance according to our tradition for people of faith to know the scriptures that our faithfulness might be full. Clearly, the issues of inner integrity are very important in matters of faithful living.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of faithfulness is a matter of trust—trust in God and our fellow humans.

So often in life, we know what we expect from ourselves, others, and even God. But I have learned over the years that we may have a set of expectations—our own reasons for doing something, but God may have a completely different purpose for the very same set of expectations and events in our life. We may think we know what is happening, but God may be preparing us to be of help to someone else in need—according to God's own purpose and not our own.

Over fourteen years ago in Pomona, California, in the parking lot of the Pilgrim Congregational Church of that city, God taught me a very valuable lesson, one which remains with me yet today. This story is the tale of the most immediate and direct response to prayer I've ever received. And I'm not so sure that the response was because of my need, but that of someone else. But that's part of the story.

At the time, I was Chair of the World Christian Relations Commission of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. We were having a meeting at the church in order to accomplish some special tasks. Dr. Howard Conn was in attendance at this meeting. As we finished our work before noon, we took a break for lunch. We went to

a small authentic Mexican restaurant. I had rented a car, a Toyota. As I was not driving my rental car to the restaurant, I put my papers and things in the car. We had a great lunch. But when I got back, I soon discovered that along with my papers I had locked my rental car keys in the car. I called the rental agency, which was clear on the other side of Metropolitan Los Angeles by the International Airport. After speaking to three different people, finally an assistant manager said, "Sorry sir, we do not keep duplicate sets of keys, nor do we have a 'master set.' It is your responsibility to retrieve the keys if you lock them in the car. Have a nice day!" The phone call to the rental agency had taken 35 minutes. Then I called a Toyota dealer. I asked the same question, and got the same run-around. That call took 40 minutes. By then I was frustrated.

The Rev. Dr. Douglas Lobb, the Senior Minister of Pilgrim Church, said, "Pat, I know a little service station down the road where I do business. They have a 'Slim Jim' which is used to open cars. I'll see if I can get it for you." I said, "Fine." He got the Slim Jim and told me the owner had said, "The locks on Japanese cars are down under the bottom of the mechanism. They are much harder to get at. It may take some time before you catch the release which is small and hard to find." I went out to the car. For the next 25 minutes I felt around inside the car door for the release. Several times I felt I was near to it. Finally I caught it and the lock was sprung. I got my keys out of the car. By that time I was not only frustrated, but angry as well.

In a rage, I bowed in prayer and said, "O.K. Lord, what was that all about?" I paused, heaved a sigh and said, "Amen."

As I finished the prayer, I turned back to the car to close the door, and as I did I saw just thirty feet from the car a grey-haired lady in a trench coat shaking as she stood next to a late-model cream colored Oldsmobile Cutlass. I

instantly knew that there was a problem. Moreover, I knew what the problem was. I walked over to the lady and without asking her name or introducing myself, I said, "you've just realized that you locked the keys to your car inside, haven't you." She gave me a startled look and said, "Why, yes I have!" "Well, I said, producing the Slim Jim from behind me. "I think I Can help you." Within 30 seconds I found the lock release and her car was opened. "There you are." I said. "Have a nice day." She looked at me and asked, "What do you do for a living?" I smiled and said, "Why, I'm a Congregational minister."

As I walked away, I bowed in prayer again, this time without rage or anger in my being. I prayed: "Well Lord, if I had to go through all that frustration making myself mad along the way just so that I could be of help and assistance to that lady in her time of need, it was worth it. Moreover Lord, you've taught me once again that our anger and frustration is usually self-imposed. Thank you for the lessons. May I never forget what you've taught me here today. Amen."

It wasn't until years later, selfish and self-centered human being that I am, that I realized that the prayer that was answered that day was the prayer of the grey-haired lady by the car. That, too, was a valuable realization.

Sometimes our struggles are self-imposed. Sometimes they are preparing us for greater service to God in order to help someone else in life. The fruits of faithfulness are displayed in our living and speak far more clearly than any words merely mouthed in the recitation of a creed.

The fruits of faithful integrity which trust in God are offered every day we live. Let's remember that during this celebration of this special day—this gift from God which is the eternal now.

AMEN.