



“Shaping Character”
Scripture – Luke 10:25-37
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 12, 2017

Just two words and you know exactly what I am talking about: Harvey Weinstein. Successful movie mogul, co-founder of Miramax films, net worth estimated at \$200 million. I suspect he would give it all back if he could exchange it for a good reputation. When he dies, whoever has the dubious honor of officiating his memorial service will be faced with a hefty challenge. How could you possibly mask his reputation as a sexual predator with a veneer of dignity?

He is one of the latest in a string of men who have been exposed over the past couple of years. Bill O’Reilly, Bill Cosby, Roger Ailes, NPR’s chief editor, Michael Oreskes, and comedian Louis CK had all risen to the top of their fields, but now they have been publicly humiliated for their decadent behavior. Their reputations have been permanently sullied.

Last week we learned that three UCLA basketball players will not be suiting up for a few weeks. They are currently under house arrest in China for shoplifting. What they did was not merely stupid. Stealing is wrong and they know it. Of course, these are merely the high-profile stories of ethically empty individuals. Daily we read of murders and weekly we hear of mass killings. Like a dam that has burst, stories gush forth about greed, hate, selfishness, envy, and deception.

The Christian Church is essential to society because it can play a major role in shaping people’s character. When the church is true to the core teachings of Jesus, it may be the best hope for halting the downward spiral of standards.

When he was in the sixth grade, “Jeff came home from school one day and said, ‘Dad, I’m tired of being a goody two shoes. I’m always the odd guy out. All the other kids, especially the popular ones, have all the fun.’”

“His father listened patiently to his son’s frustration about missing out on the action and then proposed an idea. ‘Jeff, I think it’s fine if you want to try something different. Try messing around a bit; try a little mischief. Why don’t you give it three weeks, and we can visit again about how it’s going.’ Jeff thought that was a splendid idea. But, the very next day after school Jeff told his dad that he was finished with bad behavior. He had thrown a pencil at his teacher when she turned her back to the class. The teacher spun around and demanded to know who threw it. Jeff raised his hand and confessed, ‘I did it.’”

“The teacher marched over to Jeff’s desk and told him he should not be accepting blame for others’ bad behavior. She then turned to Kyle, who was sitting next to him, and hauled him out by the scruff of his neck.”¹

The teacher knew the two boys. She had witnessed their basic character and the errant behavior did not fit what she knew about Jeff. However, it corresponded exactly with what she had seen in Kyle. Character is not an add-on to a person's personality. Character represents the essence of who a person is. The Church can be a driving force in shaping one's character, but integrity does not materialize overnight. Character is formed, shaped, and reshaped over an extended period. It emerges gradually and it is highly influenced by role models.

Humans learn by modeling the behavior of their elders. Whether you signed up for it or not, if you have children or grandchildren, you play a role in shaping their character. They notice when you sit on your horn and curse the driver who cut you off. They also notice when you buy a backpack and school supplies for a low income child. They notice when you make a racist comment. They also notice when you purchase a water filter or a latrine for Guatemalans. They notice when you bend the truth. They also notice when you serve as a mentor for an at-risk child. Children and grandchildren are like little sponges, constantly soaking up the actions they see, the words they hear, and the emotions they feel from the people who are consequential in their lives.

In addition to absorbing traits of role models, character is also shaped by habits. In the same way that regular exercise will make you a healthy person, making a habit of always telling the truth shapes you into an honest person. Learning to put off immediate gratification helps you become a patient person. Doing good deeds for others carves you into a kind person.

Positive role models and healthy habits help us develop a virtuous character. It also helps to have the grounding that a solid community of faith can provide. In a faithful church, members are expected to follow the way of Jesus which is an unfolding adventure that fashions one's character while injecting life with vitality.

In a community of faith that provides opportunities for youth to feed people who are hungry, to hand out toiletries to people who are homeless, to build friendships with youth in Guatemala, to provide backpacks and Christmas boxes for people they will never meet, they learn that followers of Jesus are compassionate and generous and grateful. They learn to switch the focus from themselves to others and they discover the joy that comes from sacrificing for another.

A few minutes ago, Shelley and Mary-beth brought to life the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. It reminds us that people also need stories that inspire them to become virtuous.

We know this story well. A lawyer – which in the first century meant a religious scholar well-versed in Hebrew law – approached Jesus with a question. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Why did he pose this question? Out of curiosity? Nope. He asked the question because he knew the answer. He wanted to highlight his impressive wisdom and sterling character.

Jesus played along and asked, “What is written in the law?” The man lowered his voice and spoke with all the gravity he could muster. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus replied, “You have given the right answer.”

Feeling confident after Jesus touched his shoulder and praised him, the man posed one more question: “Who is my neighbor?”

Why did he ask that question? It could well be that he had spent time crafting an answer he knew would dazzle those within earshot.

But Jesus disarmed him by telling a story about a man who was making the 18 mile trek from Jerusalem, high on a hill, down to Jericho, over 800 feet below sea level. This rocky road through the wilderness was not a safe place to be traveling alone, and the man was beaten by robbers and left for dead.

The story had plausibility because that rocky stretch between Jerusalem and Jericho was known to be hazardous. “Now by chance,” Jesus says, “a priest was going down that road.”

Aha! – the lawyer is thinking – the priest will rush to the man’s aid. But, when the priest saw the man, he angled for the other side of the road. Another man, a devout Temple assistant, saw the man in the ditch and followed suit. Why? I do not think they were unmoved by the sight of a beaten man. But it could be they lacked courage. Perhaps it looked like a set-up. They would stop to help the man only to find it was a trap. The man could have had accomplices nearby ready to pounce.

Compassion is an important virtue and potential motivator, but it is not enough. They also needed courage. They needed to be brave enough to get involved.

A Samaritan who was also traveling that road not only had compassion for the man, he also possessed courage. The Samaritan stopped, bandaged the man, lifted him onto his own donkey, and took him to an inn where he could recuperate. The next morning, when the Samaritan continued his travels, he gave the innkeeper money to care for the man and promised to cover any further expenses. The Samaritan was not only brave and compassionate, he was also generous. The fact that he told the innkeeper that he would check back to cover any other expenses seems to indicate that the innkeeper knew the man to be of good character. He was trustworthy.

The Christian Church possesses sterling treasures like the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Beatitudes, and the Sermon on the Mount, that can inspire us to live in ways that builds a solid character. A solid character not only gives us the confidence to withstand the temptations of the day, but it also helps us become a blessing to others.

Philip Newell shares an episode from the final months of his father’s life, when dementia was destroying his memory. Philip says that his father had a favorite blessing that he would often repeat. It was the blessing attributed to Aaron in the Book of Numbers. It is familiar to many of you. It begins: “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you.” In his father’s closing days he would bless people with these words.

When the time came for his father to stop driving, Philip had the task of helping his father sell his car. Philip “called the local car salesman and set up an appointment for the next day and he made a point of saying to the salesman, ‘When you meet my father tomorrow you will notice that he is pretty confused. But please honor him by speaking to him, not me. This is his car.’ The young salesman understood.”

The next day when the three met at the dealership, there were some awkward moments. “Philip’s father said to the salesman, ‘Now how much money do I owe you for this car?’ The salesman replied, ‘No, no, Dr. Newell. We want to give you money for the car.’ To which the father said, ‘This is very generous of them!’”

“At the end of the transaction, as the check was being handed over to Philip’s father, Philip said to the young salesman, ‘My father often gives a blessing, and I think he would like to bless you now.’ So there they were, standing in the middle of a car showroom and the father took the salesman’s hand, looked straight into his eyes, and said, ‘The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.’”

“Philip glanced at the young car salesman. Tears were streaming down his face. He will never forget that moment. Never.”² His father lost his wits, but not his character which had been forged over a lifetime.

The Christian Church is essential to society because in a world where there is little shame in being dishonest, arrogant, greedy, ruthless, and abusive, the church can play a decisive role in helping people develop a virtuous character. And people of exemplary character radiate light.

May you light up the world!

NOTES

1. Peter W. Marty, “An Undivided Life,” *The Christian Century*, August 2, 2017.
2. John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*, (Woodstock, Vermont: Christian Journeys, 2014), p.22-23.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of the manger — our Emmanuel — you have entered into our world to dwell with us in sorrow and in joy. God of the empty tomb — our Resurrected Lord — you have shattered the power of death, and turned our mourning into dancing. Still, you weep with us, even as you promise to wipe away every tear from our eyes.

We take comfort in your presence among us ... in your willingness to share our pain, even as you work to transform our suffering. So we turn to you now, seeking the peace that you alone can bring.

God With Us — Our hearts are heavy as we lament another tragedy. We grieve with the people of Sutherland Springs, who mourn the loss of parents and grandparents, children and grandchildren, partners, siblings, and friends. We grieve with the saints of First Baptist Church, whose community has been devastated, and whose sacred space has become a site of horror. We grieve with and for our nation, as we grapple with the violence that plagues our common life and robs us of our sense of security. Take our grief, we pray, and transform it into righteous anger, boundless compassion, and fierce hope, that we might be instruments of your healing, here and now.

While the eyes of our nation are focused on Texas, we remember that there are many people in many lands who know the scourge of violence. We pray for communities near and far that are marred by conflict and marked by suffering, and we long for the day when all will beat their swords into plowshares. We know too well that the cost of conflict is great, and we remember those who have given so generously of their skill, their time, their energy — even their lives — in service to this country. On this Veterans’ Day Weekend, we give thanks for the dedication and courage of those who have served in our armed forces, and we pray that we will show our gratitude by caring for those who have sacrificed much.

Loving God — In this world of violence, we recognize that our prayers are not enough. They are merely a starting point — a way of naming all that is amiss, all that mars your vision of *Shalom*. As we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” align our wills with your will, and empower us to build your kingdom in our midst, so that all creation may share in the joy of your promised peace. By your Spirit, fashion us into people who see the pain of this world and refuse to pass by on the other side. Give us the grace to love with heart, soul, strength, and mind, so that our words and our deeds might glorify you.