

Today we are examining the issue of ethics as we continue our consideration of Faith, Ethics and Politics. Contrary to popular opinion, politicians do have ethics. I recently learned of a presidential candidate who was out on the campaign trail and was approached by a very sweet elderly lady. She told him that she was on a fixed income and that money was very, very tight. But she said that she was so inspired by him that she saved \$100 and want to give him a hundred dollar bill for his campaign. With the \$100 was a note of encouragement, with her name and address included. The candidate was delighted and hugged the woman and took the money. Later that day he took the note and money out of his pocket to give to his campaign manager, and noticed that there were actually two \$100 bills stuck together. So he was faced with an ethical dilemma as he considered his options, “Do I keep both bills, or give half to my running mate?” No, some politicians do have ethics and for that we can be thankful.

Now ethics is essentially a branch of philosophy which deals with right or wrong and what it means to live a good, moral life. It seeks answers to the question: “How shall we live? How shall we behave?” Ethics is concerned with bringing order into human affairs and offering guidelines toward living a moral life. Now you might think that it really doesn’t matter, most of us know right from wrong, we do not need certain rules to find our way in the world. But it does matter. As Christians we believe that we are all prone to selfishness and even evil. We will always put our own interests before the needs of others, and we will bend the rules to suit ourselves. We need guidelines to call forth our best selves.

I remember years ago watching an episode of 60 Minutes that dealt with Adlof Eichmann, the principal architect of the Holocaust. Mike Wallace was interviewing Yehiel Dinur, a concentration camp survivor who testified against Eichmann at the Nuremburg trials. A film clip from that 1961 trial showed Dinur walking into the courtroom, and stopping quite suddenly as he saw Eichmann for the first time since he had been sent to Auchwitz 18 years earlier. Looking at Eichmann, he began to sob uncontrollably, then fainted and collapsed right in the courtroom. He explained that reaction to Mike Wallace by saying that when he saw Eichmann after all those years he was shocked by what an ordinary man he really was. He said, “Eichmann was not the godlike giant who tortured us and sent so many to their deaths. He was really an average man much like me. Looking at him, I felt afraid for myself. I saw myself in him and realized that I could have done what he did. Eichmann is in all of us.” For this reason and many others, ethics is a very important field of study and practice in human affairs.

Theories of ethics can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophers. Socrates believed that a person would behave ethically if they knew what was right. The truly wise and educated person will know what is right, do what is good, and therefore be happy. Happiness is linked to ethical behavior and misery linked to unethical behavior. Plato believed that there were four human virtues related to ethics: wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice. People who had wisdom would know the right thing to do and this would give them harmony with themselves. Harmony, according to Plato, was the basis of all justice. Aristotle took Plato's ideas a step further; he included other traits necessary for ethical living: prudence, friendliness, generosity, honesty and wit. Aristotle believed that good judgment or prudence was the foundation of all good living. So the ancient Greek philosophers based ethics primarily upon human wisdom.

Another branch of ancient ethics was the religious approach, which addressed ways to order and control human behavior through fear of divine punishment. We see this clearly in the Bible, where there are about 1500 rules designed to promote ethical living and avoid punishment. So you might assume that if you adhere to the Judeo-Christian tradition, living an ethical life would be easy. You just follow the rules and all will be well. But it really is not that simple. With 1500 rules, you can never obey them all. For instance, some of the Old Testament rules are that you must sacrifice animals to appease God; if your children disobey you then you should stone them to death; or you should never touch the skin of a hooved animal. (So much for the NFL.).

One of the reasons Jesus was so despised by the religious authorities of his day was because he flagrantly broke the rules, such as healing people on the Sabbath, eating with sinners, claiming to be God in the flesh. Religious based rules are a matter of context and culture, and can be interpreted differently over time. The early Christian church opposed the death penalty, citing the ethics of Jesus in the Lord's Prayer, "...forgive those who trespass against you." But then came Clement of Alexandria, a Christian apologist, who provided theological grounds for the justification of capital punishment, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," and the death penalty was considered compatible with Christianity until Augustine. So even Christian ethics can be contradictory and complicated.

Modern ethics, beginning about 1500 developed the theory of Obligations and Consequences. In this theory, we are obligated to act morally, and the outcome or consequence always determines whether something is moral or not. If it hurts someone, it's immoral, but if not it can be considered moral. Here the ends always justify the means. Then we have situational ethics. This strand of

ethics seeks right or wrong within every unique situation. There is no absolute that can be applied in every circumstance; you have to decide in each situation. Joseph Fletcher developed this theory and suggested that in every situation we should ask: What is the most loving thing to do?

Which leads us to the ethics of Jesus. As Christians, our guiding ethical principle is Jesus Christ, as we try to let him live in us and through us, by the power of the Holy Spirit. He spoke for God, and modeled a very intentional way for us to live. Yet it is not easy to figure out what Jesus would want us to do amid some of the more complicated issues of our time. Perhaps a better question than: “What would Jesus do?” is “What would Jesus have ME do?” Jesus did not specifically or directly address so many issues that we face today, but he does offer us a direction. Jesus essentially gave us three basic precepts: love God, love your neighbor—and that includes both your friend and your enemy, and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Put yourself in someone else’s place. This is what Jesus did time and time again, and what he asks us to do, as well. And Jesus did not get his ethical values across by setting forth a bunch of rules, guidelines, or boring theories, but by telling stories. Illustrative stories that answer the age old question, “How then, shall we live?” “What is the most loving thing for me to do in this situation?”

Brad Dunkin is the son of Warren and Evelyn Dunkin, active and beloved members of this church. Brad loves history and loves to travel, so several years ago he decided to visit Turkey. All by himself. On an overnight bus to visit some Turkish ruins he met two other men, one from Morocco and one from Libya. They decided to visit these ruins together. On the way they stopped to get some breakfast, and hiked a little ways before they stopped to eat. Halfway through breakfast one of the men suggested they go see the ruins, and then come back and finish breakfast. So Brad and one of the men left, while the other man stayed with the food. Then they returned to finish their breakfast. After two sips of his orange juice, Brad was knocked out cold. While he was gone, the other man had slipped a lethal dose of drugs into his juice. They robbed him, stole his passport, ID, credit cards and cash. They hauled his lifeless body to the side of a road and threw him in a ditch where he lay for 2 days. He easily could have died, and **should** have died considering the amount of drugs they gave him. But, after two days Brad miraculously regained consciousness, and began stumbling down the road in a daze. His face was badly sunburned because he had been lying face up in that ditch. As he stumbled along the road people passed him by, thinking he was a drunk or a crazy drug addict. Finally, a Turkish man stopped to pick him up. He took him to the police station, where he was immediately put in jail, since drugs

are highly illegal in Turkey. But that man who picked him up was concerned about how he would be treated in a foreign jail, so he begged to police to allow him to take Brad to a hospital. There they gave him IV fluids for dehydration and slowly brought him back to health. This stranger checked him out of the hospital and took him home to an Inn owned by his father. He fed Brad and nursed him back to health, even taking him for a check up to his own doctor. Finally, Brad was issued a temporary passport, and several weeks later he was safely home in the arms of his family.

Now Brad easily could have died, but due to the kindness and compassion of a total stranger, he lived. Jesus told a very similar story about a Good Samaritan, in response to questions a lawyer asks, what must I do to live? And, who is my neighbor? Jesus tells of a Jewish man, traveling alone at night, who is accosted by thieves, robbed, stripped naked and left for dead. A priest walks by, assumes this man is dead, walks around to the other side and continues his journey down to Jericho. A Levite, who could be considered a religious professional comes along, he sees the man and does the same, crosses the street and goes on his way. Then another man comes along, a Samaritan. These people were hated by the Jews, considered unclean heretics. This man gets off his donkey, binds up the wounds of this injured man, puts him on the donkey, takes him to Jericho, which was about 23 miles away, and finds him a room at an Inn and provides him food and clothing. He pays for all of this himself, a hated Samaritan who had no good reason to help a Jew. Then Jesus says to that lawyer, “Who was the good neighbor to that man? Go and do likewise.”

That Turkish Samaritan who helped Brad Dunkin was probably not a Christian, and possibly had never heard the story of The Good Samaritan. But he knew what was the most loving thing to do in that situation. And he saved Brad Dunkin's life.

Jesus suggests that we are our brother and sister's keeper. He tells this story because this is what his ethics looks like. This is what love looks like. He asks each of us in every situation: Did you care? Did you get off your donkey? Did you sacrifice something for a brother, for a sister? The story of the Good Samaritan was one of Dr. Martin Luther King's favorite passages of Scripture, in fact he said it was his all time favorite.. His last sermon was about this very thing. He went to Memphis to speak on behalf of some striking sanitation workers.

They were not making enough money to live on, went on strike, and nobody in Memphis seemed to care. Others were hired to replace them, and they were forgotten. So King knew that if he went to Memphis he could draw attention to their cause. Now, he was really tired, at that time, in fact he really doesn't look

good when you see pictures of him that night. He was getting death threats, his family was getting death threats, he clearly needed a rest. It was very risky for him to go to Memphis in early April of 1968. Yet he does, and in a very prophetic message he says, “It doesn’t really matter now if I die. I have been to the mountaintop; I have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” He then preached on the story of the Good Samaritan. Dr. King said that in this story, the question that the Priest and Levite asked was, “If I stop to help this man, what is going to happen to me?” It was the wrong question. The Good Samaritan came along and reversed the question. He asked, “If I do not stop and help this man, what is going to happen to him?” That is the question Dr. King said Jesus want us to ask, not what will happen to me, what will happen to them—the sanitation workers, the hungry, the poor, the suffering, the struggling.

If, as I said last week, politics is the process of determining who gets what, when and how, then Jesus cares deeply about such things. He calls us to engage in the political realities of our time, just as he did in his time, because they have a huge impact upon those he came to serve and save.

We will not find Jesus offering a specific plan for political action. He does not offer detailed economic theories, or ideas about a housing or mortgage crisis. He does not offer a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq or ideas about global warming. But we know for sure that Jesus cares about suffering and forgotten people. He cares that families are losing their homes that little children are sick, because they have no health insurance they cannot afford to see a doctor. Jesus cares that people die from lack of food and suffer unspeakable violence. Jesus cares that people are dying as they illegally try to enter this country in search of a better life. Jesus cares that we are destroying the environment, polluting our water and air and this world God loves. Whenever people suffer anywhere his heart is the first heart to break. And his ethics say that whatever we do to the least of these, we do to him.

Our Christian faith does not always offer an absolute or clear ethical solution to every situation. But it does show us the sort of hearts we should have as we approach the most pressing issues of our day. And that is what the ethics of Jesus Christ are all about—having hearts filled with mercy, compassion and love. Amen.