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Newport News, Virginia
October 4, 2009

The Price of Integrity
Job 1:1; 2:1-10

The reason we make decisions is not discussed much, these days. Often, personal gain, politics, selfish interest, or a sub-conscious psychological reason is behind our decision-making and actions. Rarely do I hear, “I did what I thought was right.”

The book of *Job* is one of five Wisdom books in the Old Testament—Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. If you try to interpret it only literally, you will run in to all kinds of difficulty and miss the main points.

Archibald MacLeish’s 1958 Pulitzer Prize winning play, *J.B.*, is a modern-day retelling of the old story of Job. Both beg the questions: “Will a person serve God for naught? Will a person do what is right if there is no visible benefit?”

Let me re-tell the story. The setting, Uz, is a bit obscure, just as is the time of its occurrence (sometime between the second and tenth century B.C.E.). Like *Star Wars* that begins with “way back in time” to provide the setting of its universal story of good fighting evil, *Job*’s purpose it to help answer the question, “Will a person do the right thing and be faithful to God even if there is no reward?”

There once was a man who lived in the land of Uz. He was honest, a man of his word, hated evil, and was devoted to God. He had seven sons, three daughters, was very wealthy and most influential.

One day when the angels came to report to God, Satan (the Designated Accuser) came with them. When God asked Satan what he had been up to and Satan responded that he been checking things out all over the earth, God asked him, “What do you think of Job? He is honest, true to his work, hates evil, and is totally devoted to me.”

Satan responded, “Job is these things only because you have pampered him and made sure nothing bad happens to him. Strip him of all he has and he will curse you.”

“Very well,” God said. “Strip him of all he possesses and see. Just don’t hurt him.” And, Satan left the presence of God.

(The curtain drops. Scene one ends.)

One day while his sons and daughters were having a party at the oldest son's house, a messenger came to Job and told him of the first calamity. The Sabeans had invaded part of their land, stolen all the oxen and donkeys and killed all the field hands. Only this one messenger had escaped to tell the story.

While he was still talking, another messenger arrived. Lightening had struck and killed all of Job's sheep and the shepherds, except for this lone messenger.

Still another messenger came with the story that the Chaldeans had invaded part of their land, had stolen all the camels and killed the camel drivers with the exception of this messenger.

A fourth messenger arrived with the worst of all news. A tornado had hit the the oldest son's house, killing all his sons and daughters.

Job got to his feet, ripped his robe, shaved his head, then, fell to the ground to worship God. Job then offered the words in his prayer that we've heard in many settings, often with no knowledge of where they came from: "The Lord gives and the Lord takes; blessed is the name of the Lord.

(The curtain drops again. End of scene two.)

What follows is almost a repeat of the opening scene. God, God's angels, and Satan are having another roundtable meeting. God asks the same question as he did in the open scene. Satan responds again with the same words, "I've just been roaming the earth, checking things out."

"What do you think of my servant Job? Have you ever seen anyone as honest, loyal, devoted to me, with such a firm grip on his integrity?"

Satan responded: "He is that way only because he still has his health. Let him lose that and he will curse you."

"Alright," said God. "Take his health away from him; just don't take his life." Satan leaves the presence of God.

(The curtain comes down and scene three ends.)

The next scene finds Job with ulcers and scabs all over his body. They itch and ooze so badly that he takes a piece of broken pottery to scrape the sores as he is sitting on a trash heap among the ashes at the town's dump.

Job's wife enters the story for the first time. "Still holding on to your precious integrity, are you?" she says. "Why don't you curse God and be done with it?"

Yet still, Job refuses to sin and says nothing against God.

All of us are familiar with how the story continues on for the next forty-one chapters—his three friends visiting and accusing Job of apparent wrongdoing, Job’s railing questions to God, God’s penetrating questions to Job, and the final chapter that sets everything right.

However, I want to pause on the ninth verse of the second chapter in this story:

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die."

What is the price of one’s integrity? Or perhaps I should back up and first ask, “What is integrity?” Integrity is the quality of being honest, having strong moral principles, doing what is right whether anyone but you knows what you did. Architects sometime speak of the integrity of a structure—the uniformity or consistency of theme. Sometimes they speak of not “violating the integrity” of a design. Computer technicians may speak of the integrity of a hard drive—whether or not it has been corrupted. All uses of the word speak in their own way of being unified, unimpaired, internally consistent, or lacking corruption. A person who has integrity is one of those “what you see is what you get” in the best sense. Such is one on whom you can count during the good times and during the bad times. Integrity is what you do in the dark when no one is watching.

Mahatma Gandhi once said: “A ‘No’ uttered from the deepest conviction is better and greater than a ‘Yes’ merely uttered to please, or what is worse, to avoid trouble.”

George Bernard Shaw said: “Better keep yourself clean and bright. You are the window through which you must see the world.”

Theodore Roosevelt...: “Character, in the long run, is the decisive factor in the life of an individual and of nations alike.”

Henry Ford said: “Quality means doing it right when no one is looking.”

Oprah Winfrey...: “Real integrity is doing the right thing, knowing that nobody’s going to know whether you did it or not.”

What really matters is that one's integrity has its greatest effect on the individual himself or herself. One of the finest compliments anyone can give is to say, "You can count on her or him to do what is right."

However, integrity comes with a price. You will disappoint people—sometimes your own son or daughter. For politicians, it may cost them the next election. It may mean not always going by the rules to do what is ultimately right. Years ago, I heard someone say: "He who learns to run away, lives to fight another day." While I recognize the importance of timing, something about the jingle seemed self-serving and shallow. This jingle proved to be a philosophy of the one who offered it as clever wisdom to me. Ultimately, I watched him run his business into bankruptcy, knowingly deceiving his employees, his customers, and his family.

A good friend, an elder in one of the churches I served, and a most respected president of an accounting firm wanted me to hear his story shortly after arriving as his new pastor. "I want you to hear it from me that I had to declare Chapter 11 a few months back. Another investor and I bought in too heavily with prospective oil fields. There was good money being made and I just got greedy. I told Peggy (his wife) that if she would just stick with me and be patient, I would pay off all the debt and we would be all right." He did and they were. Someone else told me, not Howard himself, that his investment partner completely defaulted on the loan...leaving Howard to paid off the full note both of them had signed. Howard had integrity. His was always the first advice I sought when needing a broader perspective.

Jesus was the finest example of integrity. He always sought to do that which was right, even when a simple recanting of his actions or words would have gotten him off the hook. When rules needed to be substituted for higher principles, he did so. When accused of defacing the Sabbath, his logic was: "Were people created for the Sabbath, or was the Sabbath created to enhance the lives of people?" And, he healed the lame man on the Sabbath, despite the religious law against such.

For Job in this timeless story, the consistency of his character cost him. It cost him his earthly wealth, the lives of his children, and his health—initially. But his "precious integrity," to quote his spouse, ultimately led to a deeper

understanding of life, himself, and God. The last chapter in this book becomes one of those “and they all live happily ever after” chapters. His health was restored, his lost wealth was replaced—and doubled—he and his wife had more sons and daughters who shared equally in their inheritance, and his self-righteous friends were publicly corrected by the Almighty. It doesn’t always work out that way because this is a wisdom story. But I promise, you will always come out ahead, because your personal character is strengthened and you can live with yourself. Not standing up for the right and being dishonest always has a negative effect on a person’s life. It sometimes costs a lot to be a person of integrity; but it always costs a lot more not to be.

Today is World Communion Sunday. With many other churches on the earth, we eat the bread and drink the wine provided by our Lord, and all of us are recipients of his grace. Even within our own congregation, you can’t help but see the faces of each person who are given the same gifts and love.

You can’t really celebrate it if you have ill will towards another at the table. No room for racial discrimination, gender discrimination, age discrimination...ethnic, economic, educational, or religious discrimination. As Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount regarding bringing a gift to the altar,¹ if anything in your heart is creating angst, leave your gift and go make things right with your brother or sister, then come back to the altar and make your gift.

The opening pages of our Constitution, *The Book of Order*, speak of “The Great Ends of the Church.” They are:

- The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;*
- The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;*
- The maintenance of divine worship;*
- The preservation of the truth;*
- The promotion of social righteousness;*
- And the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.*

What powerful objectives. What a powerful last statement—“to exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” May we do so this day. AMEN.

¹ Matthew 5:23-24.

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

1There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

2:1One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD.

2The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." 3The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason." 4Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. 5But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." 6The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life."

7So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. 8Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

9Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." 10But he said to her, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.