Developing Integrity
Isa 58:6-9; Mt. 5:13-16

13 “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness,
how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything,
except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.
14 “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be
hidden. **15** Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.
Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the
house. **16** In the same way, let your light shine before others, that
they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

I love our congregation. Before I can actually preach my sermon on not losing saltiness in your spiritual life, we already have a ladies group that are knitting “Melt ICE” hats, in protest of Minneapolis. Cute Nordic design. It is the same one that Norwegians wore during WW2 when they were occupied by the Nazi’s.

I’ve learned several times across the years with the those nice ladies that stand up in church to announce that they are getting together to solve a problem. Don’t get in their way… Do Not…

We hear a lot about “Attention Deficit Disorder” as a concern for our kids. But right now, like you, I’m far more worried about the “Integrity Deficit Disorder” that is sweeping our adults. Leave aside the naked bribery of countries depositing millions in a bitcoin account or gifting one of the most expensive jets on earth for overt influence. Donald Trump undoubtedly has, what lay people would call a personality disorder that handicaps his ability to reflect morally, which was in evidence again yesterday when he posted an ugly racist attack on a former president, with none of the normal shame that the rest of the country feels. And then, he is so inept at dealing with the embarrassment that it caused, you realize ‘that boys not right’. He is missing a piece, so we will leave that aside.

Our country is being led by a Congress that won’t step up, won’t act responsibly. They beg off, make excuses, play the partisan sniping game ‘what about the other side’ that is so Middle

School. They are enabling one of the most anarchic moments in American history and the future will not be kind to them for their lack of integrity.

And all of this against this broader integrity deficit disorder manifest in the thousands of emails to and from Jeffery Epstein, written seemingly by boys in middle school or worse, with this extraordinary sense of privilege that we won't get caught because we are so special. These are the adults in the room.

It brings to mind an earlier generation of leaders who moved us with their serious moral integrity. I think of Abraham Heschel, the great Jewish intellectual that joined Martin Luther King in the Civil Rights movement.

A decade later, he and Dr. King, joined arms again to protest the Vietnam War. A reporter walked up to Heschel and asked him

why he is protesting the war. Heschel thinks for a minute and says "Because I can't pray."

The reporter is incredulous. "What do you mean you can't pray? What does praying have to do with the war?"

Heschel responded, "Each Sabbath, when I open my prayer book, I see the faces of Vietnamese children running from napalm".

Great answer! Why? He opens the prayerbook to be filled with the viewpoint of God the compassionate, God the merciful. The prayer book is supposed to make us see the world with God's eyes.

And you may ask yourself, why do we have to be in touch with our moral selves when we open the prayer book? The answer is that morality is actually hard-wired in the human personality. It is part of the default software, so to speak.

It can be damaged. It can be perverted, but it is not optional equipment. And what does that mean for us all? It means that we continue to develop morally throughout our entire lives. And that is why older people regularly report that morality becomes more and more important to us as we mature through the life cycle. Violating our conscience becomes more consequential. We can't live with ourselves.

I remember asking one of our veterans what the successful life looked like to him? He said, 'being able to sleep with yourself at night'. That was one thing I learned from walking the 'Greatest Generation' through the last chapter of life. Those guys never got over the traumas we asked them to live through that we might enjoy the liberties of freedom. They never stopped thinking about the men that they could not save, the tragedies of war that they could not prevent. They went over and over these scenarios, not

just in rumination, although there was a lot of rumination, but processing all of it, what it meant, how to live after trauma. And, at the very end of their life, almost every single one of them, wanted to go over it one more time for a lot of reasons. But central among them was they needed to resolve a very complex and ambiguous moral dilemma that was critical for them. Integrity is important to each and every one of us.

They helped me to reflect on the social context for our scriptural tradition. It took me a long time to realize why the bible was written. It is not just about history, where we came from, but that is part of it.

The social context is war. The moral question is how to we recover from the aftermath of being defeated, our daughters raped, our sons exiled usually in slavery, our homeland destroyed, all of our people gone, killed prematurely, unjustly?

There is something so visceral, so damaging about living through violent impunity that humans become enraged beyond their control. Spiritually, we have to control our emotions that threaten to enflame us, overwhelm us, drive us into despair.

So the Buddhists, who are just more advanced here than other spiritual traditions, taught us to meditate, to transcend and dispel the negativity of the world around us. They taught us to cultivate an inner peace, regardless of what is happening externally.

I love the figure of Yodha in Star Wars, collected, calm, somewhat serene in spite of the fact that he is surrounded by warriors that create anxiety and agitation routinely. Meditation is cultivating inner peace, a sense of sacred awe, a simple presence with ourselves so that we can cultivate compassion, empathy, understanding and harmony with those around us. That is one spiritual dimension.

And the other part of responding to war and the tragedy of violence is captured in the biblical tradition, that of redemption. How do we honor the tragedy that we lived through? How do we redeem what was lost? How do we transform destruction into something purposeful, something meaningful?

It took me a long time to realize that practically every generation in all of our recorded history (the last 4000 years) have lived through the utter devastation of war, particularly if you were blessed to live a long life (meaning 70-75). At some point, the peace would be rudely interrupted and war would destroy your former way of life.

How do we live after the destruction of our country? How do we live after everyone close to us has died?

When I was writing my dissertation, I read about one of the earliest concentration camps that was set up in France at the very

beginning of the war. The inmates were the intelligentsia of Paris that had been rounded up and detained when the Nazi's stormed in.

The inmates were playwrights, authors, musicians, actors… Shortly after they were incarcerated, they started to collaborate on Sundays. They sponsored poetry readings. They rehearsed plays that they had memorized. They sponsored concerts. They read aloud great literary passages that they remembered. They tried to actively cultivate the humane impulse to beauty and reflective meaning in the midst of a putsch by the violent, stupid brutes that controlled their existence. Especially surrounded by ugly, dehumanizing, arbitrary force, they huddled around the humanities in the Western tradition, the wellspring of culture that is our higher, more noble side.

Christians used to say that these moments are divine. They are little parables of God in the world. This is how God is manifest in

our lives. You want to find God? Look into the faces of people who manifest love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. That is how Saint Paul put it in Galatians (5:22-23).

In Corinthians, he says that wherever the Spirit of God is genuinely manifest you will find hope, wisdom, justice and courage. They are all moral qualities. And together, they point towards a life lived with integrity. You are at one with yourself, not divided, like we are when we are hypocritical. You are at one with God or we would say 'the divine Spirit is manifest in you'.

Atticus Finch put it like this in "To Kill a Mockingbird" "**Before I can live with other folks I've got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience.**" We will almost always live in a broken

society and we have to grow in moral stature in spite of our surrounding s. We have to be oriented by our Spiritual North Star.

That is what is compelling about the example of Jesus. He answered to a higher authority than the world in which he was born. He looked for the Kingdom of God amid the kingdoms of this world. In a cruel society, he manifest compassion. In the midst of violent aggression, he was kind. Amid an unjust occupation, he sided with the poor and oppressed. In response to attack, he manifest patient peace. In season and out of season, he was faithful to himself and faithful to God. People said he was the Son of God because they thought he was completely filled with the Spirit of God.

He had a lot of things peeled back in his life so that he was left pretty much just with his character towards the end. At least that is the way it is depicted in the Gospels that we have. They focus on

his character. And in the story Jesus' character became clarified, his integrity concentrated, his sense of purpose and mission focused.

Admiral Chester Nimitz once said "**God grant me the courage not to give up what I think is right even though I think it is hopeless."** Integrity is what sees us through terrific challenges, painful difficulties. It is what we find so quietly powerful about the example of Jesus in Jerusalem.

As my grandfather used to say to me, "**Son the time is always right to do the right thing."**

Integrity is like that. It renews the zesty flavor that gives our life its moral zing. And may it be so with you.

May you grow in moral purpose and manifest intrinsically spiritual virtue. May your life cohere towards genuine meaning as you interiorize the perspective of God in love, joy, peace, patience,

goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. May calm, serenity and inner peace fill you as you grow up. More than grow up, may you spiritually and morally **glow up** from within like a lamp that illumines everyone around you.

For your light is bright, and the people around you, the world around you, is in need of illumination.

Let your light shine. Amen.

Our first reading reminds us that the point of religious practices is that it changes our heart and we become more like God.
I read from Isaiah 58.
“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?