

What Impact Does Integrity Have?

The Love that is God within and among us today also connects us (in ways too wonderful for us to comprehend) with additional saints – that is persons infused with the Love of God – both living and dead. Love connects across all boundaries and divisions. So we gather on this All Saints Sunday in 2023 on land which has lived in relationship with many peoples across millennia. Let's enter into a time of wondering together: what impact does integrity have?

Let's begin with prayer: O God grant to each of us and to this body (this community of faith): serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

This morning, I invite you to call to mind someone who has had great influence on the way you live your life. This person may have spoken with clarity about what they most valued, but you likely have learned more from the way they behaved than what they said. We will return to the following prompt in a few moments when I will ask if a few of you feel open to speaking your response aloud. I encourage you to write this down if it helps it to stick in your head: **In one sentence, state the most influential lesson your saint (dead or living) has taught you through their behavior. State the most influential lesson your saint (dead or living) has taught you through their behavior.** I hope that this prompt invites us to appreciate and honor the integrity with which our saints have lived.

Here is the one that has arisen for me today: A church leader listened carefully to young people, embracing my questions.

While we let that question percolate, I invite us to meditate on today's readings through which Micah and Jesus spoke truths about practicing Love to people for whom they cared deeply. They each expressed a longing for their community members to practice or embody what they professed to value.

In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown (a professor and author who studies courage, vulnerability, shame and empathy) offers these salient thoughts: *"Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen... Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage."* (*Daring Greatly*, 37) I have come to believe that practicing integrity requires vulnerability (meaning the sharing of truth and courage).

Micah cried out, *"But I am full of strength by God's Spirit, full of justice and courage, to declare the crimes of Jacob and Israel to their faces."* What were some of the crimes the people were perpetrating against each other in Micah's time? Some *"cry peace when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who have nothing to put in their mouths."* Micah further elaborates. *"Listen, you leaders of the House of Jacob, rulers of the House of Israel, you who loathe justice and pervert all that is right, you who build Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with violent injustice! Your leaders sell their verdicts for bribes, your priests accept fees for their rulings, your prophets practice divination."*

In our Judeo-Christian tradition we have recognized prophets by their patterns of speaking difficult truths to those in power. Micah directly named the sins of socioeconomic oppression (those in power declaring war against the hungry, the powerful were becoming richer and more powerful on the backs of the poor among them by selling them goods and services in dishonest ways).

Oppressive use of power has not faded away over the centuries. It is a form of evil that is very much alive, feeding on our greed for control. Micah valued socioeconomic justice and had the courage to speak the truth of God's economy of love and life for all. I wonder if Micah also put his value into practice in his own living.

What do we glean from today's gospel reading about Jesus' core values? I hear Jesus calling for integrity, humility and service. Regarding his community's religious leader, Jesus offered this advice to his followers: *"The religious scholars and the Pharisees have succeeded Moses as teachers; therefore, perform every observance they tell you to. But don't follow their example, even they don't do what they say. They tie up heavy loads and lay them on others' shoulders, while they themselves will not lift a finger to help alleviate the burden. All their works are performed to be seen... They are fond of places of honor... they love respectful greetings."* Jesus calls his followers (then and now) to live with integrity. While he hoped people would continue to look to their religious leaders for spiritual wisdom passed down through the generations, he wanted us to only follow the lived examples of leaders who practice what they speak. Jesus placed a very high value on integrity.

Later in the passage, we hear Jesus calling us to lives of humility and service: *"Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted."* I wonder, are we embodying (and so modeling for others) Jesus' way of humility and service – prioritizing generosity of spirit, love and kindness above appearances?

Modern-day prophet Brené Brown asks this: *"Are we practicing love? Yes, most of us are really good at professing it—sometimes ten times a day. But are we walking the talk? Are we being our most vulnerable selves?"*

Are we showing trust, kindness, affection, ad respect...? It's not the lack of professing that gets us in trouble in our relationships; it's failing to practice love that leads to hurt." (Daring Greatly, 106-107)

I would like to offer us a moment now to bring to mind and heart that person who has profoundly influenced us. Consider one clear behavior that they consistently demonstrated and which has influenced the way you live. After an extended moment of silence, I will ask if anyone wants to share their single phrase. If you wish, you can include the person's name and their relationship to you when you speak your phrase that describes their influential behavior. Here is the prompt one more time: **In one sentence, state the most influential lesson your saint (dead or living) has taught you through their behavior.** Again, what has arisen for me today is this: A church leader listened carefully to young people, embracing my questions. Let us hold a moment of silence for one another.
[pause]

Would anyone like to share aloud an influential lesson from their saint.
[four persons shared aloud]

I invite you to consider the following words as they relate both to our individual lives and to our life as a congregation. Hear this thought from Brené Brown as it relates to our question – what impact does integrity have? She writes, *"We can't give people what we don't have. Who we are matters immeasurably more than what we know or who we want to be...when our practiced values are routinely in conflict with the expectations we set in our culture, disengagement is inevitable."* (Daring Greatly, 177, 180)

“We can’t give people what we don’t have.” I wonder, who in this congregation has modeled for you loving, courageous, truth-sharing behavior with such integrity that they inspire you as you contribute your own energy, skill, and money into the mix of our ministry? I invite you to consider making the bold move to tell that person how they have inspired you – thanking them face to face and spirit to spirit.

What impact does integrity have? May we demonstrate the answer by striving to live in the courageous, truth-sharing ways of integrity with which the saints of our lives have lived. May we keep journeying together in a spirit of mutuality – trusting that we, like Micah and Jesus, are *“full of strength by God’s Spirit, full of justice and courage.”* Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Micah 3:4-12, Matthew 23:1-12