

THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER: PERSONAL INTEGRITY

Philippians 2

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On March 25, 1911, a clothing factory worker in lower Manhattan threw either a cigarette or a match into one of the great scrapheaps of cotton that lined the factory floor. The pile quickly burst into flames. Somebody alerted the factory manager who grabbed some nearby buckets of water and dumped them on the fire, but the cotton scraps were explosively flammable and flames soon spread to the tissue paper patterns hanging above the wooden work desks. The manager then panicked. Instead of thinking first of evacuating the 500 hundred factory workers, he thought only of trying to put out the fire. He ordered workers to drag a fire hose from a nearby stairwell, but there was no water pressure.

The doors to the stairwells and exits were locked – a common practice at the time to prevent workers from taking unauthorized breaks and to reduce theft – so many of the workers could not escape from the burning building and instead they jumped from the high windows. 146 garment workers died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, most of them recent Italian or Jewish immigrant women and girls aged 14 to 23.

One of the bystanders observing the horrible scene was a woman named Frances Perkins. She was already working as a lobbyist to end child labor, but this incident turned a career into a vocation. In that moment, and in the days immediately afterwards, she asked herself, “What does life want from me? What are my circumstances telling me to do?” In other words, she felt called, summoned by life. She witnessed the Triangle fire

and she felt indignant that this tear in the moral fabric of the world could be permitted to last.

Frances Perkins was born into privilege, born in fact, in Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood. One ancestor was a Revolutionary war hero. Her parents sent her to college, somewhat unusual for a woman of that era. There she learned that a well-lived life involves throwing oneself into struggle, that self-respect and dignity come not from one's manners and etiquette but from testing one's moral courage, facing opposition and ridicule. There she learned that people who pursue challenges end up far happier than those who pursue pleasure.

Eventually Perkins became Secretary of Labor in FDR's Cabinet, the first female Cabinet member, and she holds a record as the longest-serving secretary of labor. She was a major force behind many of FDR's programs like the New Deal and the first minimum wage law. She believed that the work she was called to do gave her a deep inner sense of purpose. She was not dependent on being praised by others.

I am not a scholar of Frances Perkins' life; I'm sure she made many mistakes along the way, as all people do. But her life seems a good example of a life of integrity. She knew who she was, what her gifts and talents were, and how she could use them for the common good. She followed a sense of call, a vocation, and responded not to money or prestige but to the inner sense that she was doing what she was meant to do. She was true to herself.

The word, "integrity," does not appear often in the Bible, but the concept is surely there. Integrity has to do with wholeness and honesty. The **opposite** of integrity is someone who feels that they are living a double life, that they have to be one way when they're

with one group of people and a completely different way with others. People with integrity are those people about whom you say - she is who she says she is. His words and action align.

One of the hallmarks of Jesus' character is his integrity. He absolutely knew who he was, he knew his purpose in life, he was laser-beamed focused on his priorities, and crystal clear about his values. None of this came easily or quickly, however.

Just after the story of Jesus' baptism, before he begins his public ministry, we have the story of Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness, with nothing to eat. At the end of these forty days (imagine how hungry you would be!) he's tempted by a figure given the name of the devil. The devil says to him - "Jesus, perform magic tricks. Turn these stones into bread." But Jesus says, "I'm not here to be a magician." Then the devil shows Jesus all the rich and powerful places in the world and says, 'I can make you ruler of all of this.'" Jesus says, "That's not my calling." Finally, the devil says, "Show us what your God can do. Jump from this high place and see if God will save you." Jesus says, "I'm not here to test God."

Despite very real physical hunger, despite the fact that he could have done a lot of good as a political ruler, despite the possibility that he could have drawn people to God by showing God off, Jesus rejects all of it. "No, I don't obey you. I only listen to the wisdom of God that is within me. I know who I am and whose I am and what my purpose in this earth is to be."

Then, from that place of inner knowledge, Jesus launches his ministry - to bring good news to the poor and the brokenhearted and the forgotten.

He knows who he is, but he continually renews his sense of call as well, with frequent and consistent and intentional spiritual practice - time with God, time in prayer, time in worship, time in nature.

This three-week sermon series is entitled, "The Content of our Character." That line is from Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in which he says this - "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

I spend a lot of time thinking about how people assess their lives. As I meet with people at the end of life, in hospice care, as I meet with people who are planning memorial services for their loved ones, I learn what it is that people have placed as their priorities, and I learn what it is that people remember most about them.

There's nothing sadder to me than being at the bedside of a dying person who is filled with regrets and disappointments. It's a cliché, but I can tell you this for sure - the things we worry about so much in life, like our stuff - none of it matters at the end of life. No one thinks about what kind of cars they drove or whether or not their closets were clean. It's **always** about how they spent their time and the quality of their relationships. "Did I leave the world a better place?" "Was I kind?" "Did I forgive and was I forgiven?" These are the questions people ponder at the end of life. And also this one: "Is God pleased with me or disappointed in me?" It's about the content of our character.

Friends, we are living in some difficult times. That's not a news flash, but I want to acknowledge it. These times are difficult for me, as an individual, and in my role here. I have had some of the most tough, thought-provoking conversations of my entire ministry in the last couple of weeks. There are some people in this church who wish that I would take

a more activist stance on the pressing, hot-button issues of our day. There are some people in this church who would like it if Sundays were a day to take a complete break from even mentioning the social issues that divide us. And there are opinions on every point of that spectrum. I have been spending as much time as I can in discernment, talking to colleagues, reading, thinking, praying, so that I can be the best leader I know how to be in this time of upheaval. It's how I try to maintain **my** sense of integrity.

I continue to believe that the Avon Lake UCC is called to be a church for people who think for themselves, a church where all people are welcome, regardless of party affiliation. **But** we also need to be a church community in which we call one another to accountability, and I am grateful for the people in my circles who do that for me (even if i might not appreciate it at the moment it happens.) The needs of the world are too urgent for any of us to sit on the sidelines.

A lot of people spend a lot of time and energy creating social media posts that are clever but also sarcastic, and seem focused on demonizing the other side. What if - instead - we focused every day on asking ourselves these questions, in a spirit of humility as this morning's scripture calls for: "What am I doing to love my neighbor today?" "What am I doing for those who are most vulnerable today?" "What am I doing to care for God's beloved planet today?"

What if this community becomes - even more than we ever have been in the past - a place where we help one another to be and stay people of integrity? Where we are gracious and forgiving but also help hold one another accountable?

If we remember the messages Jesus taught and lived about love and acceptance for all - if we remember the call in the Hebrew scriptures for us to care for the widows and

orphans - if we remember the prophet Micah, who said, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God?" - if we focus on these things, we might have different political strategies, but we will end up in the same place.

We call ourselves a purple church, a big tent church, but we can't let that be an excuse. We can't say, "I can't get involved, because my involvement might offend someone." If we do that, our community will stand for nothing at all. Instead, if we do this right, with integrity, we will be a model, an example, a source of hope in this polarized, divided nation of ours.

In the course of my reading and discerning, I keep noticing two pieces of wisdom that speak most pertinently to me right now. Our calling as Christians, if we are to be people of integrity, is to do these two things regularly. The first is to look at what it is we have to give. Do we have time to volunteer, money to donate, particular skills to offer? Every one of us has something. We then need to find a way to become involved with those issues that call to us. We don't all feel passionate about the same issues and we don't all need to become involved in the same way - in fact, we shouldn't. But each of us must act. None of us can sit on the sidelines.

And the second is this. We must balance our involvement with experiences of joy and beauty. We are meant to enjoy the gift of life, and we won't be good ambassadors for any cause - especially the Christian life - if we are miserable. So nurture your spirit. Spend time with people who make you laugh. Take time to enjoy good food. Listen to music that uplifts you. Walk through the Metroparks. Watch the sunsets. Rest! Do whatever it is that reminds you of all that is good about this life and worth preserving.

I wonder if the manager of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory had ever considered what his inner purpose was. Was it just to make money for the owners (who were eventually prosecuted?). Or did he ever remind himself that each person who worked for him had intrinsic value and worth as a human being? Maybe he just panicked, and that's understandable, but if his first thought had been, "I care about the lives of these workers; there's nothing more important" he could have saved 146 lives. The more clear our values and priorities are, the better able we will be to act with integrity in a moment of crisis. That disaster led to better safety regulations for America's workers. That's the good news. Three years after the shirtwaist fire, several civil suits were settled with the owner of the building. The average amount recovered was \$75 per each life lost.

May God grant us the courage to speak and act and live with integrity. I want to close with these words of Reinhold Neibuhr: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love." Amen.

Story of Frances Perkins is taken from [The Road to Character](#), by David Brooks