

Sunday, May 22, 2016

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## CONDENSED TRUTH

Scripture references:

Psalms 34:14—Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

Matthew 22:35-40—One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment of the law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Reducing, condensing, refining, compacting....this is the mindset with which I approach our lesson today.

During the last several years, with my own life changing, as the Beatle song lyric of my youth aptly states “...in oh so many ways”, I have found myself increasingly turning toward a minimalist mindset—driven to reduce and condense. Certainly this has applied to material possessions as I moved from a 4 bedroom house in Hillsboro to a small but cozy apartment here in Wichita. This mindset has also led me to be highly attracted to compactness in terms of navigational truths to guide me in practical ways in this life.

Of course, the possible risk with this minimalist approach is of inadvertently reducing ideas in a way that could render them as trite and inappropriately simplistic. That is not my intent. Instead it is my purpose to extract essential properties that can actually magnify meaning and implication.

This is why I particularly appreciate the New Testament scripture read earlier about Jesus being tested by one of the religious elite. In response to being asked “which is the greatest commandment?”, Jesus’ reply was simple in its elegance—reducing his words of response to an economically brief and concise reply—“Love God holistically, with all of your being and by the way—this means to love your neighbor just as much as you love yourself”. Jesus’ response was condensed in volume of words but over the top in terms of condensed flavor. The primary scripture that I have been busily reducing for today’s lesson is Psalms 34:14-- Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

In mulling over this Psalms passage for some time, I am really drawn to the almost deceptive brevity of words but with such resounding import. “For the simplicity on this side of complexity, I wouldn't give you a fig. But for the simplicity on the other side of complexity, for that I would give you anything I have.” –Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Our Psalms passage today is packed full of thought provoking, action oriented language that yes, with its’ brevity of words belies the complexity that lies within.

Turn from evil:

Most of us can quickly ascertain evil as personified by specific reprehensible acts and behaviors. Murder, adultery, lying, cheating, deceiving...pretty linear logic as to the clear wrongfulness in these types of purposeful behaviors.

And I also believe we understand that evil sometimes takes a subtle, cunning path. In C.S. Lewis' book, *The Screwtape Letters*, the Senior Demon in the story provides his nephew, the junior Demon with the following advice as he labors to trip up an unsuspecting Christian: "...the safest road to hell is the gradual one---the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."

I grew up in a denomination and with well intentioned, principled, loving parents who were zealous in identifying and calling out certain activities as evil in an apparent attempt to go the extra mile for the sake of eternal security. However, the irony of being taught that on the one hand, dancing was evil and that on the other, encouraging young men at the time to go to Viet Nam with an M-16 in hand wasn't lost on me. When I was a sophomore in high school I went to a youth rally at one of the church colleges associated with my denomination at that time. I vividly remember the keynote speaker being an Army Colonel who told us that indeed to enlist in the army after high school should be a preferred Christian prerogative for all boys in that audience.

That evil exists is not in question. However, we can do so much more harm than good in mislabeling or confusing others as to what is and what is not evil. I have a sense that the Psalmist who declared that we should turn from evil in today's passage had a pretty clear eyed understanding of the insidious reality associated with true evil.

Do good:

Most of us can name off unequivocal acts of evil without much hesitation. The same could be said in our intuitive understanding of what constitutes good deeds in this life.

As followers of Christ we seek to identify and execute upon acts in behalf of others that are inherently good. My own meditation related to doing good is that sometimes I am capable of trying too hard to think of good things to do instead of being open to God's sometimes autonomous direction which can take a different twist that what we envision.

The scriptures are replete with stories of people like Jonah and Peter who had their own one track minds as to what constitutes a good deed and how they wanted to act upon their subjective notion of it. In both cases, God had to shake them up and let them know, you may have your own version and action plan as to how you think you can best accomplish the mission I have established for you, but you aren't really listening to me. Therefore, I'll provide you with an object lesson. I.E. Jonah and the big fish detour to Ninevah. Peter, on the rooftop in Joppa. Hungry Peter? Don't call anything "unclean" which I have provided for you to eat. I had my own personal object lesson many years ago.

In my early days of heading up sales for Barkman Honey Company I was tasked with building business beyond their then Midwest only footprint. I worked pretty hard at this and traveled a lot in establishing business throughout North America.

I finally began to make some traction in hitting pay dirt with a couple of large national food distributors and remember one day when I had the good fortune of landing a meeting with one of these new accounts, located in L.A. The only problem was that I was already scheduled with another equally coveted new potential account in Boston which was established for the day after my L.A. meeting. With careful travel choreography, I was able to put together just the right flight connections that allowed me to be in L.A. for a 2 p.m. meeting one day, and then high tail

it to the airport to go to Boston (by the way, in case this is lost on you, the other side of our continent) in which I was to connect with a short layover in Chicago.

By the time I got to Chicago, I was tired, hungry and questioning my own sanity at having agreed to these back to back meetings. My meeting the next morning in Boston was scheduled for 9 a.m. and I thought, I am going to get some shut eye on this flight! Wrong!! I no sooner got in my aisle seat when an older woman sitting next to me wanted conversation. Normally, I am pretty amenable to this kind of thing and don't like to be unfriendly. However, I sought to answer in one syllable responses to this sweet, but slightly annoying fellow passenger. She was not to be deterred.

As the plane was taking off, it was clear she wanted and needed to visit. I grudgingly gave up the prospect of a nap and turned my full attention to her. It wasn't long before I knew that this was going to be one of those memorable moments in the air.

This woman confided in me that her husband had suddenly passed away and that her daughter had summoned her to Boston. This woman told me her daughter wanted her to consider coming to live there. This woman was agonizing about this decision. She was also obviously in the throes of grief over the unexpected loss of her husband. As an aside, little did I know how much I would later in life be able to identify with that particular grief.

By the time the plane had landed in Boston, the woman had asked me to pray for her in making the best decision regarding a possible move to Boston. As we got up to deplane, she hugged me and I asked her where she was from. She replied, Pilsen, Kansas! This little Kansas village is just 17 miles from where I lived at that time in Hillsboro!

It was pretty convincing to me that God had a task in mind for me that evening in spite of that nap which I thought I wanted.

Seek peace:

You remember me telling you about my conflict with the war of my youth, Vietnam. During my high school years I began laying out a peace position based on the teachings of Christ as best I could ascertain such teachings in tension with war. I knew nothing about Anabaptist teaching about peace then—boy could I have used the support of this church as opposed to my own church community at the time!

This led to my presenting myself to the draft board in Emporia several years later on a cold January evening in 1971 and seeking Conscientious Objector status. By the way, later discovering the Mennonites when I moved my wife and children to Hillsboro some 15 years later was like coming home!

So it is pretty obvious that meditations about peace as taken from this Psalms passage and what it means to us as followers of Christ is very important to me personally. However, in this Psalms meditation, I have thought a lot about the need to not limit myself as pertains to the many facets of what it means to embrace and offer peace in the name of Christ to the world.

To seek peace is to confront that which stand in the way of peace for so many hurting people, many of whom we come into contact with every day. World peace and the absence of armed conflict is admirable and necessary but in pursuing peace, I need to start with my own heart and then observe more intently the many people around me with whom I interact on a daily basis.

Pursuing peace is to become an agent of peace. This can take so many forms and have so many points of focus. I like the wording in our Confessions of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective:

We believe that peace is the will of God. God created the world in peace, and God's peace is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ, who is our peace and the peace of the whole world. Led by the Holy Spirit, we follow Christ in the way of peace, doing justice, bringing reconciliation, and practicing nonresistance even in the face of violence and warfare.

Pursue it:

The way of Christ is multifaceted with many roads and many opportunities to contribute toward the peace for the benefit of all humankind.

Doing justice. Bringing reconciliation. Practicing nonresistance.

Our Psalms passage today exhorts us to not just seek peace but to pursue it, implying that it has an elusive quality.

But pursue it, we must! Martin Luther King, Jr. said "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy." Walter Wink said "Jesus does not proclaim a nonviolence for the perfect, but for the violent." And finally, Jesus himself said "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.

In many ways, today's lesson must seem old hat to those of you who grew up with a Christ centered peace position. However, this precious directive from Christ continues to invigorate me, perhaps because I came upon it in tension with my community at the time.

So there you have it. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

TURN---DO---SEEK---PURSUE!