

“You Are the Moral Leader You’re Looking For”

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Exodus 1:8-22

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

A few years ago, I attended the UCC Michigan Conference where our preacher, the Rev. Dr. Frank Thomas, gave us this message: Although you are all looking around for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr of our time, stop it. You are the moral leader you have been looking for. So, go out and be it! This revised sermon was my response to his call, and it seems appropriate to share it with you now, as we prepare for a week where we celebrate the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King.

Many of you know that I teach a course on leadership and ethics. In this course, I usually teach a case study that involves a company that knowingly sold brakes that didn’t work to the U.S. Air force. Luckily, the deception was discovered before anyone was hurt. A few years ago, one of my students came into my office after we discussed this case, wide-eyed and hesitant. He said, “Professor, I think I might have done something unethical.” He then proceeded to tell me a story of how he had worked for an automotive supply company that supplied a certain piece of safety equipment. An auto company had contracted with my student’s company to make this piece of equipment. It was 2006 and the auto company wanted the part made to the new 2007 federally mandated safety rules. Legally, my student’s company was not required to follow the 2007 rules, but they agreed to do so anyway in order to get the contract. My student then explained that he was in charge of performing the tests of the part. He found that the part failed to meet 2007 safety requirements, but that it met 2006 requirements. When he reported this failure to his boss, though, his boss told him to lie to the client. “We’re not breaking any laws by producing the part at the 2006 requirements,” the boss explained, “and we’ll lose the contract if we tell them we can’t make it yet at the 2007 requirements.” My student told me that he followed his boss’ orders.

After telling me this story, he looked at me, pleadingly and asked, “did I do something wrong?” He hadn’t broken the federal law, but he did lie to his customer and break the contract. Also, the safety equipment regulations were being updated in 2007 for a reason; it would save lives. I think my student knew the answer to his question. He was just hoping I would vindicate him.

Unfortunately, we are all faced with this kind of ethical dilemma several times in our lives. Someone in a position of authority over us, or a group of people whose respect we want, will tell us to do something that violates our moral and ethical code, and we will feel compelled to do it or risk losing something important—a job, a friendship, our reputation. My guess is that almost every one of us can think of an example of when this happened to us. It may be that our own examples don’t have the same kind of serious consequences that my student’s example had, but I bet we’ve faced such a dilemma. And what are we supposed to do in this situation? Is it ever okay to violate our morals in order to keep a job or a friendship or our reputation?

This is the dilemma facing the women in our scripture reading for this day. I find this reading frightening; it is about a man with enormous earthly power who feels so threatened by a group of immigrants that he orders all their baby sons murdered. This is the reoccurring story of tyrants throughout history. The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, hear the orders of their Pharaoh. The man has the power to order the death of babies and expects to be obeyed, so these women know that he won’t hesitate to kill them if they disobey. And yet they do disobey. “They feared God,” says our scripture, meaning that they know and understand the moral code set by God and they choose to obey it. Moreover, my research has shown me that the Hebrew text is a little confusing here. The grammar implies that these women were Egyptian, that the text could read

that they are “midwives *to* the Hebrews” or “*of* the Hebrews,” not that they are Hebrews themselves. If this understanding of grammar is correct, these women risked their lives not even for their own people, but for *immigrants*. The man in authority demanded that they break the moral code of God, and they refused. What a terrible risk, and what great courage that took.

When Pharaoh finds out, he enlists the help of his entire nation, demanding that everyone kill Hebrew baby boys when they find them and, our assumption is that his orders are generally carried out. In other words, others are not so brave as Shiphrah and Puah, or maybe they don’t like the Hebrews. In any case, when they are given an order by their leader, they obey.

This is a story about morals and ethics. It is a story about people pulled between obeying earthly and heavenly authority. The majority of the people in this story fail, but key people succeed and through that success, they find salvation.

Now you might be thinking that when I say they find salvation; I mean that they are rewarded by God. Even though they are rewarded--that’s exactly what the story tells us about Shiphrah and Puah, anyway--that isn’t what I mean when I say they find salvation. Or you might be thinking that I mean that they will be rewarded in heaven for their good deeds. That’s not what I mean either.

When I say that they find salvation through doing what is morally correct, through becoming moral leaders, I mean that they have made a choice that has utterly changed their lives.

You see, when we talk about the salvation that Jesus Christ brought to us, we are usually talking about the salvation of eternal life. But there is a second kind of salvation that Jesus brought. Through his teachings and his actions in his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus taught us how to act. He taught us that there is a better way to behave and that way is usually counter cultural and often in defiance of unjust authority. By acting in the way that Jesus taught us to act, by following in Jesus’ footsteps, we find a certain kind of salvation.

Let me be clear. I am not saying that we have to behave like Jesus or in any particular way in order to gain the salvation of eternal life. That’s not at all what I mean. Scripture very clearly teaches us that God loves us so much that God grants us eternal salvation. You’ve heard this before. Salvation is granted by grace alone and not by our works.

What I’m talking about is the way we feel and the way our entire life is affected every time we come to a moral or ethical decision and we choose to follow the path of Jesus Christ. When we make the right choice, the holy choice, something shifts inside us. We *know* it is the right thing to do. We feel a profound inner peace and often a quiet joy. We look at the positive effects of our actions and then, the next time we have to make such a choice, we do it again. Our lives, both the way we act and our internal senses, are forever changed when we do the right thing. That’s what I mean when I say we find a second kind of salvation. We don’t gain *eternal life* by doing the right thing; we gain a new understanding of *this* life.

I want to clarify this concept even more because I think it’s tricky. When we follow the footsteps of Jesus Christ and choose to live morally, we shouldn’t gain the kind of satisfaction that makes us proud or arrogant. Look at the role model of Jesus; he was always humble, but he certainly didn’t have to be. He was the incarnation of God! He could have done anything, insisted on anything, lorded his power over everyone. But as our story today tells us, he allowed a preacher in the wilderness to baptize him and called regular people—fishermen and tax collectors to be his most trusted disciples. Ultimately, his choice was to obey God the creator, to heal outcasts, to wash his disciples’ feet, to work for justice, to stand up to unjust authority. He did everything right and he never bragged about it.

So, the feeling I’m talking about is a humble one. It is the feeling that comes from doing something right when no one is looking. I believe that you all know what I’m talking about. For example, those of you who have marched in the Pride March, I wonder if you felt it? Or those of you who have taken part in the Black Lives Matter movement or those of you who are working for immigration rights, have you felt it? I’m certain that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and all those

who marched and peacefully protested with him felt it. They risked being jailed, beaten, water-hosed, and killed for what they did. And you...walking in the Pride march when you know there are people who will hate you for it, taking a stand against racial and immigrant discrimination when you know that people will hate you for it—these things must be terrifying or at least infuriating. In all these cases, you are taking a risk to do what is right. So, when you get past the feelings of fear, and worry and anger...what is that feeling down deeper? I am guessing you know what I'm talking about—there's a feeling of quiet joy, of inner peace. It is the feeling of knowing that you did what was right, and it changes you—who you are and how you live in the future. That's what I mean when I refer to the second kind of salvation.

My student made a mistake, as all people do. He was unable to stand up to immoral authority. Luckily, our God of grace forgives us for our mistakes. More luckily, our God of grace sent Jesus to teach us a better way of living. When faced with an ethical or moral dilemma, and I can almost guarantee that you will be faced with one, you do not have to flounder around, wondering what to do. Our scripture gives us models like Shiphrah, Puah, and, most importantly, Jesus Christ.

Let me say one final thing. Shiphrah, Puah, Jesus', and the Rev. Dr. King's names were all recorded. Their acts of moral courage will always be remembered. For most of us, that won't be the case. We can be the moral leaders we're looking for without expected reward and even if it seems that our impact is small. Shiphrah, Puah, Jesus, and the Rev. Dr. King didn't do what they did in order to gain notoriety, and neither should we. We should act morally because Jesus taught us to do so; we should act morally because it's the right thing to do. And so, I will leave you with a quotation from one of my favorite authors, George Elliot. This is from the end of the novel *Middlemarch*:

“But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

The moral leadership we all are looking for is a faithfully lived life. Let us go now and live it. Amen.

References

Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. London: Wordsworth, 1994.