

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
February 5, 2017

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to brake every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide... [To let your] light...break forth like the dawn, and your healing...spring up quickly.
Isaiah 58

This is a smart phone. I carry it with me, like many of you, I'm sure, because it seems to have all the answers. I check it in the morning to see what's going on in the world. I check it during the day to see who's contacting me. I check it at night, to finish up business and maybe to play a game or two to help me get to sleep. We call this a smart phone, but actually, the phone is just one of many apps. I have a calculator and a scanner and a calendar. Three or four screens-full or apps. Often, when in conversation, I'll break to say, "Wait a minute. Let me check with Siri about that." Yes, there is even a smart woman inside this device with whom I can check my facts. "Hey Siri, what's the best sushi place in town?" I talk with Siri as I would a friend — Siri is tuned in to the world, working with Wikipedia, Yelp, Rotten Tomatoes, Shazam, and other online services to get you even more answers. You can ask Siri to show you the Orion constellation or to flip a coin. You can even ask her for a joke. Now, Siri works with HomeKit to let your voice be the remote control or connected products in your home. Siri works hands-free, so you can ask her to show you the best route home when you are driving, and what time you will get there. The more you use Siri, the more you'll realize how great she is. And just how much she can do for you. Given the circumstances and fears and frustrations that many people are feeling these days, I asked Siri— "What is a moral compass?" She answered me right away. She told me that

Morality is the differentiation of intentions, decisions, and actions between those that are distinguished as proper and those that are improper. Morality can be a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct from a particular philosophy, religion or culture, or it can derive from a standard that a person believes should be universal. Morality may also be specifically synonymous with "goodness" or "rightness." Immorality is the active opposite to morality, opposition to that which is good or right, while amorality is an unawareness of, indifference toward, or disbelief in any set or moral standards or principles.

Then, I asked Siri if she could give me a moral compass. Nope. She struggled with it and then gave me the name of a movie with the word "compass" in it. I think you know where I'm going with this. I want each of us to fully grasp the importance of recognizing the need for a moral compass. Without one, there is chaos, destruction, willy-nilly, hurt, violence, mean-spiritedness. With out a moral compass we are morally lost. But where do we go to get one? And can we buy one for our children while we are there? Recent studies have been done at universities across the county, to try to determine when and from where young adults are developing a moral compass— and *if* they are developing a moral code of behavior. It's complicated. The studies look at peer influence, curriculum offered, the availability of wise professors and administrators. In conclusion, I'd say the most of the studies say, "It's a crap shoot—" a risky or uncertain matter.

And when success is the guidepost or goal—David Brooks (who writes for the NY Times and is a commentator on NPR) offers:

If you live for external achievement, years pass and the deepest parts of you go unexplored and unstructured. You lack a moral vocabulary. It is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. You grad yourself on a forgiving curve. You figure as long as you are not obviously hurting anybody and people seem to like you, you must be o.k. But you live with an unconscious boredom, separated from the deepest meaning of life and the highest moral joys. Gradually a humiliating gap opens between your actual self and your desired self, between you and those incandescent souls you sometimes meet —the ones who show forth a unmistakable goodness.

David Brooks has concluded that [moral] people are made not born. The people who have achieved an unfakable inner virtue, built their morality, obtained their moral compass, slowly, over time, from specific moral and spiritual accomplishments.

Let's cut to the quick. For us, those who are fortunate enough to have been given the gift of Jesus, morality and the gift of having a moral compass in your pocket, comes from years of learning, listening, and being part of a community that teaches and honors who he is. Jesus, in Word and Deed, in sacrament and in community, shapes our moral imagination in ways that are deeper, more radical (meaning “at the root”) than we are aware. He is the Good Shepherd, the Divine revelation, the Way, the Truth, the Life. He is willing to give up everything for others, even life itself. His respect for others is unlimited. His hospitality breathless. His kindness and compassion and forgiveness—is the stuff of true healing and peace. Jesus didn't invent morality. It's there in the Law and the Prophets. From today's reading from Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to brake every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide... [To let your] light...break forth like the dawn, and your healing...spring up quickly.

In today's gospel he cautions his followers, “I have come not to abolish [the Law] but to fulfill it.” What Jesus did, was to live it. Without him to show us, to teach us, to love us into moral living, we are condemned to a life of moral meandering. “[We] are the salt of the earth.” We are the moral compass for the world. If we have lost the flavor, if we are no longer pointing north... If we are no longer a city built on a hill, or a lamp on a lampstand, giving right to all in the house... than we have lost our way, and lost our usefulness and we are not part of the solution, but part of the problem. We are to be about the business of Jesus. You knew all along that this was my point. It follows that it is our privilege and responsibility to expose our children, bit by bit, story by story, relationship by relationship, social commitment by social commitment, involvement, action—that overtime, they will discover that they each have a moral compass in their pocket that we have helped them to build.

We are all part of the Jesus movement. This membership shapes our moral imagination. It teaches us the benefit of humility and gentleness and self-control. It teaches us to respect the dignity of everyone, regardless. And with every membership comes a moral compass. A moral compass. It is the ability to judge what is right and wrong and act accordingly. It is the thing inside each of us that tells us which direction we should go when we have to make decisions involving right and wrong. How do we treat

strangers? How do we treat enemies? Are we honest? Are we loyal? Do we help others in need? With a strong moral compass, even when we falter to some degree, eventually we will find the strength to do the right thing.

What's in your pocket? I hope that each of us has not only a smart phone but also a moral compass.

Amen