

How Can We Talk About *That*?

Psalm 26

A Sermon Preached at St. Matthew's Presbyterian Church, August 20,
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How many times have you and I walked into a social setting where we know we should under no circumstances bring up *that* subject?

We better not say that our job now includes *that* or our children are involved in *that*.

And, we dare not mention the church we attend now believes or does *that* either.

For, if we do walk down that scary corridor of talking about *that*, then who knows what would happen?

By bringing up *that*, we'd might cause a scene at a dinner table. Family Feud, World War III style might erupt in our living rooms.

We might destroy the bridge we'd been working years to build with *that* friend. So and so might never speak to us again!

Or worse at all in bringing up *that*, we might heap on ourselves shame, ridicule or worst of all unwelcome? We might not be accepted in the places we long to be accepted the most.

Silence seems like a good choice B.

Because it's true, isn't it? Showing up telling the truth, living into our beliefs, our integrity might just cost us a lot. Really a lot.

Our list of "thou shall not bring up *that*" grows longer by the day when it comes to certain groups of our friends, family and co-workers. And never on Facebook (we just keep posting pictures of cute dogs or babies). It's just easier.

But, the question I want to ask you is this how God wants us to live? Is this how we were designed to live in community? Exchanging the warm

fuzzies of presumed harmony at the cost us more than we might ever imagine?

We all know there's a better way. BUT getting there is a whole other issue altogether, isn't it church?

Our Psalter reading for this morning does help us though with this conversation, though. Asking us what might our responsibility be as people of faith to cross that line of sensitive conversation points . . . why? Because something greater is at stake.

Our reading begins with a confession of honesty: **"Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity."**

It's a Psalter that most scholars ascribe to the pen of King David, the great poet of Israel who is known to bring us whole heart to the table when it comes to worship of God. For, he's never one to hold back an emotion both of the lovely kind or full of complaint when it comes to his songs to God.

And it's a Psalter that brings us to sit carefully with the word, "integrity."

David wants to be a man of integrity.

For though at first read, Psalm 26 can seem like a pompous, self-righteous hymn—"Hey look at me God! I'm amazing! I haven't done anything wrong" of a man who seems falsely accused by someone, many Hebrew Bible scholars believe it's more than this. Psalms 26 exists as piece of liturgy that was first used at the temple by priests or other pilgrims.

So, the words expressed aren't merely not about David or for David. No, they are a corporate declaration of what it means to worship the One True God.

Or in the context of a modern reading: it's a prayer of the church.

It sounds differently read through this lens, doesn't it? Hear this passage a Psalm of "we"

"Vindicate us, O Lord, for we have walked in our integrity, and we have trusted the Lord without wavering. . . .

We wash our hands in innocence, and go around your altar, O LORD, singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, telling all of your wondrous deeds.

Do not sweep us away with sinners . . .

But as for us, we walk in integrity."

Simply: this Psalm is the church showing up just as they are. It's the church both being present in the spaces where they know God dwells, but also NOT avoiding those difficult topics like evil.

For David writes there is good in the world, and those who do good, and there is evil.

There is sin and there is righteousness.

There is the practice of corruption and there is honesty.

And though it might have been easier to sweep the clarity of all of this under the rug—this Psalm draws a line in the sand. This Psalm calls out the actions that are not in line with God's ways. This Psalm tells the truth.

I'll say it again. There is good. And there is evil in the world. And this Psalm asks us to walk in the ways of integrity.

But this kind of "drawing the line in the sand" good for community life? I mean really? All of us going around telling THE truth all the time?

Let's bring this Psalm to a modern context. If there's anything I know about what people are saying about us as in "us" called the church these days it is that our silence is deafing. The world "out there" often hears more about us from than actually from us!

This week, I've been wondering all over again does the world out there know what we as followers of Christ actually believe about pressing issues facing our nation.

Do they know that we believe that racism is a sin?

Do they know that we believe all are welcome at God's table: young, old, white, black, brown, gay, straight, believing or doubting?

Do they know that we believe a central tenant of our faith story was and is welcoming the stranger, in particular the immigrant?

Do they know out there that we're trying to love people for whom we disagree? I mean, really love them?

Does the world out there see actions that show we really believe what our liturgy says we believe every Sunday or is sound bites all they have?

So, for these reasons and more, I just want to stop and say thank you to Psalm 26. I want to say thank you to these words of scripture bringing us back to our center again, back to a place of communing with God with integrity.

Our faith you see, has based tenants, especially the fact that God loves us. And we are called to love other people too. And it's our faith that asks us to be very clear in sharing this. No changing our mind. No stepping around the issue. Just saying it.

In the example of David, we can't be silent. We can't simply let the wind keep blowing especially during weeks like this when racist leaders and marches are exhausted and hailed as normal. For it's not normal. And it's not ok.

For, the faith, I believe God has called us to is to have integrity, even if what we bring might be offensive to someone else.

Of course, this might mean we'll have to have more difficult conversations and family meetings than we'd like.

Of course, this might mean we'll have to give up the plastic "How are you? I'm a fine" conversations that are a normal part of our family reunions, soccer mom chatter or waiting on the airplane small talk.

Of course, this might mean we might be called "Not a Christian" someone who says they profess the same faith as we do (which happened to me this week, even!)

But in exchange, my friends, let me tell you this. We'll get something. We'll be real! We'll be sharing what God has given us to share. LOVE. We'll be living into our integrity.

A couple of years ago, I had the experience of a lifetime to travel with a team from Feed the Children, which my husband was formerly the President of, to the remote region of Northern Kenya to the state of Turkana.

When we touched down in the arid desert, I knew right away Turkana was unlike any place I'd ever visited before, though I'd already journeyed many times before to our cities in the region.

Barren fields with little vegetation filled my gaze as we traveled down bumpy roads to the village we'd scheduled to visit.

The reason for our visit included seeing a water project that Feed the Children donors supported—bringing fresh water to a community that previously had none, forcing children and mothers to walk a daily basis to the river about 5 miles away, muddy and full of crocodiles.

So needless to say, when our vans pulled up to the village center, which consisted of a school, we were greeted warmly. The village elders and mothers said over and over how thankful they were to the organization did to help them have fresh water for the first time in their lifetime.

And boy did they show their gratitude too.

Soon Kevin was taken by the hand by the elders, given a stool that only he could sit on, wrapped around the shoulders in a piece of fabric that

looked like a cape and given a “honorary” chief’s hat with feathers sticking out of it to wear. How could he say no!

When we asked later through translation what it was, we learned the hat with the feathers came from the belly of an ostrich kidney.

Think about that for a moment and imagine how many times Kevin washed his head when we got back to our motel . . .

I was not off the hook either. Several of the leading women of the community took me by hand (*I later called them the head of the local PTA board*) and pointed that I should stand in a spot without moving.

Then they circled around me and started dancing and singing while jumping up and down.

I felt a little claustrophobic but most of all overwhelmed—no one, not even my dearest friends ever danced and sang for me like this.

But then all of the sudden I felt drops of water on my forehead and running down my cheeks. I looked and the sky and reminded myself that we were in the middle of a literal desert. Where possibly could this water be coming from?

Only to then look at the faces of the women again jumping and dancing only to realize they were spitting in my face.

I asked some of the local staff later why this happened and they quickly replied, “Oh my goodness, Elizabeth, don’t you know what happened? They only spit in the face of the visitors that they like the best!”

Well, then.

With their whole heart, these dear people welcomed us. There truly was no holding back. They loved us. They commuted with us with integrity—though it felt unusual to us.

Maybe it's extreme cultural example, but I think this is what it sometimes feels like to be "all in" when it comes to the integrity of sharing our love with others.

Somebody could give us their highest offering of thanksgiving and it could feel like we need to go home and scrub extra hard in the shower.

Somebody could give us their highest offering of welcome and it could feel like we were just insulted.

But, even with all the conflict brewing potentially below the surface you and I can't NOT show up with the stories, with the rituals, and with the expressions of love that God has given us to share in community.

For it is when you and I hold back our authentic expressions of worship and love for God and experiences with God that the church misses out!

I dare say the church in this place misses out if one part cowers down in fear of rejection we ALL forfeit an opportunity to experience God here on earth.

Sure, there will be moments when you look someone in the eye and wonder, how in the world do these people and I worship the same God? I can't believe he or she just said or did that!

But there also will be moments when our souls soar with hope that we've just dwelled in the house of the Lord, like we've never known.

We'll call that place level ground. The place David talks about when he says, "My foot stands on level ground; in the great congregation I will bless the Lord."

Would it be easier to avoid that hard conversation? Sure.

Would it be easier to not love in our most authentic shoes? Sure.

Would it be easier to say no to that invitation to dinner because we don't know if we'll like what they'll serve up in conversation? Sure.

But, this easy way would never be the way of our God. For our God calls us to commute with integrity. To love our neighbors.

And to talk about *that*.

AMEN