

Strengthening Our Core

August 13, 2017

Rev. Dr. Susan Gilbert Zencka

Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church

Texts: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14:22-33

Exercise trends come and go – or maybe better, they come and stay. Jogging became popular in about the 1970s, followed by aerobics in the 1980s. Health clubs in general had caught in the 1980s, but more weight lifting and strength work became popular for people of all ages and genders. Since 2000, yoga has been an important part of the exercise world, and has grown to include chair yoga for those who can't do the poses standing up. There are also yoga classes that are more rigorous, and others that stress the spiritual dimensions of yoga. And for the last ten years or so, more people are doing Pilates, which strengthens the core – and indeed, throughout the fitness world, people are working on core-strengthening both to help athletic performance in sports from baseball to gymnastics to running, and for general health.

So why is it important to strengthen your core? When your core – the muscles around your abdomen, your pelvis and hips, your lower back, and your trunk – are all strong, you have improved balance and stability, reduced back pain, increased energy, and an improved sense of wellness. Strong core muscles help with everyday activities from swinging a golf club to reaching up to a high shelf to tying your shoes. And they help you to stand straight and tall.

It turns out that in addition to a strong physical core, we need a strong moral core to stand straight and tall too. I've spoken before about the difference between transactional and covenantal ethics, but I want to review these before we get to our Biblical stories, and some of what these ideas and these stories might mean to us in our lives, and in these times.

Transactional ethics are when we base our actions and our words on the actions and words of others – this is very common in our culture. We hear this approach in sayings like:

- what goes around comes around;
- if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours;
- an eye for an eye;
- tit for tat.

We hear it in the things people say and do,

- "What's in it for me?"
- "If he says nice things about me, I'll say nice things about him."
- "If someone hits me, I have to hit them back harder."

The last two, of course, are quotes from our president, who in general seems to take a transactional view of life in the world. The transactional view is not uncommon – indeed, I would say it is the dominant view in our world. But it is not the biblical view.

The biblical way is covenantal – so called because of the way God established covenants with the world after the flood, when he put a rainbow in the sky as a reminder of God's covenant to never destroy the world again. Or when he made a covenant with Abraham. Now we're all familiar with contracts, right? And when we think of contractual language, we think of phrases like "when the party of the first part notifies the party of the second part...." – contracts are between two or more

entities. But these scriptural covenants were entirely one-sided. God made these promises because of who God is, not because of what we – or Abraham or Noah – had done or not done.

And if we have a strong moral core, that is the way our behavior will be – we will treat people the way we believe we should treat people, because of who we are, not because of what they do to us or for us. Jesus didn't say, "Love one another, when the other is nice to you." No, he said, "Love one another." And as we all know, he carried it further, "Love your enemies, and do good to those who hurt you." We are called to love as God has loved – and God loves because of who God is, not because of who we are. So our behavior should flow from our own core values, our own ethics, our own decisions about how we want to be in the world.

Now, by the way, it's not news that the biblical model isn't the dominant model in the world – if it were, Jesus wouldn't have been crucified. It was because his teaching was challenging, and a new way in the world, a way that challenged the power relationships in his time, that he was crucified. It is equally unwelcome in our time.

And the way of Jesus isn't easy – we often get distracted by the actions of others, or by our own emotions. Most of us are naturally reactive – we have to work at developing a different response. Someone says something that pushes our buttons and WHAM – we find ourselves reacting to what they've said or done, instead of acting out of our own moral core. In fact, the apostle Paul wrote a little about this experience in his letter to the Romans. He wrote, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." [Romans 7:15-19] We all know what it is like to not live up to our own standards. Nonetheless, while we might not always succeed in behaving from our core – having a covenantal perspective means that our goal is to have our actions, our words flow from our own values, our own goals, our own decisions about who we are. And that's very different from basing our actions and our words on the actions of others. It's the difference between acting and reacting.

So what about those times when we don't live up to our own values? These are the times that show us that we need to strengthen our core. Maybe we need a fuller understanding of why we choose the values we do. Maybe we need to learn to slow down, and find the space to choose our response. Something that really stuck with me from reading *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* was a quote that the author, Stephen Covey, found somewhere, I don't remember where. And the quote went something like this, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. And that space is the moment of decision." Learning to notice that space, and make a decision rather than just reacting is huge in strengthening our core. And the other way we strengthen our moral core is by the repeated action of making the right choice. We remember that small actions matter. We strengthen our moral core by using it. We practice being honest in small things so we can develop the courage and the habit to speak truthfully when it gets hard.

Let's look at how this played out in our Bible passages this morning: we had the introductory story about Joseph, and another story about Jesus and Peter. In both of these stories, people got distracted by their own emotions, or by the action of another.

If you remember from last week, Jesus was having a very long, very hard day. In the morning, he had heard that his cousin John had been put to death by King Herod. He went off to be by himself to process this loss, but the crowds followed him. So he taught them; but as the day wore on the crowds became hungry, and the disciples were concerned about how to feed them. He asked for what food the disciples had, and there were 5 loaves and 2 fishes. The disciples distributed these through the large crowd – 5,000 men, plus women and children – maybe 20,000 in all. After feeding them all, the disciples gather up 12 baskets of leftovers. And it is there that this week's story begins. [Read Matthew 14:22-33]

Even though it has been a long hard day, Jesus takes time for prayer. He knows what he needs to strengthen his core. And after taking that time, he needs to catch up with the disciples, so he comes walking across the water and they are terrified. But Peter, who is, by the way, a great example of someone who is always reaching beyond himself to become something more, and so he asks Jesus to let him also walk on water. And he steps out of the boat, but as he walks toward Jesus, he becomes distracted by his fears, and by the storm, and he begins to sink – but Jesus holds him tight and gets him to safety before asking, tenderly, “Why did you doubt?” We do doubt ourselves, and this is why we often find the hard things even harder. This is why that practice of doing hard smaller things is so important – to teach us that we can. And that's why Jesus found prayer so important – to immerse himself in the love of the One who sees in us all we can be.

As we read the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob who we've spent some time with over the past few weeks, we have to acknowledge that Joseph isn't very pleasant, to say the least. Let's just acknowledge that he is a bit of a jerk. And his father, Jacob, has created a pretty awful situation. Jacob has 12 sons and he loves one more than the others – and he makes it obvious, by doting on Joseph, and buying him the spectacular coat of many colors. But Joseph makes a bad situation worse through his own behavior – we didn't read this section, but he tells his brothers about dreams he has had in which his brothers will have to bow down to him. So not only does he lord over them his favored status, but he tells them that in the future, he really will be lord over them. Not a recipe for getting along.

And the brothers let his words and actions push their buttons, until they are so reactive that they are ready to literally kill him. They say, “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him....” They are letting his words guide their actions. This verse is used on a plaque at the National Civil Rights Museum on the site of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination – it reads, “Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him, ... and we shall see what will become of his dreams.”

What will become of the dreams of God if we who claim to follow Christ cannot speak the truth?

As many of you know, over the past 48 hours, there have been demonstrations by white supremacists in Charlottesville, VA and an action that if it were done by a Muslim, we would call terrorism: a white man sped his car into the crowd of counter-protesters, killing one woman, and injuring 19 other people, some seriously. The white supremacists were from the Ku Klux Klan, and neo-Nazi organizations, and they were gathering for a long-planned "Unite the Right" rally. On Friday night, they had marched onto the University of Virginia campus, and then surrounded a church, shouting, "You will not replace us" and "Jew will not replace us." Yesterday, they chanted Nazi-era slogans.



There were some organized counter-protests, including a gathering of clergy from many denominations. One of them wrote the prayer of confession we said together this morning. These had gathered in prayer before the demonstrations. Some of you have a photo of those clergy on the front cover of your bulletin. The clergy are on the left; the folks on the right with the semi-automatic weapons are from the white supremacists. [image: Christopher Mathias]

Others of you have a painting, a rather disturbing painting, that was done by Norman Rockwell to memorialize the civil rights workers who were killed in Mississippi in 1964. [Murder in Mississippi, 1964] In that painting, on the right, you can see shadows of the men who had come with guns to kill those young men.



This painting is not the style that we are accustomed to from Norman Rockwell – we are used to sweet, sometimes funny, glimpses of Americana, the America we'd like to think we are. In this painting, Rockwell confronts us with a reality of the America we are, or were in 1964.

All too often, in church, we stay in the safe places. We like the sweet stories about baby Jesus, or Jesus welcoming the children, we're less comfortable when Jesus tells the rich young man to sell his stuff, or when Jesus gets angry. We want to feel good when we leave here. We don't want to discuss ideas where we may have disagreements. We want to get along. But are we becoming a people who will go

along to get along? Was Jesus someone who shied away from the hard issues?

People don't want to hear politics at church, and I agree, partisanship has no place in church – but many issues are moral issues as well as political issues. The church is at risk of losing its soul if we refuse to discuss moral issues just because they have entered the political arena. Many issues that have become political were biblical issues first, issues such as immigration and aliens, care of the poor, health care access, fair housing, women's rights, pollution and care of the earth, war and non-violence, the character of leadership, to name just a few. If we refuse to speak on these issues, then we have lost our voice, and if we have lost our voice, how can we ever speak the Good News of Jesus Christ?

We need to strengthen our core so that we can stand up straight and be counted. And we strengthen our core with practice. We have to practice speaking out in the world, and we need to practice speaking the truth in love with one another. The hatred that came to march openly under flags of white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and neo-nazi ideals is not a partisan issue – many of our nation's leaders, Republican and Democratic, were able to name this as the moral evil it is.

We need to have the moral clarity to say white supremacy is a moral evil and if the president cannot clearly and unequivocally condemn it, then he is complicit with the racism, hatred, and violence that comes from it. And if we cannot clearly and unequivocally condemn it, then we are complicit. We need to have the moral clarity to say that violence and hate speech against Muslims is a moral evil and if the president cannot clearly and unequivocally condemn it, then he is complicit with it, and if the church cannot clearly and unequivocally condemn it, then we are complicit. We need to have the moral clarity to say that taking health care away from millions of people is a moral evil, and we need to have the honesty to acknowledge that the current system is not working perfectly either. Exactly how to fix it probably falls within the partisan umbrella, but understanding that we must fix it is a moral issue.

These are hard and dangerous times. A spirit of hatred and division is growing in this country. And the people embodying this hatred and violence believe that the president has their back. Now, I want to be very clear: I know that some people in our church voted for Trump. I understand that not everyone who voted for the president supports the racial hatred that has found a new freedom to speak and march openly under his leadership. But whether you voted for him or for someone else or failed to vote, all of us who are white people in a country that privileges white people need to actively work for our country to be one where all God's children – of every color, religion, gender expression, sexual orientation, immigration status, and income level – are safe from hatred, violence, or discrimination; have access to adequate health care; can serve their country if they choose; and can confidently look forward to a future in which the earth will be safe from manmade impacts on the climate. These are moral issues, and we who follow Jesus Christ have a moral obligation to stand up, speak out, and work for God's justice. God has dreams too, and if we claim to be God's disciples, we need to be willing to work for those dreams.

It must have taken a lot of courage for Peter to step outside the safety of the boat into the storm, especially when he wasn't sure he could do it. Jesus caught him and held him close. We may be very frightened to step outside the safety of the easy subjects to face the moral evils of our times, especially when we are unsure of how to do it. Jesus never said following him would be easy. But in God and with one another, we can do hard things. Amen.