

THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF BURLINGTON, UCC

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“How then shall we live?”

Preached by the Rev. Elissa C. Johnk
Based on a sermon series by the Rev. Adam Hamilton

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing in your sight, and bring us closer to you, in our thoughts, words, and daily living. Amen.

I don't know how many of you have watched the recent tv series, *The Good Place*. Although it was spectacularly irreverent, there has never been a more thorough and hilarious contemporary look at the field of ethics, which happens to be our topic today.

In it, one of the main characters, Chidi Anagonye, a professor of moral philosophy, ends up in hell. He has studied every answer to the question of how to determine “what is good” and therefore cannot make the simplest of decisions.

The choice of almond milk or dairy milk agonizes him, because he knows of the environmental consequences of almonds – 16 gallons of water is needed to produce a single glass of almond milk.

He is paralyzed. Every decision is too fraught to do the right thing, and so he does nothing.

When he finds out he is in “the bad place”, he assumes it is because he chose the almond milk. Instead of the fact that his obsession with always doing the right thing leads him to never do anything at all.

When it all seems to be falling apart, and it feels like every decision carries a heavy moral weight, HOW do we live?

We are three weeks into our series on the relationship between our faith and our political or civic life together.

In our first week we looked at what we mean by faith, and what we mean by politics, and how both rely on one another to flourish. What is civic life without our moral commitments? What is faith if lived without regard to our life together?

In the second week, we looked at the way Christianity has interacted with culture in the past millennia – either withdrawing from it, being subsumed to it, or, at its best, working as a transforming force both for the individual and society.

This week we are going to look at *how*. How do we make these decisions and have these conversations on a day to day basis? And how should we, as individuals, approach our political decisions?

How, then, shall we live?

For some folks, the answer is easy. You follow the rules. The early Hebrews were clearly into rules-based ethics. After the Garden, there were the 10 commandments. But it turns out 10 isn't quite enough. What does it mean to honor your mother and father? What does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy? If I have livestock, is feeding them work? Cooking?

The Rev. Hamilton, outlined all this in his series over a decade ago, and from whose sermon outline I have taken today's message, pointed out that when you go to Jerusalem, the elevators are programmed to stop on every floor on the Sabbath, because pushing the button is considered work. But this is true even in NYC apartment buildings with large concentrations of Orthodox Jews.

This type of rules-based approach needs a rule for every situation. And let's be honest, the people of the Bible tried. All in all there are over 600 commandments in the Old Testament, and there are another 800 or so more in the New Testament.

How then shall we live? There's probably a rule for that.

And while Jesus was clear – he came to fulfill the law, not abolish it – we know that he didn't mean by ritually, obsessively following every rule, like Chidi Anagonye. Instead, for example, in the case we looked at last week – that of the woman caught in adultery – the rule was stoning. And we know that Jesus didn't pick up a stone. He healed and gleaned from the fields on the Sabbath, and the disciples didn't always wash their hands before eating... so clearly he rejected this approach.

How then shall we live? Well, the other pole says we should base our ethics and morality on the consequences. What will happen if I or we do this?

This sounds good at first, and a good deal of political theory has tilted toward this understanding of "the ends justify the means." John Stuart Mill landed at this pole with his theory of Utilitarianism – or that which does the most good for the most people is the most 'right'.

But this is obviously problematic.

One need only think of our debates about the use of torture to understand how.

And it is clear this is not, actually, what the gospel tells us to do, as this was the very reasoning put forth by Caiaphas, the High Priest, as the reason to arrest Jesus. “You do not realize,” he warned, “that it is **better** for you that **one** man **die** for the people than that the whole nation perish.” Kill Jesus and appease the Romans is a pretty good illustration of a consequence or outcomes-based ethics. And it forms the basis of one of history’s most enduring crimes.

A third school of thought, favored by Aristotle and Plato (in different forms) falls just outside this spectrum of rules and consequences.

Rather than asking “what must I *do*” it asks the question “who should we be?”. This theory asks us to identify the key virtues that we would like to define our life, and to live according to those virtues.

This sounds nice at first, but gets very complicated, very quickly. Is a virtue sufficient to enable you to respond to complicated situations? Does one have enough wisdom to be able to determine the virtuous action in any given situation? What do you do when two virtues collide in any given situation? Such as honesty, and telling the truth, and compassion and remaining silent?

Who determines what is good?

Does this sound familiar? On the one hand, we have law and order, and rule-following, and the other we have what is good and right and just. But as we saw last week, on our discussion about the intersection of culture and faith, there is no agreement on the terms: who makes the rules and who decides what is good.

And so we end up talking past one another.

One school of virtue thought says we should pick a person we admire – Plato, say, or Jesus, and try to act in every situation as they would.

You might know the slogan: what would Jesus do?

The problem with this question, however, is that we are not Jesus. And we aren’t supposed to be. We are supposed to be *us*.

A better question is *what would Jesus have me do?*

Which is, essentially, just our first question asked another way, the question of the lawyer to Jesus. *How then shall I live?*

“The word became flesh and dwelled among us.”

“I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.”

Christian, at its root, means “little Christ.” To be a Christian means to attempt to live the life that Jesus would have you live. To understand that, in Jesus, we find the fullest human expression of divinity, and the fullest divine expression of humanity. The human, fully united with oneself, with creation, and with God.

If the Bible is an inspired book, translated by people attempting to capture the interaction of humanity with God, in Jesus we have the direct testimony.

Right and wrong, then, the central ethical principle we have for determining how we ought to live, is in that fullest expression of human divinity, Jesus.

To be a Christian, then, means to understand Jesus this way, and in that understanding – what some would call acceptance, find yourself transformed in wholeness by the work of the Spirit. Then we are to *live* as a transformed people, followers of the way of Jesus – the loved and loving, whole and whole-making, united and uniting people.

Here, the Rev. Hamilton went for the big guns. Addressing his congregation, he said that many were willing to pray every morning, say they wanted to follow Jesus, but very few live that way – either in their individual lives, or in the way they think about the bigger issues.

“We trade in columnists and experts,” he said, “not Jesus.”

“How many of you have heard – or thought” he continues, “I don’t mind Jesus so much, it’s the Christians I don’t like”?

If you’re thinking “well, that’s why I am a member of a quiet little New England congregation. We aren’t *those* kinds of Christians, well, we’re not much better.

A recent course I took on Church vitality has looked at tens of thousands of congregations worldwide, from dozens of denominations. Churches are healthy and growing if they have 7 characteristics. Often, denominations and regions share similar strengths and weaknesses. Liberal New England congregations, for example, tend to have the same characteristic missing: passionate spirituality. Meaning, when we make decisions about our lives, we don’t go to Jesus or our faith.

We don’t go to our central moral commitments to make our decisions.

What would it look like if we were truly to live as Jesus wanted us to live? And how would we determine that?

Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?
How then shall I live?

Jesus, like many other Rabbis at the time, summed up all the laws and the prophets with a two-part rule, one which I hope you are beginning to know by heart – and if you don't, it's worth committing to memory.

Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Love.

A virtue and a duty, all it one.

The first commandment is to love God.

Hamilton breaks this down into two questions: the first question we must ask ourselves, in every interaction, or action, or policy is: does this reflect my love of God? Does this action honor God?

If you have a hard time imagining that, think about it this way: if I were to do this, or support this, or say this, would it be an act of loving and honoring the Creator of all that is, and Creation itself?

And the second question is:

“Is this loving?” “What is the loving thing to do?”

With my business? With this government policy? With my employees? Boss? Spouse?

“Will this thing I am about to do honor God?” and “Is this loving?”

The other way Jesus phrased this is perhaps even more familiar: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you,” (Mt 7:12).

The Golden Rule.

Would I still think this was love if it were done to me?

Which, as Hamilton reminds us, works not just in our interpersonal relationships, but also our political ones.

“What does it feel like to be treated this way?”

By my boss? Employee? Spouse?

Representative? Fellow citizens?

By another country?

“Will this thing I am about to do reflect my love of God?”

“Is this loving?”

“Would I want someone to do this to me?”

Well, sure, the man says to Jesus, I've always done those.

But who is my neighbor?

And this is where Jesus tells the story of the Samaritan – the second-class citizen, the heretic, the ‘certainly-not-my-neighbor.’”

Because stories are easier to remember than moral rules.

Dr. King imagined the priest and the Levite with important meetings. Organizing meetings. To improve the Jericho Road, even.

He asks the listeners to understand that the road was dangerous, and they might have feared for their lives.

Take a look:

He goes back to the scriptural rules they would have had to follow – not participating in any rituals or sacrifices for as much as 7 days.

Others have added to this the understanding that you would have had to walk 20-plus miles, along a dangerous road, because the man needed your ride.

You would have to pay at least \$500 in today’s money – at the outset, and probably as much on the return.

So you are out \$1,000, you have to cancel everything for a week – including all the good meetings you were going to have about making the road safer – you have to walk 23 hard, dusty miles. And all of this is a risk – because the man who needs help could actually be a thief lying in wait.

Would you really stop?

This, then, is the final question. The final way we must interrogate our individual and corporate actions.

Not “if I stop, what’s going to happen to me?” but, as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., put it: “if I don’t, what’s going to happen to him?”

This is the ethic through which we evaluate the ethic of love.

Love for whom?

Not us.

But the ones Jesus and scriptures continually name as being on the forefront of God’s minds: the lost, the vulnerable, the orphan, the widow.

“What will happen to those 1300 children of God? What will happen to the sanitation workers if I do not stop?”

If I do not stop, what will happen to the students?

If I do not act, what will happen to the addicted?

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If we do not address this, what will happen to the incarcerated?
If we do not address this, what will happen to the homeless?
If we do not address this, what will happen to the working poor?

How, then, shall we live?

“Will this thing I am about to do reflect my love of God?”

“Is this loving?”

“Would this be loving if it happened to me?”

“If I don’t stop, what will happen to them?”

Did you know that, exhausted and sick, Dr. King almost didn’t preach that night? Almost didn’t give his “I have been to the mountaintop” sermon. Almost didn’t proclaim to the world that:

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

His final, prophetic words.

And only because he stopped to ask “if I don’t stop, what is going to happen to them?”.

Imagine if he hadn't stopped to ask himself that question. And now, imagine if we do.