

Inordinate Morality, February 9, 2020, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Ps 122; Mark 6.1-29

Holy Jesus, you sent many into the world to proclaim your kingdom on earth. Send us, equip us, and walk with us so that everyone can learn of your abundant love. Amen.

As a good Canadian kid, I grew up watching hockey. Watching hockey is required for Canadians of course. But I was also a *good* Canadian kid. My wife still makes fun of me because I am such a “rule follower”. So it was surprising that while watching a hockey game on TV one night that I had to re-think what it meant to be both “good” and “Canadian”. (If you’re not a hockey fan, I hope you can still follow this example.)

During the game, a skater from one of the teams managed to get the puck and race toward the other net on a breakaway. The defending skater, chasing after the guy with the puck and, (not able to catch him), reached out with his stick and hooked the skater’s leg and pulled him down before he was able to get a shot away.

Just in case you don’t know, it’s against the rules to “hook” someone with your hockey stick, *especially* if you pull them down. It is even worse if that player is on a breakaway because then the player who was pulled down is awarded a “penalty shot”. (I hope most of you know what I’m talking about here...)

This is exactly the kind of thing that happens in hockey games. This was nothing unusual. Nothing changed for me that night because of this.

What changed my thinking was what the announcer *said* about the play.

The announcer said that in that position, any defending player would know that it was their *responsibility* to “take that penalty”. It was the job of the defending player to break the rules of the game and haul down the player on the breakaway. “He can’t let him take that shot,” the commentator said.

I guess I was naïve. Okay, yes, obviously I was naïve. But this was a real learning point for me. In this game of hockey, the rules were not meant to be followed. Sometimes, one was *obligated* to break the rules.

Remember I said I was a good Canadian kid. Rules were meant to followed—especially the rules in hockey.

I knew that if it were me in that situation, if I was the last man back, I would do everything in my power and within the rules to and stop the guy on the breakaway.

That’s just the way I operate. When I find out there is a rule for how something is supposed to be done, that is how I do it, from that point on. If there’s a stop sign, I stop. Even if there are no cars around and it’s the middle of the night. If the containers are supposed to be washed *before* they go in the recycling bin, they are washed, even when it takes forever (and they never bother to check when they’re picking it up anyway). If the sign says “Please have two pieces of ID ready” you can bet that those two pieces of ID are out of my wallet and in my hand when it’s my turn to go up to the desk.

But ever since that moment watching that hockey game, I am no longer under the illusion that this is how the rest of the world operates.

The rules are there, of course, but not everybody follows them.

And even the people that *do* follow the rules, they follow them for all kinds of reasons. Some times people are afraid that they will get caught if they break the rules and face a punishment or a fine. That can be enough for many people to follow the rules. There might be other consequences that come from breaking the rules too, such as being treated differently by others or facing future obstacles (like “points” on your driver’s license for example). The thing that *really* blew my mind was when I realized that for some people, fines and punishments were simply part of the way that they operated. Someone I knew had car insurance in a *different province* from the one they lived in. They understood that they would get a fine if they got caught, but calculated that even with paying the fine, they would still be saving money. The fine was not a deterrent at all, but simply part of the cost of the service. This is how some big companies operate too, paying fines as a part of their normal operations with no intention of changing the practice that earned them the fine in the first place.

It seems that there are not many people who are interested in following the rules when it’s not convenient for them.

The same can be said, too, of “doing the right thing” or acting morally. I make the distinction because I realize that following the rules is not always most moral thing to do.

But it is *not* all that common for people to act “morally” just because it is the “right thing to do”.

John the Baptist really wanted to do the right thing. He wanted to speak “truth to power”. So he did. Even though Herod was the tetrarch (“King” was just something people called him, not really his title), John the Baptist didn’t let that stop him from pointing out that he was breaking the law of the Jewish people when he took Herodias as his wife. There is some confusion as to exactly what the relationship was between all the parties here (and our translation adds to the confusion by using the same name, “Herodias”, for both the mother and daughter in this story). The wife in this story had been married before, to another of Herod’s relatives, either a brother or an uncle—and she was already related to the first man that she married. The incestuousness of the relationships in this family was not something that would be considered appropriate by any audience, modern or ancient. But they were the ruling family, so they could do what they wanted.

--Until John the Baptist spoke truth to power and criticized them for breaking the law. His behaviour did not make him popular with the royal family. It got him thrown in prison.

Most of us realize that there can be consequences when one does act morally. If someone acts according to their conscience and not according to the rules or the customs or the expectations of them, they might find themselves facing many of the same deterrents we talked about earlier. John was imprisoned for speaking out. But there are other more modern examples we can think of, where people have been punished or ostracized or fired or ridiculed for acting according to their conscience—for trying to live according to a *moral code*—when everything suggested their lives would be easier if they didn’t. If you’ve been watching the news you can think of Alexander Vindman or Mitt Romney or Gordon Sondland who all suffered severe consequences for doing what they thought was right.

The challenge to us today is to keep striving to do what is right even when it is difficult. To face up to those challenges and maybe even suffer consequences for doing what we know to be right.

But that is not to say that we should all take the path of John the Baptist. Not everyone is called to be a prophet. And not everyone is called to put themselves in harm's way.

It is up to all of us to live according to what we know to be right and to stand firm in our convictions.

But first I have two cautions to mention.

Firstly, it has become increasingly clear that morality is a *somewhat* subjective thing—and I say that as someone speaking from a pulpit. Many who have stood in my place before have been unwilling to acknowledge that the line between what is “moral” and what is “immoral” is not always clear. Today the church is one voice of many that contributes to one's own conscience and it would be harmful for me to pretend otherwise—to suggest that scripture is perfectly clear on all matters (because it isn't) or that the church's teachings are strict and clearly outlined (because they aren't). There are some matters about which there is little debate. But many others are cause for much debate. (If you want to talk about this some more, let's have a one-on-one conversation.)

Secondly, *how* we share our personal convictions is just as important as what those convictions are. While it is all well and good for us to live according to our *own* convictions—our own personal moral compass—it is not our job to use guilt or shame to change the behaviour of *others*. One's moral compass is a personal matter—and they are not all calibrated the same. Guilt can be a powerful tool and it is one that is often used. I suspect many of us have experienced someone trying to coerce us to behave in a particular way by using guilt. Some of us may try to get others to behave in a particular way by using guilt or shame as well. I know I do it. If someone in front of me is trying to make an illegal left turn, they can expect to hear my horn, which I hope will *shame* them into following the rules. If someone has too many items for the express line in the grocery store, the condescending glares of the others in the store might be enough for them to line up in the regular line.

It does seem as though some people are completely immune to others' attempts to shame them. They are “shameless”, as the expression goes, and their behaviour can't be modified by others' disapproving clucks or head shakes. But regardless of others' reactions, that's not the approach that we are called to use.

When Jesus had difficulty in his hometown—the people who grew up with him couldn't accept that he was anything other than ordinary and so their faith in him limited their ability to receive his power to heal—Jesus sent the out the apostles out to carry on his mission. They brought with them the same message that Jesus himself was sharing with the people he encountered. And that message was simple. “[T]hey went out and proclaimed that *all should repent*.” There is an underlying assumption that there *is* a moral code that they all know about—but also, that they were all straying from in some way (and needed to repent).

It was not up to the apostles whom Jesus sent to catch people out in the midst of doing “bad things”. Rather, all were told to repent.

And this is the message today, both *for* us, and for us to take to others. It's not up to us to tell others what to repent *of*, nor is it my job, from this pulpit, to tell you what to repent of. I am not here to shame you into action but rather to encourage you—us, all of us, to dig down deep and find what we need to fix. Not to be ashamed and feel guilty and horrible—that's not the idea. But rather, to ask ourselves what can we bring before God and ask for forgiveness for—and help going forward. What will help us to

be moral people? To live according to what we know to be right—and not just the bare minimum mandated by the law?

In a few moments, after the Prayers of the People, we'll make our confession. As we start that confession, I would encourage you to dig deep. What do you know already that you want to do better? What do you want God to help you address in your life?

This is not something to feel guilty or ashamed of, but instead, this is something we can be joyful about. We will receive the forgiveness of God for the ways we have been wrong and we can leave this place with joy in our hearts knowing that we have something in our lives we trust will get even better with this renewed focus and with God's help.

Let us pray.