

True Integrity, True Witness

Deuteronomy 4: 1-9 Mark 7: 1-15

Sometimes our beliefs don't always line up too well and even we can't answer the ambiguity; there is this disconnect between our beliefs and our actions.

I think I've done pretty well to avoid the issue of the Confederate flag, but having just had our RACES study group meeting this past week, let me break the ice.

Flag supporters are fond of saying that the Confederate flag is all about 'heritage, not hate.' It's a catchy line, but it's problematic. On the other side, the folks who want to see the flag put in a museum are very clear that the flag has *always* been about hate. It continues to be the nearly universal emblem of hate, adopted by hate groups around the world. How is it that there can be such discrepancy in understanding?

First is the nature of what history has been popularly taught in the South. It has been rather mind-blowing for this Yankee to learn what form of history was taught continuously from the 19th to the end of the 20th century, in Marion County at least.

A participant in our RACES study group, a 1983 graduate of North Marion High School, related that nothing in his history education *ever* included black people. Nothing; no one. Then at a talk I gave at Fort King Presbyterian, a woman whose daughter has taught in Marion County schools for several decades noted that the curriculum didn't change until after 1999. Really?

When I came here and someone told me about the War of Northern Aggression, I thought they kidding. No, they were serious. But didn't the war start in Charleston, South Carolina with secessionists firing on and capturing Fort Sumter? Weren't the first battles of the war fought to defend the nation's capitol? Ah, Southerners remember Sherman's March and the devastation of the battlefields, most of which were in southern states. Southerners saw themselves defending their homesteads and plantations from Northern armies. Northerners were the aggressors. We can see at least two sides to history, two very different perspectives – one Northern and one Southern.

While Southerners are fond of claiming that the war was fought over the issue of states' rights, it omits that the main state right was the right to enslave a race and exploit them as owned property, as chattel, listed as assets like farm animals. It also ignores that states entering the nation in the first half of the 19th century were constantly debated as to whether they would be slave states or free states. The documents about the reasons for secession always cited some declared **natural right** to buy, own, sell, and exploit black people as slaves.

An emissary from the new Confederate government went to Europe to bargain for diplomatic and trade relations there, the primary markets for cotton, the South's white gold. He went to the British and the French and talked about the importance, value, and natural rights of slavery. They were appalled. Eventually he figured out that the British and French were horrified by his views, since they had renounced slavery decades before and had come to see it as an evil and contemptible practice. When he figured out their objection, *then* he began talking about how it was about states' rights. But it was too late; they knew perfectly well what the agenda was, and Europe never did much for the Confederacy as a result.

Indeed, no nation in world history has sought to establish itself for the primary reason of maintaining racial enslavement except for the Confederacy.

But there is another perspective worth considering, at least in my view. The perspective of black folks needs to be considered, too. Their ancestors were the slaves. But their history with that flag doesn't stop in 1865. The first iteration of the Ku Klux Klan under vicious racist General Nathan Bedford Forrest immediately after the war raised the flag of the Confederacy. When the KKK came around in a big way for a second time after World War I, it was around the flag of the Confederacy. And its modern iteration following Truman's integration of the armed forces and the rise of Strom Thurmond's segregationist Dixiecrat party rallied around the Confederate flag. It is no wonder that black people recognize the flag as a 150+ year old symbol of racial oppression, particularly unworthy of being flown in honor by any government of all the people. A symbol of division and hate since 1861, it belongs in a museum, not on a flag pole flying in honor next to the current national flag.

'Heritage, not hate' can only be a successful phrase if you eliminate black people from history. But if you take away the black people, then your 'heritage' is no longer history, but a convenient mythology, bleached, white-washed, because black people don't really matter. And that's the message we have been sending to the black community right up to this very day. It isn't an issue of the past. It's Exhibit A in how we can ignore black people and the black community, maintaining a society where only one race gets heard and only one race truly matters.

My point is to call attention to how we can be conflicted between what we believe and how we act. We would like to believe that we always have things in perfect alignment, an integrity of beliefs being fully and accurately expressed by our witness, our actions. In fact, that's more of a rarity than we'd ever want to admit.

As Christians, we know that we'll never attain that **perfect** alignment between our inward ideals and our outward practices in the realities of life. Sinful people, no matter how faithful, blessed, righteous or pious, are still sinful people – and that covers *all* of us.

By the grace of God in Christ, we receive forgiveness, but that grace would be cheapened and trivialized if we didn't take seriously our responsibility to get our inward and outward lives, our beliefs and our actions, on the closest track possible. We had better realize that something unseen is at work in all of us, something beyond the visible that muddies what we thought were pristine waters.

God knows all about us. God knew all about the Hebrews in the same way. The covenant going forward from the Exodus would not simply be with one family, Abraham and his descendents, but with a people, the Hebrews.

God knows that *his* people need to be distinctive from the rest to come close to meeting God's intentions. To become distinctive, they needed instructions on how to act distinctively in their daily living. In Deuteronomy, we learn that God has given the Law, the Torah to his servant Moses. The Torah-Law contains the clear instructions in how live each day, designed to train the human spirit in the ways of faithfulness to God.

Yet it seems God knew what would happen when he gave his people Torah-Law. Once you have law, then you have lawyers and legalists and legalisms. The law may be wonderful, but the lawyers, legalists, and legalisms are dreadful ... and unavoidable.

God knew this was coming. God adds a caveat to Moses' message; *Do not **add** to what I command you and do not **subtract** from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.* Nice try, God, but it didn't work. The problem wasn't with the Law; it was the sinful human spirit that made a huge mess of it.

But God's idea was right on target: Give the people instructions on how to practice their faith each day so that their spirit would be attuned to what is holy and righteous rather than the sinful and corrupt. In this way, they would have integrity. The Jew knows that by her observance of dietary law, she is honoring God and practicing her faith. The Jew who enters the place of worship and dons a yarmulke knows that he is honoring God and practicing his faith. The Jewish family that practices the Sabbath prohibition of work sets itself apart by honoring God and practicing their faith. The Jewish parents who teach their children about the way of faithfulness in the Law are, in that very act, practicing integrity and giving witness to their faithfulness to God.

If Christianity has a weakness, it is the lack of prescribed, daily, routine behaviors to train, reinforce, and nurture the human spirit to the ways of God and faithfulness. For Christians, it's all optional ... or so it seems. Yet our integrity and our witness often seem quite compromised, sometimes hopelessly broken.

God's message to his people in Deuteronomy is to know your God, practice his ways with integrity, and your witness to the world will be distinctive. But there's also the warning: don't forget what God has done for you, or who God is to you. Do not let these lessons *slip from your heart* or from your spirit where it must reside as your strength.

We Christians need to be aware of our weaknesses. We need to develop our own disciplines and practices that attune us to the spiritual and to what God is all about in our lives. God has left this responsibility in our hands.

This is a critical dimension of *stewardship*. We may think stewardship is about money, but it's really about spiritual practice. God gives us responsibility to be faithful not only over our money, our time, and our talents. Our practices of integrity should embrace spiritual disciplines that nurture our faith. This is the priority of stewardship. Our faithful inward spirit defines any stewardship action, any faithful witness we make. If our inward spirit is weak, confused, and vulnerable – lacking integrity – then our outward response, our visible witness will be weak, confused and vulnerable as well.

When the Pharisees and lawyers confront Jesus, he realizes that their question lacks any good intention. Their legalistic tactic is familiar. Jesus quotes Isaiah who knew all about legalists; *They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.* As if to say, you've forgotten who God is and why God gave you the Law. You've piled up a heap of rubbish on God's Law. The right practice of faith gets turned into a legalistic maze. Then Jesus reminds them of an ambiguity in their own requirements, created apart from God's simple command.

Finally, Jesus returns to the question of what is clean and what is unclean, a distinction at the heart of the Jewish practice of faith. He doesn't deny the value of washing, of keeping

ritual purity and being clean. He simply reminds them that it is not the outward that defines unclean, but the inward; *What comes out of a man makes him “unclean.”* Their outward ritual purity and piety masks an inward conviction of self-righteousness, a desire to judge, to maintain power and control. Jesus sees the unseen, the spiritual, a force that subverts the Law with legalism in order to fulfill its own ambition for self-righteous judgment, authority, and control.

This unseen force that Jesus sees and names is, at its root, spiritual.

In our self-assurance, we normally esteem ourselves as highly moral, quite ethical, good Christians, solid citizens, clear in our values, and in control of ourselves in all but the most extreme situations. And believing that, we're dupes, blind to our weaknesses, oblivious to the conflicts and ambiguities, the spiritual struggle that rages more often than we'd ever admit. If we deny our affliction, we're only fooling ourselves, and we deny the power of God's healing salvation for us. Our integrity is compromised and our witness is corrupt.

The conflict between the integrity of our beliefs and the witness of our actions is entirely spiritual. As Jesus says, what comes **out** comes from **within**. Know what's inside, be familiar with your blind spots, and always seek the power of your faithfulness to God and Christ to meet and match the challenges that confuse and corrupt our actions with unworthiness. May we respond instead with true integrity and true witness in service to the Lord.