

"The Fundamental Things Apply"

Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-16

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

August 20, 2010 – 6th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

The song that runs as a theme through the movie *Casablanca* contains this interesting line, "the fundamental things apply, as time goes by." (It's so familiar that you can almost hear Dooley Wilson play it now!) The fundamental things. The bottom line issues. This refrain expresses a truth about life: there are some things that really don't change from one generation to the next, from one period to another.

Now not every sentiment you find in song is profound, but I think this is one place where it is. There are some basics to life. Certain things are universal. People aren't really all that different from one time to another. What motivates individuals today is what has always motivated people. One reason we study history and literature is to find out how much **doesn't** change in life. That, in turn, helps us to better understand the present.

Going back to the T'ang and Sung dynasties in China, for instance, you discover that they were fertile times for poetry. Many examples of the writing from those eras are surprisingly contemporary to us in matters of the heart. Basics then are basics still. Men and women continue to love and hate and fear. There is—and always has been—envy, passion, and greed. Some individuals are motivated by high ideals; others by baser desires. Some have great aspirations; others just want to get by.

Most realities are quite consistent throughout the ages. I like this simple expression of pleasure written by Li Yu over a thousand years ago:

With one jug of wine
And a fishing line,
On this earth how many
Are as happy as I?

Perhaps today the drink of choice might be beer, but enjoyment in the simple things of life is still something we seek.

The Bible, too, is filled with a wide range of emotions and behaviors. We find that the way some people treat others is most commendable but, in other instances, it's deplorable. The best examples of human conduct are there in its pages, as well as the very worst.

The "fundamental things" are repeatedly emphasized throughout the Scriptures. The passages there make it clear that, when we don't understand the basics of life, we run the risk of losing sight of how we are intended to live. Our Old Testament reading for today lifts up again what is expected of us.

Elton Trueblood, the Quaker theologian, used to say, "The Ten Commandments have not been repealed." Indeed, these basics are still relevant today. This set of instruction forms the timeless basis of civilization, whether the agrarian one of ancient Israel or the tech-savvy world of the 21st Century.

Today may be proud of the achievements of our scientific age but, in any society, it is usually the ethical qualities that prove to be of ultimate importance. We look back at great civilizations and discover that their downfall usually wasn't a lack of material resources, but came about because of moral decay and unconcern with the greater good. In other words, people forgot what they were to be about.

The Ten Commandments are fundamental and still serve as a standard of moral reference. The passage read today is not so much a description of what we always do, but rather an affirmation of what we know we **ought** to do. The Decalogue is a contemporary document. Circumstances tend to change with the years, but basic obligations don't vary at all. They still show us how life should be lived and what God requires from us.

A man built himself a cabin with shelves around all its walls. One day he was visited by a fellow who was an actual carpenter. As the evening progressed the carpenter became more and more uneasy. Finally the host noticed he was troubled and asked what was the matter. "Forgive me, but it's your shelves" he said. "Almost every one of them slopes one way or another."

"Do they?" replied the cabin builder. "I guess I never noticed."

One man was bothered by what he saw; the other wasn't. The carpenter was disturbed because every time he looked at those shelves, he saw them against a true vertical. From his everyday work he was used to building in relation to a plumb line. Things were either straight or they weren't, either right or not. The builder of the cabin didn't have such a sensitive eye and, for him, all that was important is that things functioned. He had no reference point as did the carpenter. In the long run, as things tended to fall off his shelves, it might prove better if he did.

The Ten Commandments are a measuring tool of whether we commit ourselves to the best, or fail to rise to our potential. Yet, as unchanging as these directives are overall, as relevant as they remain, they cannot tell us what to do in every situation. They address behavior in general terms, but not in specific situations. That's where we come into the picture.

So even though the basics never change, we always have to interpret these commandments in light of individual circumstance. While they still serve us well, and are key to moral living, we can easily harden them as a way of passing judgment on others. That's "fundamentalism" and extreme examples can be found in all faiths. Here, law takes precedence over love and distorts what may have started out to be good. That's happening a lot in today's world. We see it in the Middle East and Africa, but it's not limited just to those areas.

Our New Testament lesson today is also a passage that deals with basics. Jesus comes into the Temple at Jerusalem and is enraged by what he observes there. Here, where only the best should be offered to God, he observes exploitation of every kind. The merchants in its courtyard are conspicuously taking advantage of the visiting pilgrims.

The money changers were not content to make a reasonable commission; instead, they gouged the penitents out of all they could. Those who sold animals for sacrifice abused their monopoly to the detriment of those who had no other choice. Temple officials could not hardly have been unaware of this and perhaps were even profiting from these transactions.

Jesus condemned those who took advantage of others and, in so doing, profaned this most holy place: "It is written," he said, "My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers." The Gospel of John describes how Jesus, with indignation for what was happening, drove the unscrupulous from the grounds. It's no wonder he made enemies among those who benefitted from the status quo. They weren't happy with a whistleblower who threatened their bottom line.

Jesus' strong reaction clearly shows that commercial abuse in the Temple was a basic issue for him. It was not a point upon which to equivocate; not a practice to be overlooked. It was a matter of justice, which is a central tenet of faith. He did not hesitate to act.

In life we often find ourselves uncertain about what to do and what not to do. Life is complex. Circumstances and situations change rapidly. Sometimes what seemed clear yesterday can be murky today. We often find ourselves indecisive about the direction or action we should take at a given time. Maybe that's not surprising that we have to struggle some.

Now when a hiker becomes lost, practical advice is to first stand still and get a bearing. Use your knowledge of the outdoors to see what it can tell you. The angle of the sun, the growth of moss on a tree, the movement of the clouds can all be valuable clues in determining direction. The worst thing to do is to panic and to forget what you know. If you take time to recall your basics, the right direction will likely become evident and will get you back.

So I think it is with our lives. When you're uncertain, when you don't know what to do next: stop... and think. Remember what you do know. Look for a reference point, something by which you can determine where you are and what you need to do.

Om short, consider what you've learned in life that bears upon your present situation. Recall the fundamentals of what you believe and live by. Consider the essentials that are at the heart of your faith, like compassion and generosity. Recenter yourself by them, pray for guidance, then step forward. More often than not further steps will be clearer if you get the right start.

Should you still not see your way, seek out others who have their feet solidly planted. That's an important part of being in community. Friendship serves as an aid when we're can't see our own path. There's help readily available just for the asking. It's the kind of favor, too, that we can repay later by being there when others need us.

Look as well to the Bible and read again the promises of God. Discover anew the teachings of Jesus and find what might apply to you. The Scriptures provide us with the key for living life fully, not merely surviving. They have been relied on for countless generations and they continue to provide for us in our times of indecision.

And, by all means, pray. When we take time to ask, "God, what would you have me do in this situation?" most often the answer becomes apparent.

The fundamentals of faith still apply. They provide our basic guidance. They give us our foundation for action. So take this with you: when we know our essentials then we are more likely to be prepared for today and more ready for what tomorrow brings.