

## **"Convicted by the Evidence"**

Psalm 15; Hebrews 13:1-7

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

August 3, 2014 – 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

A young minister just graduated from seminary and received a call to a church in rural Kentucky. Now he was full of zeal and decided to do his first series of sermons on conduct.

So he titled his initial sermon "The Sin of Gambling" and preached impassionedly for 30 minutes on the evils of betting. The next morning the Head Deacon stopped by the parsonage and informed him that about one-third of the congregation raised race horses. Thought he might just want to know.

The next Sunday the minister's subject was "The Sin of Whiskey." He preached a powerful sermon that day and pulled no punches. You couldn't miss his intent. Again the Head Deacon stopped by his house on Monday and advised him that about a third of the people raised corn, which was then turned into mash to make liquor. Thought he just might want to be aware of this.

Undaunted, the young man plunged into his third sermon entitled "The Sin of Tobacco." That morning he left no stone unturned and there was no ambiguity about what he was saying. Well, you guessed it. The Head Deacon came by once again let him know that a sizeable portion of the congregation made their livelihood from growing tobacco. This time the Deacon added that some new pastors seem to be a bit slow on picking things up, and if he wanted to look forward to a long tenure, he might take the hint.

Now the young man had announced that he would preach four weeks on sin, so he realized he was in a bind. The Deacons, too, were anxious to see if their advice was going to be heeded. At the very last minute he decided to drop his intended topic of "The Sin of Coveting Your Neighbor's Wife" and changed it instead to "The Sin of Fishing in the Territorial Waters of Another Nation." As far as I know, he's still at that church and never returned to his initial line of preaching.

Well, it's difficult and a bit tricky to preach on personal behavior without stepping on a least few toes. And the truth is we all have to be reminded of the need for congruity between what we say and what we do, what we believe and how we act.

This is a day and age where people seem to be very confused about right conduct. It permeates our businesses, our professional life, our family relationships, and our personal life. The ground rules seem to be changing rapidly in all aspects of our living.

If we look back at history we see that every society has had its ideal person, its hero. For the Romans it was the soldier. For the Greeks it was the sage. For the Chinese it was the poet. For America today? Maybe it's the entertainer or the athlete. The Hebrew ideal, on the other hand, was the person of exemplary conduct—the one whose relationship to others is blameless, whose caring is shown in selfless actions, and whose morals are without question.

Perhaps nowhere in the scriptures is this more evident than in the Psalms, and especially in today's reading. This song was used as an entrance liturgy as the pilgrims came to the temple for the great religious festivals. They ask, "O Lord, who may dwell in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" The answer to these basic questions make up the rest of the psalm.

Here, then, is a description of the person of righteous conduct who is suited to enter the temple: He or she obeys God in the everyday matters of life, speaks words that are true and sincere, and avoids slandering others. This person does no wrong to friends nor spreads rumors about neighbors, carries through on what is promised, doesn't lend personal money at interest, and refuses to testify against the innocent.

Our New Testament lesson continues this same theme. The Letter to the Hebrews bids Christians to love each other as brothers and sisters, to welcome strangers, to remember those in prison or otherwise suffering, to maintain one's marriage vows, and imitate in faith those who are worthy leaders.

Now these are high standards. Hearing this list I doubt if any of us would immediately say: "I do all that. No problem." These two lists make us stop and examine how well **we** are doing in our own situation, how well we are squaring up to the ideal being put forth.

You know, this is not just maintaining good conduct as a member of society. It's more. It's what God expects of us, and that's a whole different thing altogether.

I wonder how many of us would have been deserving of admittance to the temple back then? Looking at it in another way, if Christian conduct would suddenly be outlawed, how many of us would be convicted by the evidence at hand? Are we aligned enough with our faith that it could identify us to others? Do we **live** what we believe or are we invisible to the rest of the world?

A Christian merchant cannot condone deceptive advertising and justify it as common business practice. A Christian teacher cannot hold back her best effort from a student because of ethnicity. A doctor cannot overcharge an insurance provider by saying, "Everyone does it." A clerk can't bring home office supplies with the excuse, "They expect it and buy accordingly."

You can't split yourself apart and live two separate lives, unless you're a member of the Mafia. Even here Pope Francis is cracking down. He declares the obvious. Jesus calls us specifically to an integrated life which has but a single set of standards for all situations. Our faith lays out only a single code of conduct, and that is the highest possible.

And what about your life and conduct? How do they hold together? Is there an inner integrity?

Well, I guess you really need to be the one to answer that. I'm not going to make the mistake of that young preacher from Kentucky. I like it here so I don't feel compelled to take the "one sin fits all" approach.

What I will encourage you to do is to take a regular inventory of yourself and your behaviors. Critically evaluate the various areas of your life as if you are a stranger to yourself. Test your actions against the convictions you say you hold. Is there alignment? Are you sincerely trying to bring your words and actions to fit in the same space?

Need some help with this? God, through Christ, shows us the way. The scriptures contain the basic insights. I can be here to urge your application. Only you, however, can put all the pieces together.