

“Behave Yourself”

Psalm 15; Hebrews 13:1-7

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 8, 2015 – 5th Sunday after Epiphany– Rev. Ronald Botts

I really have sympathy for that mother or father who must contend with an out-of-control child. No matter how well-behaved he or she usually is, there are times when every child just seems to lose it or saves the worst behavior for the most public setting.

It's then I most often hear that exasperated cry from a parent, "Behave yourself!" This is usually said in a loud voice and often startles the errant child, at least momentarily. Then they go back to doing whatever it was that angered mom or dad in the first place. "Behave yourself" gets out some frustration just in the saying, but rarely does it produce the intended response. Every generation uses the same words, but seemingly to no avail.

Good behavior is important in every stage of life, and especially so as we grow older. Every society has had its ideal person, its hero. For the Romans it was the soldier. For the Greeks, the sage. The Indians have always held mystics in high regard, while the Norse considered the warrior to be the epitome. I'm not sure who Americans today would put in that place, though we have high regard for anyone willing to sacrifice themselves to help someone else in true need.

For the Hebrews the ideal person is one of good conduct—a person whose walk, talk, and relationships are blameless and righteous, a doer of good, an individual of high moral behavior. Nowhere in scriptures is this more evident than in the Psalms.

Psalm 15, our Old Testament reading for today, is a good example. It presents the portrait of a person favorable to God, asking rhetorically: "O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" The answer then points to a person of good conduct, one "who walks blamelessly, and does what is right, who speaks truth from the heart; who does not slander nor do evil against neighbors"

The Psalm continues by presenting the person favorable to God as one who conducts him or herself with high integrity and sincerity. Though piety and devotion are presupposed, behavior is the key to discipleship. How we conduct ourselves is the most important test of faith.

Some years back there was a film called *The Frisco Kid* starring Gene Wilder. It's about a young rabbi in Poland who is sent to the United States to assume a congregation in California. The story takes place in the Gold Rush days of the 1840's.

Well, he lands on the East Coast only to discover that he has missed his ship to the West. Instead of waiting months for the next one, he decides to cross the country on horseback. It's tough going and he's repeatedly threatened by hostile people and hostile elements. He ends up being robbed, beaten, and harassed. Yet, along the way he is also befriended by a bank robber who sticks with him and protects him from further harm.

Now the rabbi was well schooled in the Torah. He not only loved it, but lived it. One of the things he was carrying with him was a copy of the Scroll of the Law, which was to be used in worship in his new synagogue.

He abided by the Torah where it says, "Thou shalt not steal." So even though he was penniless, the rabbi refused to keep the money which was stolen by his robber friend and he returned it to the bank. The Torah says that life is sacred, that "Thou shalt not kill;" therefore, the rabbi refused to carry a gun, even to defend himself. In this and many other ways he took seriously those ancient scriptures. They were his daily guide to right behavior.

Well, this particular story has a happy ending. The young rabbi finally makes it to San Francisco and wins for himself a beautiful bride as well. We really want him to succeed and, in the end, he finally does so.

If you've seen this film you might agree that while the rabbi's temptations may be different in specifics from our own, they're not so readily different in nature. He was faced repeatedly with the challenge to cheat on his conduct in order to get through life easier; and certainly a little less integrity might make it easier for us, too.

If we didn't worry about right and wrong, we might end up richer. If we didn't care how we got to our goals, we might not have to exert as much energy. If we didn't need to consider obligations toward others, we might not be interrupted so much from our primary path.

I know I'd have more in the bank if I didn't give money to the church or send it off to important causes. I could certainly make the twenty-mile trip from my house to here faster if I ignored the speed limit and made more use of the accelerator. I struggle with the Sunday text each week to discover its meaning and its application to life, where it would be easier to just buy a book of sermons and deliver them word for word. I could go into a store and simply take whatever I want when the clerk turns her back.

I could do all of these things, and you could likewise come up with a list. The fact that we don't fall to temptation is because we have a functional ideal for conduct and are willing to make the necessary sacrifices to maintain it. For most of us, what we believe we are also willing to do.

Yet it's also true that avoiding wrong, hard as that is sometimes, can be easier than looking for and doing right. We might say "no" to overt sin most of the time, but how often do we overlook possibilities for doing good? Certainly a day of reckoning will come for all of us when we will be asked how we spent our lives. We might take pride in describing many things we refused to succumb to, but would we feel as comfortable about a list of all the opportunities for good we missed?

The Letter to the Hebrews closes with some straightforward advice about conduct. It says, "Keep on loving one another as Christians. Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without even knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them. Remember those who are suffering, as though you were suffering as they are."

"Marriage is to be honored by all, and husbands and wives need to be faithful to each other. Immorality will be judged as such. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be satisfied with what you have."

No doubt the writer of this letter could have lifted up many more things in his list of right conduct. We would be remiss to conclude that because he doesn't cite cheating others, failing in our role as parents, or turning our backs on the environment, that these areas of life are unimportant. The writer doesn't try to present us with an exhaustive code of behavior, but instead gives a series of examples that illustrate how faithful lives should be lived.

No sacred texts could possibly define how we are to act in every conceivable situation. The variables are endless. What we are given is some basic rules and general parameters, and then we must strive to apply them to the specifics of our living. After all, when Jesus was asked what is the primary rule of conduct, he brought the whole of faith down to this: "The most important one is this: listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second most important commandment is this: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Where the scriptures are not all-inclusive, the Spirit is promised to us in order to provide guidance. We are not left without resources, but we must first apply what we know to the circumstances at hand. The initial question to any situation is "What is consistent here with what Jesus tells us to do in general?"

In today's world the morality of faith is being challenged at every turn. People are questioning what has been handed down through generations or they are simply unaware of it. "Any means to an end" is often the operative principle. If there's ever been a time when Christians have needed to live their faith, and show it in every aspect of their life, then that time is now.

Words are important to be sure, but the evidence of what we believe is to be found in what we do. As Christians we need to live as if professing our faith makes a real difference. As Christians we need to conduct ourselves in such a way that we become a light to others. As Christians we need to show the world the true way from among all the competing ways.

So then behave yourself... and behave in Christ's example.