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Abington Presbyterian Church

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John 17:14-21

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

FAITH AND THE REAL WORLD

‘Faith and Freedom,’ ‘Faith and Forgotten Stories,’ ‘Faith and Science,’ ‘Faith and Faithfulness,’ ‘Faith and Doubt,’ ‘Faith and Humility,’ ‘All You Need is Faith’ – these are sermon titles for the past seven weeks when we have been looking at areas which help us to understand and live out our Christian faith in our current context. Today we look at faith and the real world. I came to this subject for the conclusion of this sermon series in part through a book one of my friends told me about. ¹

The book, which has won some honors on lists for young adult readers, is called Marcello in the Real World. ² I’m no longer a young adult, but I was glad to hear of this book which focuses on a 17-year-old who describes himself in this way: “I view myself as different in the way I think, talk and act, but not as someone who is abnormal or ill.” ³ Marcello is a smart, quiet, kind and compassionate young man with a strong love for God. He’s been diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome on the autism spectrum, although he doesn’t believe that diagnosis. He has attended a private school for young people with special needs, but his father thinks it is time for his son to move beyond his protected world. He gives Marcello a summer job in the mail room of his law firm, telling him, “This summer you must follow the rules of the...real world.” In Marcello’s understanding that means he will engage in small talk with others, will look them in the eye when doing so, and will try to understand their facial expressions.

The ‘real world’ also calls for him to refrain from discussing his interest in God. In preparation, his father tells him, “I want you to be religious but, at the same time, I want you to participate in the day-to-day world, my world, and your world too now... People in the workaday world are discreet about their religion. They pray in private. They don’t quote scripture unless it’s a figure of speech like... ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, the blind leading the blind.’ Things like that.” When Marcello begins to cite chapter and verse about where those figures

of speech originate, his father tells him that is precisely what he doesn't want him to do. He wants him to "try to act AS IS customary." "Marcelo takes out his little yellow notebook he keeps in his shirt pocket and writes: Do not pray so that others see... do not quote scripture... Note: Listen for religious phrases that have become figures of speech. Those are allowed even if not accurate. Do not provide correct version or cite where it appears in the Bible."

I find Marcello delightfully intriguing. In his summer job, the teen finds that the real world is about competition, encountering people who are only looking out for themselves, and companies, including even his father's law firm, that seek to make a profit even when it seems to require inflicting pain on another. As Marcello says, "the real world will always poke you in the chest with its index finger." However, this young man holds onto and struggles with Jesus' words about being sent into the world, but not belonging to the world.

Many, if not all of us, have faced similar struggles with how to maneuver in the so-called 'real world' as a person of faith. The challenges may not be the same ones Marcello faced, but in some ways we Christians are and should be somewhat different from non-believers in the way we think, talk, and act. There are people of faith who try to isolate themselves from the 'real world' so that its chaotic influence will be limited on them, or so they don't have to face opposition or scrutiny. There are others who wouldn't want to admit in public that they are believers because they don't want to be thought of as being different, or as a goody-two-shoes, so they just try to fit in. Yet, as those who affirm that we belong to God instead of belonging to the world, we are sent into the world.

Our reading from Ephesians can be one of the scripture passages that can serve a little like Marcello's little yellow notebook, reminding us how we are to relate to a world beyond the church. This epistle tells us that unlike some people, our words are not to be filled with lies, malice, or slander, but are to be used to build up others. We are instructed to deal with our anger in healthy ways, so we don't get filled with bitterness and shaped by rage. We are to be honest in our work and in our relationships with others.

At a congregation I served previously, soft drinks were kept in the church refrigerator with a change jar next to them with the written expectation that

whoever got one would leave fifty cents to cover the cost. We realized after a while that not everyone was paying up when they were drinking up. The situation got talked about at a session meeting. When one of the elders said, well it was only fifty cents, someone responded, “I would think people from this congregation wouldn’t sell their integrity for such a small amount of money.”

We are called to a life of integrity that goes beyond putting in our two cents or our fifty cents. We are called to live in ways that reflect the values that God establishes. Our Ephesians passage also instructs followers to be kind, ready to forgive, living in love. These generalities are helpful, but we face specific challenges on a frequent basis. How are we to react to a racist, sexist, or homophobic comment or joke told in a social setting? In such a case, what does it mean to be kind, ready to forgive, living in love, for the person as well as for the group being ridiculed? What do we do when we feel pressure from a boss to do something that we view as unethical?

It would be easier if scripture gave very specific guidance – when this happens, do this; when that happens, this is what you say. But the guidance we are given is general enough for our faith to stay relevant even as the challenges we face take on a new form in this day and age. It is difficult at times to apply scriptural guidance to specific circumstances. But part of what makes the application difficult is that there are times when we just don’t want to face the difficulties that come with living out godly values.

Are those general guidance statements in scripture enough for us? Well, actually, that is not all that is provided for us. In our reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus knows he is about to be killed. In this gospel account, among the things that he does in his last hours before his death is to pray for his followers. He prayed for you and me, entrusting us to God’s loving kindness. That means we are not alone in the world that does frighten and perplex us, a world that tempts and belittles us. As we seek to navigate that ‘real world’ out there, our lives are held in God’s loving, watchful care. It might also help for us to realize that the rules and expectations of the concept called the ‘real world’ are not as real as is the loving care of God, in which you and I get to live each and every day.

I don't want to imply that we will always find opposition to our attempts to live out a life of faith and integrity beyond the church. Returning to Marcello's story, he refuses to let go of his love for God, and by God's grace, he discovers a community of people out there in the real world who are not just out for number one, but who also care about people who suffer, who make sacrifices to help those in need, and who even though it might not be the easiest route, they break the rules of the 'real world' when it is the right and just thing to do. Whether we use a little yellow notebook or put a sticky note on our computer screen, we do well to remind ourselves that Christ has prayed for us. When the 'real world' pokes us in the chest, may hearts that reflect the heart of God be found to be beating there. We are being guided in living out our faith, in how we are to talk, think, and act by the love, compassion, and justice of Jesus Christ. Those expressions are more real than some concept called the 'real world.' With God's guidance, supported by Christ's prayers, let's hold on to that reality, so that the 'real world's' hold on us grows weaker day by day.

¹I learned of this book from a sermon given by Rev. Agnes Norfleet originally at Union Presbyterian Seminary's Sprunt Lectures in May, 2014. I refer to a similar sermon she gave at her home church, found at http://www.bmpc.org/images/sermons/NORFLEET__Welcoming_an_Upside-down_World___May_4_2014.pdf

²Francisco Stork, Marcello and the Real World, Arthur Levine Books, 2009.

³http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/10/books/review/Lipsyte-t.html?_r=0