

ACTING WITH MORAL INTEGRITY

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Living with moral integrity in the real world is no easy endeavor. Given the fact that there are nearly as many theological positions as there are churches and people, and that there are hundreds of nations [and even various people within nations] expecting a particular allegiance, how one chooses to live her/his faith and citizenship has almost endless possibilities. Being both a faithful Christian and a responsible citizen is always a dilemma, particularly when there are so many deep divisions in our nation and the world.

Several issues have triggered these thoughts: needing to write a check for my tax bill, the ongoing necessity to be socially responsible during the pandemic, and the recent insurrection at our Nation's Capital that took on the character of a civil war. Disparate as they might seem, all bear on the struggle to be both a faithful Christian and a responsible citizen. I don't expect to say the last word or the absolute truth on these issues. What I do want to do is to share what has shaped me as I try to reflect on them. So, please bear with me.

My tax bills: they seem to always go up. But I come at it from a slightly different perspective. Until I acquired my present home I had never chosen any home in which I lived. They were chosen for me - my parent's homes, school lodging, parsonages. And yet all of my education, except my theological degree, was at public institutions, for which I paid no taxes. Having received so many benefits, I vowed that if I ever owned a home, I would never complain about my fair share of the taxes.

As for the pandemic: I remember the red quarantine signs warning that scarlet fever was inside - scarlet letters that brought fear to our neighborhood. I remember the weeks of confinement in a darkened room when I had the measles. I remember the fear of polio, seeing 'iron lungs,' friends and teachers who'd survived it but bore its palsies. All of us wore the marks of vaccination for smallpox, and were grateful for them. Wearing a mask and keeping social distance is a small price to pay.

Insurrection and civil war: I grew up during World War II, worried about whether I would be called to Korea, began my ministry during Vietnam, had a veteran broken by war in every church I served, and retired just before 9/11. My daughter and my granddaughter have been in the military and could easily have been in "harm's way." I am not naive enough to believe that everyone around the world will "make nice" to each other, or that deep ideological divisions [some claiming religious sanction] will magically go away, but I am bright enough to know that any kind of war isn't working very well either, and my MBA makes me adept enough to count the fiscal and human cost.

All of these issues [as do many others] have a moral dimension. As a Christian, I believe that how we live as citizens must be informed by our faith. That said, it is often hard to distinguish between what comes from God and what does not. While I recognize that people of faith will start in different places and reach different conclusions, I do believe that there are principles of discernment that help us make our choices.

The process of discernment is seldom easy to do, but there are common questions in the process that help a person of faith make more responsible choices:

- “Is it in harmony with the word and spirit of the scriptures?”
- “How does it relate to the life and ministry of Jesus?”
- “Does it bring peace or discord?”
- “Does it build up or break down?”
- “Does it lead to healing or to more pain?”
- “Does it reveal more of God, or turn us away from God?”

These questions will help us in personal decisions, in guidance for relationships, in community actions, and much more.

Beyond this, I find myself returning to three scriptures over and over again: Micah 6:8 which describes the call to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God; Luke 4:16 which describes Jesus’ call to preach good news to the poor and release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty the oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor; and Acts 2:43-47 which describes how people of faith are called to live together. Unfailingly, I find some wisdom for decision making here. Invariably, when these things are not considered, decisions are flawed and the community is threatened.

In our decision making as citizens of communities and nations and God’s world we are called to act with moral integrity. It will never be easy, but to do less will separate our citizenship from our faith, and that is a cost we can ill afford.