Sunday, September 30, 1990
ENDANGERED CHARACTER QUALITIES (No. 1 in a Series: Integrity)
Matthew 21:28-32

We hear a lot these days about certain “endangered species,” creatures whose existence is so precarious that they face the likelihood of becoming extinct. Thus, it is necessary for us as caring human beings to take appropriate actions to protect those creatures so they can once again multiply and thereby continue to enrich God’s creation as they live among us.

In the same way, I believe there are certain needed and God-given human character qualities that are in danger of becoming extinct. If they do, our lives together as people meant to live in loving community with one another will suffer — and in fact, are already suffering.

So today and in the coming weeks, this sermon series will deal with some of these “endangered character qualities.” Among those I believe to be the most endangered are: (1) INTEGRITY, the subject of today’s sermon; (2) COURAGE; (3) DISCIPLINE; (4) COMMITMENT; (5) VISION; and (6) GRATEFULNESS. All of these “endangered character qualities” are those that are to be found first and foremost in people who want to follow the way of Jesus.

From my continuing study of the life and teachings of Jesus, several themes have become increasingly clear to me. One of these is that Jesus believed that deep down in every person’s life, although often covered up, there is the longing to be a good person — or a pretty good person at least.

One of my favorite radio programs over the last few years has been “THE PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION” with Garrison Keillor. On that program, he often talks about “Ralph’s Pretty Good Grocery Store,” not perfect, you understand, but pretty good, which I take to mean a grocery store that tries to do its best. So it is also with trying to be a “pretty good person.”

You’ve perhaps noticed within yourself every now and then a fine urge inside of you, which leaves you unsatisfied with what you are. And for that moment at least, you felt the longing to be what God meant you to be.

If you think you are an exception, ask yourself this simple question: How do you want people to remember you after you die? Especially the people that matter to you? Your children or grandchildren if you have any, or your closest friends and associates? Think about it. How do you want them to remember you? How we want to be remembered is a sure sign of the sort of person we truly want to be.

We do not easily get rid of the urge to be a good person. One of the primary gifts of Jesus was that he was able to call forth from within the people he met, the good that was often buried. He was able to give this “urge to be good” new life.

Now, lest you misunderstand — being a good person, according to the way of Jesus, is more than feeling good, making good, and looking good. This trinity of goodness is a very powerful force in today’s culture. For example, we are urged all the time to do those things, eat and drink, or take those pills that make us “feel good.” Our commitment to pleasant feelings is like a religious devotion where any kind of pain or suffering is the enemy.

Jesus, on the other hand, was constantly calling people to a deeper kind of goodness that God has planted within each one of us from our birth. This kind of goodness has a positive and attractive power. For too long, we have let our culture define “good people” as those who were doormats for others to walk on, who never hurt anyone, never complained, and always caved in to what other people asked. The term “do-gooder” has a bad connotation.

Actually, good people are the strong ones. They are the people with integrity, courage, discipline, commitment, vision, and gratefulness, who are in charge of their own lives. They are the people who know how to love themselves and others with a love that builds and lasts. They are the people who stand firm when firmness is needed. Good people with these character qualities that we will be discussing in this sermon series are much more exciting than bad people.

To protect and multiply these endangered character qualities within and among us is crucial because something bad happens to all of us when people go bad on us, even small numbers of people. It’s like that one bad apple in a box of apples — the rottenness spreads. We know what has been going on in our own time. Big-time brokers cheat on the system and defraud the people who trusted it. Rich and powerful people betray the trust of little people. And while the haves are stuffing their pockets with more, people living all around them have no homes and their children do not have enough to eat. We do live in a time of endangered character qualities, and one of the most endangered qualities is “integrity.”

One day, Jesus told a story aimed especially at the people who claimed to be the most religious of his time. One of the story’s themes is “integrity.”

Here’s the story: A man had two sons, and he went to the first and said, “Go and work in the vineyard today.” The son said, “No,” but afterward, he repented and went. He said to the second son, “Go and work in the vineyard,” and he said, “Yes,” but he did not go. “Which one of these two,” asked Jesus, “did the will of his father?” And they answered, “The first.” Jesus could’ve also asked, “Which one of these two had integrity?” And they would’ve said the first son.

People who have integrity do not deceive themselves or others. They do not make promises and then renege on their promises. No doubt the second son in this story that Jesus told really believed that he was going to work in the vineyard, but when the time came to do so, he didn’t. He deceived himself and his father.

Self-deceit is big these days, not only among individuals but with nations as well.

Albert Speer, for years Hitler’s favorite architect, tells this story in his memoirs about Nazi self-deception. In 1943, British bombers began attacking Germany, and American fighter planes began escorting the British bombers. General Galland reported to Field Marshal Goering that American fighter planes had joined the battle for the German skies; they had shot one down, so they knew for sure. Goering screamed, “That’s nonsense, Galland, what gave you such fantasies?” “But sir, they were there,” Galland insisted. Goering then said, “I herewith give you an official order that they were not there. Do you understand? They were not there.”

Our own country is not immune from self-deception. For years during the Vietnam War, the American public was told that we were winning the war, yet American intelligence knew differently. In her book The March of Folly, Barbara Tuchman writes, “At no time were

policymakers unaware of the hazards, obstacles, and negative developments. We knew, but we chose not to know."

The self-deceit practiced by nations is written on a larger scale, but it is not different from the lies we tell ourselves. We do not want to know things that challenge our prejudices, our faith, and many of our basic assumptions.

Parents see clear signs that their son is using drugs, but they close their eyes; it would hurt too much to know. A wife shuts out clear signals that her husband is having an affair. A person addicted to alcohol denies that he has a drinking problem and is an alcoholic, and his family denies it as well. One of the most painful and disturbing books I have read in the past year has the title A Death in Whitebear Lake. It's the true story of a suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota, and a family in that town in which a mother gradually, through abuse, murders her adopted son. Her husband knows the child is being abused but chooses not to know. The physician knows but chooses not to know. The neighbors know, the social workers from the adoption agency know, the authorities know, but all of them, singularly and together, practice denial. Only twenty years later, because of the persistence of the birth mother who begins a search, is the murderer brought to trial and convicted. She is the woman of integrity and courage in the story.

Why do we do it? Why do we deceive ourselves and others? Why do we lose our integrity? Sometimes because the truth is too painful: reality has gone bad on us, and we can be so miserable that we simply close our eyes.

Another example. A woman I shall call Carol (not her real name) believed a person who is born again is cleansed of all bad desires. Her husband had abused their two daughters when they were very young. The girls grew up and left home. Finally, they told their mother that their father had sexually abused them. Did their mother know? Yes, they both said, she knew. But Carol said that it never happened. Her husband was born again, and God does not let reborn people sin. She knew, but to know the truth would threaten her faith, so she refused to know what she knew.

To be a person of integrity means that we are not to be afraid to see and know and search for the truth, even when it threatens our faith.

To have integrity also means to speak the truth when it is necessary to speak the truth. Integrity is when honest words match honest intentions.

In a small village, a small group of men gathered each Saturday morning in the wintertime and did a lot of bragging about their hunting dogs. Everybody kind of expected everybody else to lie about his dog, so it did not really count as lying.

One morning, Horace Baxter began running his dog down. "He's not worth a good twist of tobacco. Sorriest dog I ever followed. That old dog won't hunt." That's the way he went on, telling bad truth about his own dog.

"What's going on here," his friend Lemm wondered. "I never heard a man run down his own dog. Must be something special about that dog."

The next day, Lemm went over to Horace's place with a fine shotgun and said he wanted to trade it for the dog. "Naw, you don't want that dog, Lemm, he's no good at all." But Lemm persisted: "When I want a dog, I want a dog. Take the gun for him or I'll come and steal him."

The trade was made. Later on, Horace's conscience began pinching him, and he got to feeling guilty about how he'd fooled Lemm. His son tried to comfort him, "Shucks, Pa, you told him the truth." "Yes, son, my words were straight, but my intentions were crooked."

"Speak the truth to one another, for we are members one of another," said the Apostle Paul. We owe truthfulness to each other, not for truth's sake, but for each other's sake.

For Jesus, integrity is about holding our lives together so that we are the same person inside and out, backward and forward. We become people of integrity when our actions match our words.

Integrity is an endangered character trait. Above all, Jesus calls us to be people of integrity. No living person has yet arrived totally at the place called integrity. We do well to keep moving in that direction. We have to check on our intentions regularly and see whether we are still moving toward integrity or not.

How then does one help integrity to grow? The story that Jesus told about the two sons gives us the direction. Notice the first son: when his dad asked him to work in the family vineyard, he initially said "I will not." "But," said Jesus, "afterward he repented." There's the key to integrity—"he repented." I've read this parable over and over again in the Bible, and it wasn't until reading and studying it this past week that these two words jumped out at me. They are the two most important words in the parable—"he repented." He had enough courage to admit to himself and to God and to his dad that he had made a mistake. He reexamined his decision.

Repentance is never easy. It's painful to own up to the truth about yourself — but that's what people of integrity are able to do — repent, change the direction of their living, look again at their prejudices, their basic assumptions. That's what the super-religious people of Jesus' time had trouble doing. They were secure in their self-righteousness. And so he said to them at the end of this parable—"Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you!"

Integrity is an endangered character quality. Today I hope you will reexamine your life. Do your actions fit your words? When you say you are going to do something, or make a promise to someone, do you follow through and do it? Is your behavior consistent with what you say you believe? If you can answer "yes" to these questions, you are on your way to integrity. Amen.