Moral Excellence in the Body of Christ

This morning in this worship setting where we gather to listen to God’s voice, I invite you reflect with me for a few moments about moral excellence – about what it is and about its place in the body of Christ. It is customary to begin a sermon by reading a passage of Scripture. I will turn to the Scriptures in a few minutes. But to begin with, I ask you to consider with me a certain common experience I’m sure most of us have had at one time or another.

Every now and then, in my reading or conversations, I come across a statement that makes me stop and think. I had that experience several years ago when I lived in Wisconsin. I commuted to work each day with a colleague who taught economics. The commute took about 30 minutes each way. Traveling one way I would share with him my expertise in philosophy. On the return trip, he would give me lessons in economics. One of my most vivid memories from those days relates to the way he answered a question of mine. I think I had asked him to tell me what he regarded as one of the most important principles of economics. He turned to me and said: "Mike, there is no such thing as a free lunch." Then, he
burst out laughing. At first I was puzzled by the remark and especially by his laughter. After some explanation, I was able to understand what he meant and to see that he was probably right.

You probably have your own examples of this sort of experience. In the course of talking to people and reading lots of different kinds of literature, you hear comments that initially strike you as baffling or downright false. Then, on reflection, you may discover the truth in what is otherwise a strange or paradoxical remark.

It works the other way, too. Sometimes you come across a statement that initially strikes you as true and then later you decide that it is actually false or at best not true in some ultimate sense – not true in the sense that ought to finally matter.

I came across a statement like that some time ago by a man named Alexander Pope, an 18th Century English poet. Here is Pope's comment: "An honest man's the noblest work of God." This is the kind of statement one is inclined to accept at face value. It sounds true. It certainly emphasizes an important requirement of morality: honesty. Honesty is a good thing. If someone tells me that she is trying to decide whether to be honest or dishonest, I come down
squarely on the side of honesty.

   At the same time, I do not believe Pope has spoken truly when he says "An honest man's the noblest work of God." My complaint against Pope is that he misconstrues what is most noble in God's creation. In the interest of saying something moving and inspiring, he wrongly represents one of the basic requirements of morality – honesty – as the highest, aspirational goal of creation.

   Pope's error can be better grasped by analogy. To speak about honesty in the way he does is like saying, "The young person who regularly attends Sunday school and who is regularly promoted through the various grades in the Church’s educational program represents the noblest product of the church." Or to use another example, “The person who studies hard and passes the ministerial examination represents the noblest achievement of the church." I submit that many of you sit here this morning as a testimony to the fact that the noblest product of the body of Christ is the result of something far greater than merely achieving promotion though the church’s educational curriculum or passing a ministerial examination.

   I don’t want to be misunderstood, so permit me to say a word in behalf of honesty. Honesty is a basic moral requirement. No one that is dishonest can say she
has achieved moral excellence. Honesty – basic, straightforward, look-you-in-the-eye, truthfulness – is a prerequisite for moral excellence. It is a building block for moral integrity. Honesty and integrity are in turn building blocks for trust relationships, which are fundamental for establishing communities, including communities of believers. So, honesty is not something trivial or peripheral to the project of achieving moral excellence. It is fundamental to that endeavor.

Furthermore, honesty is very often a distinguishing trait of those whom we recognize as having achieved a measure of moral excellence. For example, Abraham Lincoln, a man who saw and met the moral challenges of his time, was known as an honest man. People called him "Honest Abe."

In Missouri, there is another man known for his honesty. His name is Robert Spence. He is the president of Evangel University, the institution that I left in order to accept appointment as Dean of the School of Divinity. Let me tell you a story about him. In 1988 Evangel University’s football team experienced some well deserved success. They went undefeated in the regular season, 11-1 on the year, and enjoyed a national ranking. Reviewing eligibility records near the end of the season, members of the coaching staff discovered a technical violation of the rules. A few of the players, in their freshman year, had played in a non-conference
preseason scrimmage. That very limited playing experience very early in their career made them ineligible in the 1988 season. When the error was discovered and reported to Spence, he called a news conference, disclosed the facts, and forfeited the entire season. There was no cover-up; no hiding of records; no ducking and dodging. If he were here this morning, he would take no pleasure in having me recount this incident, because the entire ordeal was discouraging to team members and embarrassing to the university. But that's the sort of thing honest persons do. And among those who have achieved some measure of moral excellence, honesty is inevitably an abiding moral trait. So I don't ever want to sell honesty short.

Alexander Pope's comment is also difficult to dismiss in a day and age when honesty is so commonly compromised. It would be easy to find specific cases in the last decade in which prominent public figures have lied or otherwise acted dishonestly. I also have no doubt there is evidence in the local community of ordinary citizens dissembling, shading the truth, speaking with indirection and intonations that give a misleading impression. And to the extent that people – whether they are public servants or private citizens – disregard the truth, the community is diminished. Even closer to home, we face a constant challenge of dealing with academic dishonesty. As with other Christian universities, plagiarism
is not a pervasive problem, but it is a persistent one. And to the extent that it is present, it is morally corrosive for those who engage in it and it impedes the work of the university community at large.

So I stand here to reaffirm in the strongest possible terms that honesty is important and that it is vital to our spiritual and moral well-being. And when we talk of “Faith that Transforms” (as we have in this fall’s chapel series), we must think of faith that transforms as a faith that clarifies, distills, and purifies our basic moral impulses, such as the impulse toward honest.

Still, we must remind ourselves that honesty, though a necessary precondition for moral excellence, should not to be confused with moral excellence itself. Alexander Pope was wrong; the honest person is not God's noblest work. This fact becomes evident when we consider how we might view people like Abraham Lincoln if they had contented themselves with doing nothing more than satisfying the bare requirements of honesty. Would we remember them? Would they be worth remembering? Would they be worthy of Pope's praise: God's noblest work? I don't think so.

You see, in the last analysis, important as honesty is, it is really only what students of ethics call a minimum maintenance standard of morality. To be a
member in good standing with the moral community, one must be honest. But moral excellence is not a minimum maintenance standard. **Moral excellence is what we call an aspirational ideal.** To aspire to something is to view it as worthy of our time and effort and to strive for it. Aspirational ideals are things we must reach for. Because they are noble ideals, we may never fully succeed in embodying them or making them fully our own. Nonetheless, like the stars that guided ancient mariners, aspirational ideals stand out as points of reference that have the capacity to orient our lives and give direction to our efforts.

What are these aspirational ideals? Some of them are moral virtues such as courage, justice, moderation, patience, and compassion.

Perhaps someone here will say, "What you say is all well and fine. But what makes moral excellence a worthy sermon subject in a chapel series focused on faith that transforms?"

Part of the answer lies in the fact that talking about moral excellence reminds us of our priorities. It is important to remember that however much we express our devotion and faithfulness to God in our worship, as we have done this morning, the larger measure of our devotion and faithfulness is found in the things we aspire to and to which we commit ourselves outside these four walls. It is still
true that where our treasure is there our heart is also.

Consider this passage from the Gospel of Matthew.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did to me." (Matt. 25:31-40, New Revised Standard Version)

If I read this passage correctly, devoted service to the weak and vulnerable, the sick and needy, the excluded and disenfranchised, is a goal worthy of our highest aspiration. Why is this so? Because in giving ourselves to these people, according to Matthew, we express our devotion and faithfulness to God himself. These are the kinds of actions that James says constitute religion that is pure and undefiled – pure acts that bind us together and bind us to our God, true acts of worship. Acts
like these that become habits reflect a faith that has transformed our lives.

Examples:  
Millard Fuller (founder of Habitat for Humanity)  
Mark Buntain (founder of Calcutta Mission of Mercy)  
Joan Cargel (organizes summer camps for abused children)  
Sharon Byrdsong (doctoral student in the School of Education; Virginia’s Outstanding Middle School Principal of the Year)

Examples like these remind us of what we can and ought to become: a university community with a robust concept of service and ministry to people beyond the boundaries of the campus. Without doubt, we express our devotion and faithfulness to God in worship services like this one; but we also express our devotion and faithfulness to him when we leave this place and address the urgent needs of people in the community.

If you look carefully at my short list of moral heroes you will notice a couple of interesting points. First, you might think that as the Dean of the School of Divinity, I would have highlighted pastors and evangelists – ministers in the traditional sense. In fact, only one of the people on my list, Mark Buntain, was ordained with a church. But even in his role as a missionary, Buntain did not follow a traditional model of ministry. He believed in preaching the Gospel, but he also believed that the Gospel is more comprehensive than the spoken word. The
Gospel is (or is not) embodied in our actions. For Buntain, ministry included establishing milk distribution centers for starving children, a school for the illiterate, and a hospital for sick and dying outcasts, the untouchables.

Buntain and the others on my list illustrate that ministry is not limited to those with ministerial credentials. Every follower of Christ should think of his or her occupation as in some way answering to a fundamental mandate to love God and to love neighbor. To do so is part of what it means to proclaim the Gospel. It is also a central feature of what ministry is all about. I suggest to you that this message is of fundamental importance in a Christian university established to prepare people for professional occupations other than traditional vocational church ministry.

My short list of heroes illustrates another point. If traditional vocational ministry is not the universal model for proclaiming the Gospel, it is also true that the ideals of contemporary popular culture – wealth, fame, status – also do not constitute a satisfactory standard for measuring the impact of one’s life. The heroes of popular culture are men and women who have made their fortune on Wall Street or in the dot.com world, sports heroes, music and film stars. A distressingly large number of these cultural icons have one thing in common: They have little to offer
that can help us understand what it means to live in a way that is not based on self-interest.

I am convinced that simply abiding by minimum maintenance standards of morality does not constitute an adequate alternative to the self-serving models of popular culture. For the Christian, life is more than an episode of “Survivor” writ large. Our exemplar is Christ, who not only articulated but also embodied a model of self-sacrifice and service to others.

So, the honest person is not God's noblest creation. Honesty, like basic standards of morality, is part of the moral ground on which we stand as we strive to respond to a higher calling. As we strive toward that higher calling, we do well to identify saints and heroes who embody it – people like those I have described today. We should tell their stories to each other, to our children, and to the young people. And as we tell their stories we should keep in mind the biblical model of moral excellence as we see it in the Gospel of Matthew.

Our time together is drawing to a close. As we stand this morning for our benediction, let us read once again the words from the Gospel writer.
When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father [this refers to you who are present], inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." [Ask yourself: have you done these things?] Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did to me." (Matt. 25:31-40, NRSV)

May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord shine His face upon you.
May the Lord lift His countenance upon you, and grant you peace.