



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Integrity
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, July 11, 2021
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

On the night of December 11th, 1995, Aaron Feuerstein was treated to a surprise birthday party at Café Budapest, one of his favorite restaurants in Boston. He had just turned 70 and everything seemed to be going his way. His company, Malden Mills, one of the largest textile makers in Massachusetts, had hit a sales record of \$400 million that year. Their PolarTec, fleec-like fabric coats and jackets were being sold by L.L. Bean and Lands' End, and were applauded by the environmental community because they were made from 80 percent recycled plastic soda bottles.

Aaron himself was in great health, had a happy marriage with his wife Louise, and a wonderful family. He had a regimen that he followed. On even-numbered days while exercising, he recited from memory an hour's worth of Shakespeare, Milton, or the other English poets. On odd days, as a devout Jew, he recited in Hebrew from the Psalms and the prophets, or from the scriptures and the Talmud on ethics.

As Aaron made his wish and blew out the lone candle on his birthday cake, he had no idea what was unfolding thirty miles away. When he got home, the phone had been ringing for hours. The Malden Mills complex in Lawrence, Massachusetts, was engulfed by a disastrous fire. Aaron and Louise rushed to the scene still in their dress clothes from the birthday party. Almost all the buildings and equipment were destroyed. Fortunately, no lives were lost, but the psychological and economic impact on the city of Lawrence was devastating. The 3100 employees of Malden Mills faced the prospects of no jobs two weeks before Christmas.

Aaron was now faced with the biggest moral and ethical choice of his life. Almost everyone in Lawrence assumed he would either retire or take this opportunity to relocate his plant to a low-wage area overseas like so many other clothing and textile manufacturers in the 1990's.

Aaron thought back on his 70 years. He reflected on all those odd-numbered days when he recited the scriptures and ethical teachings from memory. Were they just a compartment of his life that could be conveniently severed when things got tough, or were they the essence, the very core of his being? Aaron knew the right thing to do. He gathered all his employees in a high school gym and announced that all the people on his payroll would receive their salaries for the next three months though there would be no work for them to do, and he would rebuild the plant on its site. He said, "I have a responsibility to the workers and an equal responsibility to the community. It would be unconscionable to put three thousand workers on the streets and deliver

a death blow to the city of Lawrence. Maybe on paper my company is worth less to Wall Street but I can tell you it is worth more.”

In today’s Gospel of Mark, we hear about another birthday party with a disastrous ending. It was one that Herod Antipas, the tetrarch or governor of Galilee and Perea, threw for himself. He had imprisoned John the Baptist, who had denounced his marriage to Herodias as being unlawful. Herodias wanted John the Baptist killed, but Herod was not willing to go that far. He recognized John as a righteous and holy man, and he enjoyed going to the prison to listen to him.

At the banquet, when Herod heard the girl’s request, the words that had been given her by her mother, it was Herod’s spirit that was also severed that night and he was evermore haunted by regrets. His actions in carrying out the request reflected his outward need to save face in front of his guests. But whatever yearning that John’s presence and words had stirred up inside him was being denied oxygen before it really had a chance to breathe through his own evil order. His false integrity of being true to a misguided oath severed his hope for real integrity in the possibility of developing an inner spiritual anchor through further conversations with John.

A building has structural integrity when the superstructure and visible elements are tied into and act as one with the foundation. It can withstand storms and wind gusts because it is altogether firmly anchored to its core.

Rabbi Harold Kushner compares integrity in a moral, ethical, and spiritual sense to the Hebrew word *shalom*. He writes, ‘Shalom is usually translated as peace, but it means much more than the absence of quarreling. Shalom means wholeness, everything fitting together, nothing missing and nothing broken. Shalom means no fighting with yourself, no quarreling with your divided soul. To wish someone shalom is to wish her or him the blessing of wholeness and integrity.’

As word spread of Aaron’s decision to keep paying his workers and rebuild the mill, he received tributes from all over the globe. He was awarded 12 honorary doctorates and was the First Lady’s guest at the State of the Union. But Aaron said the acknowledgement that meant the most to him was a patchwork quilt made for him out of strips of Polartec by the children of a Hebrew day school. Inlaid on it were the words, ‘Who is honored? One who honors others.’

A patchwork quilt.

The severed pieces put together in a unified whole.

A few years later, Aaron looked back on that fateful night. At first, he said his role was that of a cheerleader. Then he reconsidered and added, ‘No, I was more than that. I created the spark, the hope, the will to overcome and salvage a situation that had seemed impossible. I was able to influence others to participate in that dream. Not just by the few words I said that evening. It had to do with a history together of treating human beings as God’s creatures – my confidence that they all had a spark in them, and that they all could do it. My confidence that *they all had the divine spark*.’

Aaron is now 95. He has not always been perfect, and his business decisions have not always been perfect. But his life demonstrates the importance of daily spiritual practices in developing a moral inner core from which outward good flows, especially when tested in a time of crisis. And his example and what might have been with Herod teach us the importance of

staying close to God and listening to the voices of prophets, sometimes coming from unlikely places.

After experiencing my mother's death three weeks ago, one of the graces I have felt is that I do not think she had any or hardly any regrets. I have been thinking about how, moving forward, we can live our lives without regrets. I know that is not entirely possible, but there are some steps we can take to get closer to that sort of life. They include adopting practices and giving space for the Holy Spirit to cultivate and nurture a holy presence at the center of our being that naturally radiates outward through acts of love and compassion.

That is what it means to live a life of shalom.

That is what it means to live a life of integrity.

Amen.