

What values are parts of your moral compass? What sources do you use for making decisions, especially those with moral implications? The answer to that question varies with each one of us individually, but there are some common sources that direct most of us in the moral decisions we make.

One primary source for our moral compasses is our family of origin—our parents and grandparents and those family members that we grew up with. What did our family say was important? And even more powerful in developing our moral compass, what did our family *do*? Author Brene Brown writes about the gap between our families of origin’s spoken and lived values. For example, if our parents talked about treating people with respect but made fun of people in a cruel way when they were not present; then guess which value “sticks” with us?

Another primary source for our moral compass is our culture. Culture is made up of our shared values expressed in stories, song, and generally accepted ways of thinking and acting. So at our best, American culture values enduring love, working hard, rooting for the underdog, and triumphing over great challenges. Our culture also includes things that don’t always appeal to our better angels. Sometimes we elevate the value of getting what we want, when we want it, without looking at consequences.

Of course a primary part of our moral compass is our religious faith. For Christians, we often look at the Bible. In particular we look at such moral standards as the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Those two sources intersect today in our Gospel reading. Surprisingly, though, it seems like Jesus is challenging some of the assumptions we have about the Ten Commandments. It’s like he put some asterisks on what we might think of as “settled law” in terms of our moral compass.

So what are those asterisks about? The first one he listed is about murder. I doubt if many people of any religious faith-- or even with no religious faith-- would disagree with the commandment, “You shall not murder.” That’s clear cut—we can build it into our moral compass with great confidence.

But then Jesus does add that asterisk, “But I say to you...” Jesus takes the commonly accepted law and adds to it in order to make us all stop and think more deeply about what the real issue is— our relationship with one another. How do we treat the people in our lives? Jesus pointed out some real life examples—how we get angry with each, and call each other names, and even treat others with contempt. We may not pull out a gun and shoot someone; but Jesus makes clear that our words and attitudes are equally powerful weapons and need to be addressed as part of our moral compass.

The solution Jesus offers is central to his gospel and to God’s mission for the world—*reconciliation*. A primary element in our moral compass according to the teaching of our Lord is “be reconciled.” It is of primary importance even before worship. Jesus addressed this in particular to those who have offended another—if someone we know is

offended with us, we are not to justify ourselves or blame the other person; rather we are to take the initiative and work to make peace with that person.

Now if you are like me at all, that makes us squirm a little bit, morally. I'd rather keep a mental scorecard of good behaviors I have done; and bad behaviors I have not done. That is safer and definitely cleaner. Relationships are messy and involve give and take and gray areas. But relationships are primary according to our Lord—if we ignore his teaching on this, our moral compasses will be faulty and get us lost.

When I was writing this sermon, I tried to think of a good story to help bring this home to us; but one of my moral compass points is confidentiality, so I can't share some of the better examples (so you can relax). And a similar point applies to my family—I don't like including them in my sermons very often, so that our relationships don't just become sermon fodder. But I did come up with an example that I believe will fit here.

The last corporate job I had before going to seminary was with one of the largest companies in the world—General Electric. I came from outside the company to lead the sales efforts of a very small start up company that was part of the Emerging Business unit at GE. When I, as an outsider, received the job as “sales leader,” there was a co-worker who was offended by that. He was an experienced GE employee and felt he should have received the job.

To his credit, the first time I spoke with him by phone, Tyler let me know how he felt. He started out by saying, “Don't take this wrong...” I have found that when people start a conversation that way, I need to buckle my seatbelt! Tyler then went on to explain all the reasons why he should have got the job over me. I admit, my first response was thinking, “What an arrogant jerk.” I went into defense more—which for me too often means attack mode—but by God's grace, I was able to bite my lip. I let him go on and on (and on). After awhile, I actually began to hear *him* instead of listening to my inner narrative that pointed out all the ways he was wrong.

We finished the conversation with me basically thanking him for being honest, and expressing the hope that he would help me learn what I needed to know, and that we would be able to work together. Those were all sincere comments, though not the first comments that came to my mind! Tyler said that he would. And then a funny thing happened—Tyler and I became work friends. We worked on deals together, he taught me the GE way, and he became open to me coaching him on how he could be a better candidate for future promotions. Not the result I would have expected based on his first words to me; but something that was made possible because I focused on reconciliation more than entering into a debate about being right.

Do you get the difference?

I read something recently that really struck me—“all our success in life-- in marriage, family, career, etc.-- all come one conversation at a time.” That is a really profound statement and reinforces the power of our words, our conversations, and our relationships in leading a truly moral life. And that is what Jesus is teaching in the passage we heard read today.

So let's get out our moral compasses today. Who have we offended in our lives and relationships? Or who is offended with us, whether or not we feel we have done anything deserving their attitude toward us? If we spend a little time, we can probably come up with at least one person.

Now this is when a little prayer and discernment is needed. We do not need to be overly scrupulous in this and bring up every offense over the decades of our lives. Some issues are best left alone (here I am thinking about things like the times we snuck out at night without our parents knowing about it—for the most part, just let those things go).

But think of a person close to us that we have harmed in some way—a harsh word or a dismissive attitude; or perhaps we don't know what we did in particular. Go to that person and broach the subject. If we know what we did wrong, say it—“I was wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me.” Then going forward, work to restore that relationship through healthy conversations—listening, showing respect, being honest when needed, and affirming always.

And if we do not know what the problems is, ask. That is risky and can sometimes open a can of worms. But it is worth the risk. That is how we can live truly moral lives, guided by the primary moral source of seeking reconciliation. That is how we will be judged as people and as followers of Jesus. As our Lord stated, “By your words you will be justified; and by your words you will be condemned.” That should get our attention!

Now I imagine what some of you may be thinking: yeah, yeah, that religious talk is fine. But I have to protect myself. And there is some truth in that attitude. Being a Christian does not mean you are a pushover or a doormat. Especially if you are in an abusive relationship, always protect yourself from physical and emotional harm. That too is a primary value.

And even when there is not overt abuse, but just a person who is a consistent jerk, you can listen to the advice of author Scott Stratten, “Don't try to win over the haters; you're not the jackass whisperer.” There are times to walk away and let the haters hate. We don't want to ignore an obvious issue; but neither do we need to try to force reconciliation with someone who is not ready.

It is clear that as part of our moral compass, we need to remember God's central value-- reconciliation. That value is expressed in our baptismal covenant as we confess the importance of repenting when we sin and returning to the Lord; the importance of respecting the dignity of all people; and the importance of seeking and serving Christ in all people. When with God's help we follow those central parts of our moral compass, we will not become lost in life; or if we do get lost, we can find our way again. And even more importantly, we will serve as guides to help others find the way that our Lord has already blazed for us.

Amen.