

## When No One's Looking June 24, 2007

Walt Kallestad, who is senior pastor of Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, told this story at a conference I was attending, and I thought it was appropriate to share it with you today. He said that while waiting to pay for a car wash, he picked up a music CD that he decided to buy. He paid his bill, and walked out to his car. As he was looking over the receipt, he saw that he had been undercharged, so he went back inside and told the cashier that he hadn't been charged enough. She looked him in the eye and said, "I know. I went to your church last Sunday, and I just wanted to see what kind of person you really were."

That story sort of stopped me in my tracks, and I found myself asking, "What would I have done in that situation?" What do you think you would have done? I like to think that most of us, like Walt, would have done the same thing. However, I'm also aware that some of us might not have even looked at the receipt, and if we had, we might have thought, "That's the cashier's problem," and we would have gone on our way. It seems that our response to any situation like that says quite a bit about the kind of person we are.

Now the interesting thing is that Walt assumed he was going about his business, never giving a thought to the fact that someone was watching his behavior. Clearly, he did the right thing, even though he thought no one was looking, and in my opinion, that speaks well of him. He was living in a way that's consistent with that which he professes to believe. How about us?

I really believe that, if we are people who want to live out our faith the best way we can, we have to live in accord with our highest values and principles, because our values often are derived from what we believe. We earn respect from others if our words and actions are aligned with what we say we believe. In addition, we experience a sense of peace at the center of our being when everything seems to be in synch. When we don't live that way, we get out of sorts, out of balance. To be an integrated, whole person, we have to live by those core values—our deepest beliefs.

That's basically what we refer to as character, and that's really what our Bible passage is talking about. It's from Paul's letter to the people in the church in Rome, and he's clearly trying to help them live in ways that are aligned with their faith. This is what he says: **"You're fortunate if your behavior and your belief are coherent. But if you're not sure, if you notice that you are acting in ways inconsistent with what you believe, then you know that you're out of line. If the way you live isn't consistent with what you believe, then it's wrong."** I

think he's talking about the quality of one's character.

According to dictionary.com, the word "character" is defined this way: **"the aggregate of features and traits that form the individual nature of some person or thing."** An additional definition says that character has to do with **moral or ethical quality.**

We see the character of a person when we watch how he or she handles a dilemma. For instance, Marcelene Cox has said, **"No one knows his true character until he has run out of gas, purchased something on the installment plan, and raised an adolescent."** Or, as Dwight Moody once said, **"Character is what you are in the dark."** In today's words, it's "what we are when no one is looking," as well as what we would do if we knew we would never be found out.

I guess that means that there are several questions we need to ask ourselves: Are our actions and behaviors the same whether we are observed or not? Is there a sense of integrity at our center, when our inward thought and outward expressions are aligned?

The somewhat surprising thing about our characters is that we don't arrive on this earth with them already developed. It's up to us to build the kind of character that becomes us, and it's not anyone else's responsibility. It's exactly the way H. Jackson Browne put it: **"Good character is not given to us. We have to build it, piece by piece—by thought, choice, courage and determination."**

So, what are the various elements that go together to make up our character? I don't know that I have a definitive list, but after doing some research, I found a general consensus around six different core ethical virtues that form the foundation of an exemplary character. They are: **trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.** Although I found these in various places, the website called "charactercounts.org" really pulled them all together, and offered a way to keep them in mind that I find worthy of sharing. Let's think about each one of them briefly.

That website suggests that we think about **trustworthiness** with the color blue, as in **"true blue."** If we're someone who is trustworthy, that means that we're honest, we don't deceive others, and we don't cheat or steal. We're reliable, and do what we say we're going to do. We're loyal people who stand by family and friends no matter what, and our highest goal is to do the right thing.

The next value that contributes to our character is **respect**, and it can be symbolized by the color yellow or gold, as in the **Golden Rule.** It has to do with honoring differences between us, using good manners, avoiding foul language, being considerate of others, doing our best to keep from hurting others, trying to remain peaceful in the face of anger. To me, this just seems like being a nice person and treating others in a kindly fashion.

The next value that helps build our character is **responsibility**, and it can be represented by the color green. The website I mentioned suggested that we think of responsibility in terms of being **responsible for a garden or for finances**. It's like being solid and reliable like an oak.

This is one of the hardest ones for us to develop, I think, because we often see it as the opposite of free and fun loving, but that's not the case at all. Responsibility means that we will do what we're supposed to do. It's giving our best in any situation, and persevering. It has a lot to do with our self-discipline and self-control in every arena of life. When we are responsible, we think before we act, and try to consider all the consequences, and we realize that we are accountable for the steps we take.

When I think of responsibility, it's easy to think of a teenager and his or her first day with a driver's license. I don't know anyone who hasn't felt a sense of freedom when they drive away from home for the first time, but often they don't realize the enormous amount of responsibility that has fallen on their shoulders with the awarding of the license. They're responsible for how they conduct themselves on the road with other drivers; they are responsible for any passengers in their car, and they're responsible to their parents who are entrusting them with this responsibility. It seems that this is one of the first places we see the evidence of learned responsibility.

Yet another of the values that is important for the development of our character is a sense of **fairness**. The reason the color associated with fairness is **orange** is so we can think about an orange, and how we can divide it in equal segments so easily to share with others. When we're fair, we play by the rules, and we learn to share. This is one of the first things we learn as little children—how important it is to share. Being fair with others means that we will not take advantage of anyone, and we'll accept culpability instead of blaming someone else for the times we fail to play fair. It means we keep score honestly whether we're on the golf course, the racquetball court, or just moving our way through life.

The next value is **caring**, and the color is red which represents the **heart**—caring comes from the heart. We've talked about the importance of caring for one another many times here at The Garden. We try to be compassionate and show our care toward others. We do the basic things like showing gratitude and offering forgiveness. We help people when they're in need, and don't turn our backs. A caring spirit is an essential for a well-formed character.

The last of the six values that contribute to the foundation of a good character is **citizenship**. The color purple is used to symbolize something that is regal or **royal**, and a good citizen is that. Being an outstanding citizen means that we do our

part to make our home, our work, our school, our community a better place in which to live and work. We work cooperatively, rather than competitively. We get involved and stay informed. We vote and obey the laws and rules. We try to be a good neighbor to those both next door and around the world; we are caregivers of our environment, and we show respect for authority.

Someone has said, **"You can find on the outside only what you possess on the inside,"** and I think that's true. So, maybe it would be a good idea for us to examine what we're like on the inside, to check out what kind of character is within us. That's when we'll know for sure what we're like when no one is looking.

Closing:

You know, God has created all of us as good people, people of worth and value. It seems to me that most of us regularly need a tune-up, so maybe today can serve for our annual assessment and tune-up. With God's help, we can fix what needs fixing.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.