

I know we've talked about ethical frameworks before, but it's worth revisiting. Bible Study folks, y'all can do this from memory by now, so bear with us. There's a ton of these ways to make sense of the world, but I'm gonna focus on four: utilitarianism, deontology, Kantian, and virtue ethics.

Utilitarian ethics claims that the right thing to do results in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. You probably know that one. The upside is, assuming it's true, the greatest number of people benefit. The downside is you can justify anything as long as the greatest number of people benefit. The US's justification for dropping atomic bombs argued that a prolonged invasion of Japan would've resulted in more casualties, so the bomb was "justified." Nevermind the horrors unleashed and the decades of mutually assured destruction that followed.

Next is deontology which claims something is ethically good if it is legal and ethically bad if it's illegal. The upside is that there's a set framework guiding how we live with other human beings; the downside depends heavily on who makes and interprets the laws. The Nobel Prize winning poet Anatole France said, "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread."

Kantian ethics emerged as a kind of check on deontology: something is ethically good if it is just. The upside is that justice is sought; the downside, again, depends on who defines justice. That could mean challenging unjust laws or laws unjustly enforced. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. went so far as to say, "an unjust law is no law."

Finally, there's virtue ethics which is an altogether different approach. According to this framework, every community, no matter the size (like a family, a church, or a nation), every community has its own set of what it considers virtues, and an individual's ethical status is measured against the ideal embodiment of those virtues. The upside is a strong shared identity with shared virtues; the downside is that these aren't necessarily universal virtues. The ubermensch of Nazi Germany is a prime example; every man was measured against the Aryan superman. A bad Nazi failed and a "good" Nazi succeeded based on how much they were like that platonic ideal. What the rest of the world thought of them didn't matter in defining their ethical goodness because they didn't uphold the same ideal virtues. A more positive example would be "The New Colossus," the poem at the base of the Statue of Liberty. That poem says something about what kind of people Americans are, and for much of my life, we've measured ourselves against that standard.

If you're in this room, you're in a Christian church. I hope that's not a surprise, but if it is, welcome. And in places like this, all of those frameworks need to be taken into account. It does matter how many people our actions affect, and we've got one of the greatest examples of utilitarianism's gift at the heart of our story: Jesus on the cross suffering to save all of humanity. We live and function under a set of laws; we challenge the injustices that result, and we definitely profess a set of virtues. Different denominations emphasize different virtues, but the person of Jesus remains our ideal with someone like Peter more like our reality.

When we try to figure out the right course of action, we take all those different approaches and weigh 'em together. And if we're honest with ourselves, being Christian in America has made this kinda hard 'cause we've had it kinda easy. We've been so established as the de facto religion that we've lost sight of one of the hard realities of historical Christianity. And that's that we're weird. We're weird because the virtues embodied in the person of Jesus and manifested across the millennia aren't always in line with the greater culture. And that manifests especially in the first, second, third generations of Christianity, those early days of our faith when the model of Christ was fresh and human systems had done less to push Christinity away from its beginnings.

And though that may represent a Christianity foreign to many now, it's who we were and, in many ways, who we should strive to be again. We discourage the accumulation of wealth, for example, which always made folks look at us askance. We prioritize the poor, the sick, the outcast, and we challenge rulers to see humanity in those they'd rather exploit. In the early days of Christianity, we were weird 'cause we danced and sang at funerals, and we were lazy, just like our Jewish ancestors, for taking a sabbath day off of work seemingly to do nothing. And perhaps most troubling, we are a people of martyrs. Now let me be really clear. We don't seek out martyrdom, but our many inconvenient (to those in power) and threatening (to systems of oppression) virtues make us natural targets of violence in an attempt to silence the kind of hope and courage our faith engenders. Or, as the priest Daniel Berrigan put it, "If you want to follow Jesus, you better look good on wood."

That's virtue ethics. All that stuff that makes us weird are just some of our virtues. And when we weigh the next right thing in our ethical conundrums -- and my God, are there a lot of ethical conundrums -- when we weigh the next right thing, we have to determine which of those has a greater claim, if any. And if we're looking at our spiritual forebears, there's a pretty clear pattern of which framework should get that greater claim: the virtues espoused in the person and teachings of Christ.

One of those virtues is the desire to put the needs and comforts of others ahead of our own. Take Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, the Lutheran pastor who was executed in a concentration camp the day before its liberation. He was executed because he was caught in a plot to assassinate Hitler. What's incredible about that crime is that he so deeply believed the seriousness of the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," that he thought he was giving up his eternal soul to save the many who suffered under Hitler's thumb. He's not a Christian hero because he wanted to kill someone; he's a Christian hero because he gave up everything to save the oppressed. Or Oscar Romero, assassinated at the altar after years of demanding the ruling elite answer for atrocities committed against the Salvadoran people. Or Jonathan Daniels, killed by a shop owner for the dual crimes of helping black people register to vote and buying a coke on a hot day. Or Thomas Beckett or Thomas Cranmer or Joan of Arc or the unknown martyrs whose witness flashed in obscurity or the countless others who gave their lives when facing the inevitable clash between man's law and God's and chose God's.

When Peter says Jesus is the Messiah, that cornerstone binds us to Christ in a new way. The world anticipated a savior of sorts, a human being that would free the people from the tyrannical rule of empire. Peter's one of the first to recognize Jesus as the one who will do just that but through self-sacrifice in place of sword and love in place of spear. That's as countercultural as it gets, and the state-sponsored execution of Christ did more to highlight the empire's harsh hypocrisy than to silence his movement. Peter didn't just recognize Jesus for who he was; he lived as closely as he knew how to to the virtues Jesus extolled. And he lived that belief so deeply he was killed for it. But Peter wasn't unique among the Disciples. 10 of the original Disciples were martyred. Paul was, too. And our faith is built on the stones of their sacrifice. They weren't killed because they sought death. They weren't killed because they believed in Jesus. They were killed because they acted like him. They prioritized the "wrong" people, prioritized the "wrong" things, made the wealthy and powerful nervous, swelled the hearts of those bound by injustice, and that instilled courage scared those who stood to lose everything should kindness, empathy, and care take over the world.

Our world requires ethical frameworks to guide how we live alongside other people, and it's such a complicated world, we need lots of ways to weigh what's right. Sometimes the greatest good is hard to measure. Sometimes the law is complex. Sometimes justice requires a perspective we don't have. And sometimes who we are, who we want to be, who we long to be like asks the unfathomable of us. I pray dark days of mass martyrdom don't come, but if they do, I pray we look good on wood.