

Practicing Prudence

Sermon Reprint by Rev. Dr. Tess Baumberger
Unity Church of North Easton, MA
Sermon delivered Sunday, October 26th, 2008

What a difference a few weeks can make. When I first scheduled this sermon on “prudence” for today, it seemed like an old-fashioned notion. I had my doubts. Prudence has come to mean being overly cautious, the prudent person seen as a “stick-in-the-mud.” Was it prudent to preach on prudence?

When I showed the schedule to the Worship Committee in August, they ribbed me about my plan to preach about another old school value, “temperance” in December. They worried that I was going to advocate the abolition of alcohol, as did so many of our religious ancestors. No, not me.

Then came the news of the financial meltdown on Wall Street, and all of a sudden “prudence” has re-entered our national vocabulary. A recent article in the New York Times titled “Dear Prudence” reports how people in England are re-embracing the notion of prudence in their personal lives, and in their life as a nation. I have even heard that word used on National Public Radio by both economists and political analysts. Fancy that!

In just a few weeks the virtue of prudence has gone from being rather passé to being important, once again, in our American consciousness. And I think this is a good thing, given what I have learned about prudence, what it has meant in the past, and the place it has held amongst the virtues.

There’s a bigger picture here. This sermon on “prudence” is part of a larger theme I’d like to explore with you this year - “Virtues and Values for Our Times.” For the past few years, I’ve been experimenting with doing sermon series or having an underlying thread in worship for a whole year.

For my part I enjoy meditating and playing on variations of a theme over longer periods of time. Doing so takes you deeper than you can go in just one sermon. Besides, it has gone over well with lay folks. People have said it builds up a sort of momentum in worship over time.

The best part for me is when it becomes a “conversation” between the people in the pews and me. I like it when people point out things I hadn’t considered, and suggest additional topics or even books that I might read. That’s how I discovered the book “Three Cups of Tea.” This sort of interchange makes the experience richer for everyone involved.

Now these experiments were in my last congregation, and you are your own selves, so your mileage may vary. You may not so much like hearing a sermons series, or the idea of a theme for the year. If you don’t like it please let me know. If you do, let me know that as well. I’m listening.

At any rate, it seems worth a try. Although this is the official “launch” of the series, actually I’ve been talking on this theme already this year. Stealth preaching. For instance, in the past several weeks we have discussed

- the value we have always held for religious education.
- the virtue of remaining calm in this economic crisis.
- the value of developing spiritual practices that feed our souls and take us deeper into connection with something beyond our selves.
- the virtue of being honest about our own part in disagreements, and then mending fences by asking for and granting forgiveness.
- the value of solidarity, pulling together as a religious community by deepening our understanding and appreciation of our movement.
- and lastly we’ve talked about the virtue of generosity, of serving those in even greater need than ourselves.

This week I’d like to turn to the foundation of the values and virtues we’ve already discussed. In the next weeks we’ll explore seven virtues that European and American thinkers have traditionally considered to be core virtues. From there we’ll branch out to consider others.

Three of these core virtues are sometimes called the “three theological virtues.” These are faith, hope, and charity (charity meaning is a special type of love). The other four central virtues in Western thought are sometimes called the cardinal virtues - temperance, prudence, justice and fortitude.

These four have many roots, including the works of the Greek philosopher Plato. Plato’s work “The Republic” relates each virtue to a particular group of people in his imaginary city-state. Temperance (meaning moderation) is a virtue for the producing classes, fortitude for the warriors, and prudence for those who must rule. Justice,

according to Plato, relates to all three classes and determines the relationships between them.

You can also find references to these four core virtues in the Jewish tradition. In a book sometimes called “The Wisdom of Solomon” there is a verse that reads, “She teaches temperance, and prudence, and justice, and fortitude, which are such things as men and women can have nothing more profitable in life.” In this verse, “she” refers to wisdom, which Jewish tradition depicts as female. Of course we all know this because of our lovely “wisdom window,” which features lady wisdom front and center.

Why are these sometimes called the Four Cardinal Virtues? It’s not because they come from Catholicism, nor does it indicate that they were handed down from its cardinals (the next level up from bishops). The word “cardinal” comes from the Latin word *cardo* meaning “hinge” suggesting that our moral lives turn on the hinge of these four virtues. These are the ones we need to develop in order to live by whatever other virtues are important to us, according to ethicist Robin Lovin, author of *An Introduction to Christian Ethics*, the source of today’s reading on prudence.

Prudence plays the key role of governing the other virtues. It helps us find effective ways to enact them given the circumstances. Prudence is considered an “intellectual” virtue. The French philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville, author of *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, defines prudence as “good sense, in the service of goodwill” or as “virtuous intelligence.” There is a sense of deliberating, of weighing matters, and thinking about things in “prudence” that is particular to this virtue.

Comte-Sponville talks about the virtues in general as being the summit between two great chasms that symbolize the vices. This idea in fact goes way back to Aristotle, another Greek philosopher. Being virtuous means walking the narrow path between two vices, not falling into either chasm.

Prudence is the virtue that helps us find the subtle path, the “high road” for each virtue. For example, prudence helps us distinguish the middle way between actions that are reckless and those that are cowardly. In this way prudence governs the virtue of fortitude, helping us choose actions that are bold and courageous and that have a chance of successful outcome.

Prudence tells us the difference between being greedy on the one hand and giving too much away on the other. Thus it helps us find the path of temperance (meaning moderation). Prudence also indicates the right balance between being overly permissive versus being cruel or vindictive, pointing out the way of justice.

Prudence governs virtues like honesty, helping us find the point between telling too much of the truth and too little. Sometimes it is not prudent to tell the whole truth, for instance telling an abusive spouse where to find his or her partner. Honesty is a virtue when governed by prudence.

So what governs prudence? What vices can one fall into on either side of its narrow path? In common usage, “prudence” has come to mean “cautious,” and if over-applied prudence can become the vices of cowardice or extreme risk-avoidance. If under-applied prudence leads us impulsively to take unnecessary and dangerous risks.

Prudence regulates itself by making sure that its decisions are not motivated either by fear or by what some philosophers call the “animal appetites” such as greed. Prudence can find its own middle way by sticking to the facts, remaining calm, applying reason, and resisting temptation.

Another way prudence can go wrong is if it becomes “cunning.” Cunning is a sham of prudence, using “facts” and “reason” to further its own agenda. What prevents prudence from turning into cunning is the theological virtue of love.

Augustine wrote that prudence is “love that chooses with sagacity” (or wisdom). In fact, Augustine says that all virtue can be summed up as “a due ordering of love.” I will be talking more about the vital virtue of love next week.

The word “prudence” comes from the Latin word “prudentia” meaning wisdom. “Prudentia” in turn is a contraction of the word “providentia” which means “to provide” and also “foresight.” Prudence governs decisions related to current practical matters, with charitable concern for the future.

According to Thomas Aquinas, prudence has certain “integral parts.” These include accurate memory of events and the intelligent understanding of basic principles. Prudence calls us to be open-minded to truth that comes from the experience and authority of others, and so it requires some humility. Also in the mix is the ability to size

up a situation quickly when need be, and to research and compare alternatives when there is more time to do so.

Prudence includes the ability to take all the relevant circumstances into account, including possible future effects. We most need prudence when things are uncertain and we need to make concrete decisions that take many particulars into account. In these situations, prudence helps us to apply abstract principles such as truth, kindness, and goodness in concrete ways.

Knowing some of the history of thought on the virtue of prudence, perhaps you can see why I think it is an especially important virtue to cultivate in our times. In our world right now we are now suffering from the imprudence, perhaps even the “cunning” of past choices. The suffering is real, and a circumstance to take to heart as we deliberate how to proceed.

The virtue of prudence, this “habit of the mind, heart and the hands” is one that can help us discern how we can protect the most vulnerable without making them dependent on our support. Prudence can also help us make the good choices we will need to make to rebuild the common good in our nation.

Of course prudence is an important virtue we must exercise in our nation, on such a grand level. However, it can also help us in our church life, and in our lives as individuals. The more we cultivate and exercise prudence, the more we will become people that others will recognize as prudent.

The great thinkers of yesteryear said that virtue is a habit, an acquired and lasting way of being. Aristotle said that a virtue is “an acquired disposition to do what is good.” Virtues, true virtues, are habits of both heart and hand, habits of lives lived in real terms.

There may be some virtue in thinking and talking about what is good, but not very much. The real virtue lies in actually doing what is good, acquiring the habit, day by day. The greats consider virtue to be what we are, and what we are is what we have become. We become virtuous people by practicing the virtues, making a habit of living that way.

Prudence can help us to do this because an important part of this virtue is “command,” the direct application of good counsel and good judgment. Catholic theologian Douglas McManaman points out that, “it cannot be said that one who takes

good counsel and judges well, but fails to act, is a prudent man.” Prudence must be practiced.

This is why I’d like to encourage you to join me in keeping a “virtue journal” this year. It could be a little notebook that you carry around with you in order to note down instances of virtuous acts you witness in others, or that you take yourself. But remember the humility thing.

This week you might particularly take note of prudent decisions, or encounters with people you recognize as prudent. We learn from example, so it might be a good idea to write in a virtue journal about people you admire who live the values and virtues we are discussing. Who do you regard as prudent? What are some prudent decisions you made? How did you make them?

If you would like to share your notes, thoughts, and heroes please let me know. It would be nice to hear what you have to say on the subject during a “View from the Pew,” so those segments become more than in depth announcements.

Wouldn’t it be great to share with each other our successes and stumbling blocks in seeking to live these virtues? If it makes your knees knock to think about saying it in worship, join a small group. I’m sure there will be chances to discuss these issues in smaller settings as well.

By meditating on, discussing, and practicing virtues like prudence, we can find ways to enact the love we have for one another, our concern for the common good. We can find concrete ways to show kindness that work in the long run, showing the world that acts of kindness are both wise and worthy. So may it be.