

## **“The Road Back to You: Right, Wrong and Everything in Between”**

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Rev. Dr. R. Scott Colglazier  
Senior Minister

First Congregational Church  
Los Angeles, CA

*There's a poem by Stephen Crane that goes something like this. He said, "I went to the top of the mountain and I wanted to see black and white . . . and all I could see was grey."*

*Do you ever feel like that? That what you would like to see is black or white, right or wrong, true or false? I don't know about you, but I sometimes find myself desperate for a little certainty.*

*I wonder what would happen today if we could go around the church this morning and ask a few questions. How would you answer the following: Is it right or wrong to tell the truth? Is it right or wrong to be honest? Is it right or wrong to be forthright when someone asks you a simple question? These might sound like simple questions, but under the surface there sizzles a world of complexity.*

*What if telling the truth will make you look bad? What if it will hurt your image or give someone power over you? What if telling the truth will hurt another person's feelings? I'm talking about a spouse or a child or a good friend. What if your spouse comes home from the hair salon or barbershop . . . and they ask . . . "How do you like my haircut?" How do you answer that? Be careful.*

*Be careful. Or what if . . . what if a spouse asks . . . "Does this dress make me look fat?" Oh my . . . dear friends . . . I implore you . . . with all the pastoral wisdom I can muster . . . do NOT answer that question! Honesty aside, do not answer that question.*

*Right. Wrong. And everything in between.*

*Today is Father's Day. I'm thinking of my father today, as I know many of you are thinking of your fathers. I'm missing my father today. But if I could go and see my father this afternoon, seeing him at the nursing home where he is now living in Indianapolis, he would not know me. He did not know me last summer. He would not know me today.*

*That's a real moment in life. He does not know me. He's comfortable. He's not suffering. He still more or less looks like my father. But there is an essential part of him that is now gone. Is it right to keep him going along like this? Is it wrong to continue to use resources to keep him living, even though his life with friends and family is all but over? These are hard questions. They are real questions. And these questions only intensify as the years go by. I'm talking about right. Wrong. And everything in between.*

*I think about this reading from the Gospel of Matthew, and Jesus is portrayed offering a simple view of life. If you build a life on his words and teachings, your life will be good. Like building a house on a strong foundation. But if you don't follow his words and teachings, your life will not be good. It will be like building a house on the sand, and a storm will easily knock it down. For Jesus it was simple. Wise. Foolish. Right. Wrong. But is Jesus being simple or is he being simplistic?*

*Have you read the Book of Job? Job was a righteous man. A man who followed the word of God. Yet it was all taken away from him. His entire life destroyed. Maybe it's not so simple, Jesus. Job is a meditation on the complexity of right and wrong.*

*Even Jesus had moments when he redefined right and wrong. For example, he picked grain and ate on the Sabbath day. People pointed their finger and said, “No. No. No. It’s wrong to do work on the Sabbath!” But Jesus was after a deeper truth. He said, I’m paraphrasing now, but he said: “I get what you’re saying about not doing work on the Sabbath, but if people are hungry, if people need food, isn’t that more important to God than your simple black and white rule about the Sabbath?”*

*Jesus seems to be after a deeper experience than simple black or white, right or wrong. William Sloane Coffin was the greatest preacher in the 20th century, and he did so much throughout his life to share the message of Christ with our nation. Truly, he was amazing. Yet his son, Alex, was killed in a terrible automobile accident. It devastated his family. It devastated Bill Coffin the preacher and prophet and father.*

*How do you explain that? Wasn’t Bill Coffin building his life on the rock of God? Not only had he built his life on the foundation of God, he inspired other people to do it too. The same could be said for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He led America through a critical transformation regarding civil rights. He was dedicated. He loved God. He loved the Church. He loved his family. But Dr. King was assassinated on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, and he left behind four young children and a beautiful young widow. Did he not build his life on the rock of God and teachings of Jesus Christ?*

*Right. Wrong. And everything in between. I’ve had to do some soul searching on this sermon and I want to share with you what makes sense to me . . . I still believe in right and wrong, but right and wrong is much more nuanced at this point in my life. In other words, right and wrong might be simple, but it can’t be simplistic. What I am after in life is not merely the black and white facts, but I am after the experience of truthfulness.*

*Feeding the hungry on the Sabbath day might technically violate the rules of God, that is to say, it was wrong. But feeding the hungry on the Sabbath moves a person into the territory of human truthfulness. There is right and wrong, but there is also the deeper spirit of right and wrong, and it’s the deeper spirit that I’m trying to discover.*

*The poet Rumi once wrote: “Out beyond wrong doing and right doing, there is a field. I will meet you there.” That’s what I’m trying to understand now in my life. Psychologists who understand moral development talk about the process of “universalizing” human values. That is to say, instead of getting stuck in a “yes or no” world, we begin to synthesize or universalize our values, and it also means that we begin creating personal values that really belong to us.*

*Here’s what I mean . . . I believe treating someone with respect is right. That it is the right thing to do. It’s a value. I see that as part of the teachings of Jesus. My parents taught this value to me, too. I think life goes better when we treat one another with respect. When I can offer someone respect, it resonates with a deep sense of truthfulness within me.*

*With some people it is easy. With some people it is not so easy. But even though it’s difficult, I still think it is the right thing to do. That’s especially true with people who see the world differently. And so respect is a principle that I think is right, but the challenge is how to apply the principle of respect to everyday life?*

*It's one thing to treat another person with respect, but what do you do when a person tries to take advantage of you? What do you do when someone tries to bully you and run over you? What do you do when a person is abusive to you? The ancient rabbi, Hillel, once put it like this: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what have I become?" That's the creative tension.*

*And so while I believe the principle of respect is right, and God knows we need more of it in our society, I also believe that it has to be applied in a way that makes sense.*

*The same is true for compassion. Compassion is a value for me. I think it is right. It is part of my Christian faith. Again, when I offer compassion to another human being it feels deeply truthful. That means I try to bring grace and mercy to the world. It's part of the foundation of my life. I try to bring inspiration and genuine feeling to others. That's part of my Christian faith. It's the right thing to do.*

*But what do you do when you have a child that is hell-bent on self-destruction? How much money do you give that child, even when that child is making terrible financial decisions? How many times do you let a child borrow your car to go out on the weekend, even after you discover he or she has been drinking and driving? How do you have compassion for a church member, a church member who has become a real destructive influence in the life of a congregation? My compassion wants to say yes and help and be encouraging. That is always a big YES for me. But are there limits? Don't you have to apply compassion in a way that makes sense?*

*I would add to this list the word integrity. Having personal integrity is a value for me. I know it is a value for you too. Integrity means that you follow your conscience and you will do what is right, even though it is not easy. But what do you do when someone disagrees with your integrity? What if your boss asks you do something for the company, but you know it is wrong? What if your boss asks you to fudge on a financial report? What do you do if you're in relationship, but that person wants you to be something you are not?*

*The investigation for Watergate started 45 years ago this week, and even though I was young, what I saw was that Republicans and Democrats practiced political integrity. Not partisan politics, but integrity with regard to a presidency gone very very wrong. Integrity, like respect, like compassion, is a value but how you apply them requires some real wisdom.*

*And so what I would suggest today is that you might want to think about your own life in terms of core values. Compassion is a core value. Respect is a core value. Integrity is a core value. And there are many more words I could use. Last week I talked about core wounds. And the more we understand our core wounds, the better our chances of coming home to ourselves in a holistic way. But the same is true of our core values. The more clarity we have around these values, the better our chances of living whole lives.*

*Let me end this morning with an Oprah story. I am a fan of Oprah Winfrey. So talented. And so generous toward the world. But Oprah does something every year that I find inspiring. She takes a little time and writes for herself – not for publication – but for her own thoughts under the title – *What I Still Believe*. She does it every single year. It's her personal statement of values. I love it. And I'm wondering if maybe this summer it could become a good exercise for each of us . . . What are your core values?*

*Not a clichéd list of what we think is right or wrong, but I'm talking about the deeper experiences of truthfulness that we want to discover each day.*

*Friends, we can't find our way home unless we face a few of our core wounds. And we can't find our way home unless we embrace some of our core values. That's what this summer is about at First Church this year . . . God inviting you home to you. I love you all. Amen.*