

“CHARACTER COUNTS!” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, October 22, 2017

Did you know that this past week was National Character Counts Week? Frankly, I almost missed it. Fortunately, I heard it mentioned mid-week on the radio as I was driving to visit some of our church members. Apparently, Character Counts Week was first launched at least a quarter of a century ago. It’s usually scheduled for the third week in October. The week is intended to promote citizenship, responsibility, fairness, trustworthiness, and respect, among other things. An official non-profit website recommends a wide variety of character-building activities for children and youth. One American president after another has endorsed Character Counts Week with an official White House proclamation. President Trump signed such a proclamation and endorsement a week ago Friday.

This latest White House proclamation talks in a helpful way about character. Indeed, it has some very good things to say. Permit me to quote from it at some length:

“Character is built slowly. Our actions – often done first out of duty – become habits ingrained in the way we treat others and ourselves. As parents, educators, and civic and church leaders, we must always work to cultivate strength of character in our nation’s youth.”

“Character can be hard to define, but we see it in everyday acts – raising and providing for a family with loving devotion, working hard to make the most of an education, and giving back to devastated communities. These and so many other acts, big and small, constitute the moral fiber of American culture. Character is forged around kitchen tables, built in civic organizations, and developed in houses of worship. It is refined by her choices, large and small, and manifested in what we do when we think no one is paying attention.”

The presidential proclamation then continues:

“As we strive every day to improve our character and that of our nation, we pause and thank those individuals whose strength of character has inspired us and who have provided a supporting hand during times of need. In particular, we applaud families as they perform the often thankless task of raising men and women of character.”

Congregation, I’m not sure that raising men and women of character should be called a “thankless task.” But the rest of the presidential proclamation sure resonates with me. It’s a message to be heard and heeded.

By my sights our big problem today is that we have too many characters and not enough men and women of character. I mean, good moral character. There are even fewer folks who have solid moral character *informed by Christian values which reflect what Jesus taught all the way to the cross.*

The Reverend Martin Luther King once prayed that the day would come in America when individuals would be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. He would be shocked and dismayed if he came back today. Not only are people still judged by their skin color but more than ever by their wealth, possessions, power and position. Our culture is swamped by greed and materialism. Morality and faith have taken a big hit. Sadder still, people boast about being more naughty than nice.

Just in time for Christmas, for instance, there's a new movie coming out called "Mean Moms." It's all supposed to be in jest, but it glorifies what shouldn't be and further desensitizes us to outrageous behavior. Not be left out, dads, have on current television the example of a cool dude in his beautiful *Infiniti* car bopping to a rapster "Baddest Man Alive" song on his way to pick up his daughter and friends from a pool party. I've said it before and I'll say it again: that ad gives me the creeps. I wouldn't want the "Baddest Man Alive" driving my daughter anywhere. Would you?

Our *mainstream* media has become subversive, giving the general public license to trash talk and do all kinds of mean, perverse, and crazy things. Courtesy and civility are constantly sacrificed on the high altar of making a spectacle and profit. Honesty is also a casualty. Under the circumstances no one knows who to trust anymore.

Unfortunately, folks seem so enthralled and caught up in the whirlwind of greed, spectacle, and entertainment that many don't have much, if any, time for church anymore where there's a weekly reminder that we are all meant to live a very different way. That way is beautifully expressed by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount found in the Gospel according to Mathew. (*Matthew 5*)

You remember, don't you, what Jesus says to us from the Mount? Blessed by God are the meek, humble, and unselfish, as well as those persecuted for righteousness' sake. Jesus then goes on to add that God wants us all to be a people who share and forgive, loving our enemies and renouncing violence. A little later in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus declares that every word we speak matters because it reflects and reinforces what's in our hearts and minds. As Jesus explains it metaphorically: "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit." Jesus then adds: "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of

judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted and by your words you will be condemned.” (*Matthew 12:33-37*)

In our morning epistle lessons we hear how the Apostle Paul takes it from there. In his Letter to the Colossians, true to Jesus, he offers this advice to all who would call themselves Christians:

“Put on then, is God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has complained against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony, and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.” (*Colossians 3:12-15*) Our great goal is to build Christian character, so that our lives honor the example of Jesus. Paul encourages us as a faithful people to see life’s adversity in a positive light because it tests us and shows us those weak points we need to work on as we strive to be more like Christ. (*Romans 5:3-5*)

In a literal sense, the very word *character* means a distinctive mark, impressed or engraved on an object, that represents or stands for something. Accordingly, the letters of our alphabets are called characters. So are numbers. But in a wider definition we can be said to *have character* when we stand for something and values are deeply engraved or engrained in us.

True Christians have character because they stand for what Jesus taught. In keeping with Jesus, there should be congruence between what we say and what we do. In other words, integrity is our watchword. Having Christian character more specifically means being honest, credible, reliable, and trustworthy, as well as kind, compassionate, forgiving, and generous.

Significantly, one of the larger motives for the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s was building up Christian character within the church overall. The great Protestant reformer Martin Luther was concerned that the church had focused too narrowly on cultivating the character of a few monks and nuns rather than God’s people at large. Instead of being morally uplifted, the majority of Christians were simply having their sins excused and dismissed on their weekly visits to the confessional boxes then found in every church. Even though Luther believed that salvation to eternal life is by grace alone because we could never come close to moral perfection, he called upon us to do our best out of thanks to God for his saving grace. He also wanted us to read our Bibles so that we would have a better grasp the kind of people that God wants to be as disciples of his son, Jesus.

Other Protestant reformers were even more adamant about the high moral standards that our daily lives should reflect. Moral character mattered then. It matters still.

One of my favorite theologians is Stanley Hauerwas who writes extensively on Christian faith and character. Hauerwas believes that we need to think of our churches as centers for character building where we, through mutual reflection and conversation, encourage one another to be more like Christ in every way.

Yes, Christ is our model. Our goal as Christians is to have his way of love, justice, forgiveness, and truthfulness stamped upon our very soul and being so that we become, if you will, characters of Christ—i.e., Jesus’s representatives in this world.

I think National Character Counts Week is a beautiful thought. At the same time it can easily end up as an empty gesture. Our present and future as a nation and people will continue to be troubled if we have forgotten what character is really about or our concept of character is not anchored to the kind of deeper and more demanding values that Jesus expected of us.

How would someone characterize you? What is the content of your character? Are you known for your kindness, humility, forgiveness, peacefulness and honesty? (*Colossians 3:12-15*). These are the virtues that we each need to cultivate today as thanks for everything which God daily does for us. May we each seek to show character, rather than just being a character. **Amen.**