

ALL THE WAY TO ABILENE

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols to Channing Memorial Church of Newport on October 2, 2011

This story took place some time ago. They were sitting on the porch in Coleman Texas. The temperature was 104 degrees, but the porch was shaded, and everyone was comfortable. Then, Jerry Harvey's father-in-law said, "Let's get in the car and go to Abilene and have dinner at the cafeteria." In the back of Jerry's mind a little voice said, "This is nuts. I don't want to travel 53 miles in the heat of summer in a 1958 Buick to have dinner in a lousy cafeteria." But he didn't say that.

But Jerry's wife said, "It sounds like a great idea." And Jerry heard himself saying, "Sounds good to me. I hope your mother wants to go," (hoping she didn't). And Jerry's mother said, "Of course I want to go." Four hours and 106 miles later, they returned. The heat had been brutal. Perspiration and dust stuck to their clothing and bodies. The food, as Jerry guessed, had been awful.

Later that evening Jerry said, quite dishonestly, "It was a great trip wasn't it." Nobody spoke. Finally, his mother in law said, "To tell the truth, I really didn't enjoy it much. I would rather have stayed home, and I wouldn't have gone at all if you hadn't pressured me into it." To which Jerry responded, "I didn't pressure you. I was happy here. I only went to make the rest of you happy." His wife said, "You and Dad and Mamma were the ones who wanted to go. I just wanted to make you happy." And his father in law said, "I never wanted to go to Abilene. I just thought you might be bored sitting at home with the rest of us."

So, they all made a 106 mile round trip in the God forsaken desert under furnace like conditions to eat unpalatable food in a dingy cafeteria, a trip nobody had been looking forward to and nobody wanted to take. Has this ever happened to you? Have you been part of a group, which took a trip, or accepted a commitment or worked on a project or made a decision that, as it finally turned out, nobody had really wanted?

Our storyteller, Jerry Harvey, is a real person, who is an organizational consultant. He calls this the "Abilene Paradox," which means that two statements stand in apparent conflict, and yet they exist together as true. Statement # 1. Nobody wants to go to Abilene. Statement # 2. They all agree to go to Abilene.

In a world where people think independently and express themselves freely, they would not go to Abilene. There would be no paradox between #1 and #2. That, alas, is not our world. Often it isn't even the world of our most intimate

relationships. But perhaps more often than not it should be. We waste far too much time and energy on trips to Abilene.

I suppose we have three reasons for doing this. The first is our sense of loyalty to other people and our appreciation for their loyalty to us sometimes encourages us to follow them along the road to Abilene despite our best judgments to the contrary. The decision of whether or not to question the direction that good friends have decided to take is always very difficult. We should cherish and we do cherish our friends.

But blind loyalty does not serve anyone's best interests. As we learned from a well remembered children's story, the emperor's close advisors, who kept praising the quality of his new wardrobe, did not prevent most of his subjects from recognizing that he was naked. Of course we don't always tell the emperor he's naked. We stifle our thoughts on a host of bad habits our friends have, because we do not want to hurt their feelings. But when the emperor is trotting out publicly in the buff, true loyalty sometimes requires a little painful honesty.

During the Watergate hearings, Nixon staff members kept insisting that they had always been against the plan to bug the Democratic National headquarters. Finally Howard Baker questioned Jeb Magruder as to why, if everyone had reservations, they went ahead with a stupid plan that had disastrous consequences. Magruder responded, "I am sure if I had fought vigorously against it, I think any of us could have had that plan canceled." And they would have saved the nation not only a constitutional crisis, but a psychological crisis which continued for many years. But they did not want to lose face with one another or to lose the President's good regard.

The second reason people take the trip to Abilene is that it is just easier to do what everyone else seems to be doing. It is easier to go with the tried and tested, rather than to step out on new ground. I know there are exceptions among us, but most people don't arise in the morning eager to take on the strange and the unfamiliar. When we sit on the edge of the bed and clear the sleep from our eyes, most of us feel best when we know precisely what we need to do in order to get through the day.

The third reason people too often make the trip to Abilene is that it is really hard even to risk separating ourselves from the casual company of others be they friends or just people we know. We need other people so much that we are likely to cling to the most superficial, boring and even humiliating relationships – because they are company – rather than to seek out honest relationships though they may be far fewer and less easy to come by.

We could also look at the story of Abraham and Isaac as an example of why people sometimes take the road to Abilene. Abraham hears a voice identifying itself as God, and the voice asks him to take his only son to the top of

a mountain to be sacrificed. This was no small sacrifice. Abraham and Sarah were 100 and 90 years old respectively when Isaac was born. They had waited a long time, and when he was born they were so surprised and happy that they named him "Isaac" which meant laughter.

You would think Abraham would do anything to avoid obeying this order, but Abraham was lonely. He wanted approval. He thought this was required for him to be a team player. He would do anything for the appearance of acceptance, even though it meant giving up what was of greatest importance to him and Sarah. So he bundled the kid up and took him to the appointed mountain. He built a sacrificial pyre, and took out his knife for the sacrifice. Only at this moment did an angel of God appear and tell him that he had passed his loyalty test. Further sacrifice would not be necessary.

What if we were to rewrite that story with Abraham as a man with a greater sense of what therapists call self-differentiation? In this version Abraham still loves God, but has a healthy respect for his own unanswered questions. In this version, rewritten by Jerry Harvey, God speaks to Abraham and says, "I want you to take Isaac up to the top of the mountain and sacrifice him." And Abraham replies, "God?" God says, "Yes, Abraham, my beloved son." And Abraham says, "You must be kidding God. Look! I got a phone call on the other line. I'll get right back to you."

Then Abraham calls Sarah and says, "Sarah, go hide the kid with the neighbors. I think God's on a bender again. He keeps talking about wanting to fire Isaac, plus the usual stuff about if you're really loyal to me, if you're a team player. I think I can talk him out of it, but in the mean time don't take any calls or answer the door."

About an hour and a half later, God calls back. "Abraham, my beloved son, I want you to show your loyalty to me by taking Isaac up to a mountain which I will show you, and make of him a burnt offering to me." And Abraham responds, "If you want Isaac killed you'll have to do it yourself. I love him dearly and know I don't have the power to stop you if you really want to kill him. But I don't think you will. I don't think you are that unfair. I love you too, but not enough to do something crazy."

God says, "Do you have faith in me, Abraham?" And Abraham responds, "I have faith enough to argue with you, but do not have enough faith to deny the wisdom and integrity you have given me." And there in a nutshell is the answer that needs to come to mind more often. I will be your friend. I will be your loyal spouse. I will be your faithful employee. I will be your partner. I have faith in your leadership, but not enough faith to deny the wisdom and the integrity that God has given me."

Abraham, in this apocryphal Old Testament story, makes his declaration only after he is asked to offer the ultimate sacrifice. The accommodations we make with most other people are not that severe, but they do accumulate. Bit by bit when people consistently act against their better judgments because they are concerned with taking risks or losing friendships they reach the point at which they sacrifice the child that is their own integrity on the Altar of Going Along to get Along.

I have to say this has been a particular concern in every liberal religious congregation I have served. We place a high value on being tolerant and accepting. That feels good for a while. Then many people reach the point at which they wonder what kind of speech or behavior or attitude is unacceptable in a liberal religious congregation or is even rudeness acceptable because we are afraid to name it. The thought that rude or otherwise offensive behavior would be tolerated because everyone is afraid to name it is scary.

When I suggest that people speak out I do not want to be heard as advocating strident individualism. Some individualists are only arrested adolescents who cannot or will not listen to or learn from other people. A well-integrated person is not someone who shouts “me” all the time, but someone who can take in all of the factors in a situation and many other points of view and then make an independent response.

Many of us were raised with the rugged individualist as our hero, then in adult life we discovered the costs one had to pay. Those who were brought up on television westerns will remember this scene vividly from the program “Gunsmoke.” A stranger comes into Dodge City, and within hours he is unjustly accused of stealing something. Marshall Matt Dillon arrests him and throws him into jail. Dillon assures him that he will have a fair trial when the judge returns from a meeting in Pecos.

That night at the Long Branch Saloon a mob forms. Somebody says, “We’ve got that sucker dead to rights. Let’s go hang him.” Pretty soon 500 drunk and disorderly cowboys are outside of the jail and they have brought a rope. Matt Dillon steps calmly out onto the porch. He lifts the brim of his hat and says, “Howdy.” Someone in the crowd yells, “You know why we’re here Marshall. We don’t want any trouble. Just step aside and let us come in.” Dillon points to his star and says, “There ain’t going to be a hanging in this town tonight, gents. So, why don’t you just go back to the Long Branch.”

Somebody from the crowd says, “We’re coming through Marshall. And Dillon pulls out his gun. “You see that line in the sand gents.” “Yeah, we see it Marshall.” “The first gent over that line gets his head blown off.” Now this is a moment of dramatic tension. Will five hundred drunks move forward at once, since the odds are that only one will be shot before the marshal is overwhelmed? But Dillon has guessed something about crowd psychology. It is that none of

them really wanted to lead this mob anyway. By daring any one of them to be the first he effectively defuses all of their energy.

One heroic individual defeats the mob. That's a scenario many of us wrestled with at some point in our lives. But we've lived long enough to see that only rarely does it actually work that way. Let's replay that scenario again but a little differently this time. Another stranger comes into Dodge City, is unjustly accused and is locked up. The judge has not yet returned from Pecos City.

That night another unruly crowd gathers. They have a rope. Miss Kitty goes inside the jail with a cup of coffee for the marshal and she says, "Matt, there's another mob out in front of the jail." Dillon says, "Don't worry, Miss Kitty, I'll just go out and make that stupid speech again, and then we'll all go down to the Long Branch for a drink."

He steps out on the porch. "Howdy." "You know why we're here, Marshall. Don't try to stop us this time." Dillon pulls out his gun and is about to make the usual speech when a shot rings out and Dillon falls over. Miss Kitty rushes over to hear his dying words, which are, "I misperceived the risk."

What is the risk? We could be right in an unpopular losing cause and plainly suffer the consequences. Or we could be right, but in such a trivial losing battle that our opposition loses us points with others, points that we might more wisely have saved for a more important issue. Or, we could be so hooked by the heady wine of our individualism we fail to recognize that we are just wrong. We need to choose our battles. There are risks to taking stands.

Some of us are greater risk takers than others, but all of us need to hold onto a quality that requires some risks. That quality is called integrity. This means making decisions out of a core of experience and values that is one's own. Integrity means that we speak our own truth. We do not come at that truth carelessly or lightly. We do not shout it so loudly that others can't be heard. We do not go away and brood when the majority does things differently. We don't always have to win.

What is integrity? It is easier to find out what it is not. For a brief period of time try agreeing with everyone who speaks to you. Do not process what they say. Do not turn it over in your mind. Do not consider alternatives. Just agree with it. Keep that up long enough and see how it feels to have lost your integrity.

Integrity is the ability to be honest and consistent about who you are. It is the ability to speak out of that central core which is what you have learned from the world and from yourself. It is the only reason we do not always take that trip to Abilene, and it is worth the risks we take to keep it.

