

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

A Prayer of Confidence

Psalm 4 • Confirmation Sunday

The sacrament of baptism marks a new beginning. When you are baptized, whether as infants, young adults or older folk, you're baptized into a community of faith, a community called by God to live in accord with God's commands. The young people being baptized today are responding to God's call to be disciples of Jesus Christ. They are well practiced at being disciples. They've spent most of their lives to date learning. A disciple is very simply a student, an intern, one who serves a master teacher and learns from him by doing what he says and following his way of life. The Spirit of God has claimed each one of you for God's own possession and now seals that claim with a splash of water and a blessing. Today marks a new beginning in your pilgrimage of faith. You are set apart by God to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, to learn from him and to follow his teaching, his way of life.

So what do you do when the society encourages behavior that runs contrary to what Jesus teaches? How do you respond when your friends, acquaintances or co-workers suggest that it's really OK to do something you think is not Jesus' way? I suspect each one in this room, young or old, has experienced that. You know very well that if you refuse you will pay a price. Peer pressure is a powerful force in our lives. And I'm not talking just to the young. Peer pressure is something we all experience from time to time. It doesn't matter if you are a politician, a beauty pageant contestant, a CIA agent, a school teacher or a department store clerk, there will be times when you are encouraged to go against the very principles you believe Christ has called you to embrace. In short there will be times when you are asked to do what Jesus would never do. When that happens, what do you do?

I remember as a cadet at the Air Force Academy being taught to obey orders. I was also taught not to obey orders that I considered illegal. What was the difference between a legal order and an illegal one? Actually it wasn't all that clear. It was up to each individual to decide. No, that is not nearly as anarchic as it seems. For the most part, of course, I believed my commanders would not issue illegal orders. Even so, I knew that if I were ordered to do something that I thought was illegal I was to question the order, to seek to gain a retraction of that order, but in no case was I to obey that order. I also understood that there was a price to be paid for disobedience, even disobeying an order that I thought was illegal. I would likely be disciplined; nevertheless, I was honor-bound not to obey an order that I thought was illegal.

I couldn't help but think of that as I read this psalm. I have no idea what the situation was that prompted the psalmist to pray this prayer. But you can almost see him standing in the temple, which in this case appears to double as the courtroom. First he appeals to God to be gracious. Then he turns to his accusers and attempted to dissuade them from their accusations. It's as if he invites his peers to recognize that they were wrong to accuse him, that they were wrong to put him down for refusing to violate his principles. He is, in fact, inviting them to change their ways, to join him in right relationship with God. Listen, he says, when you are angry or envious or upset, do not sin. Instead stop and think, put your trust in God and proceed.

Who knows what they had said about him, how they had dragged his honor down. Who knows if they had wanted him to do something he thought was wrong. Or perhaps they merely were critical of him for being a faithful servant of God. Maybe they were co-workers who wanted him to alter a time-sheet so they could be paid more. Maybe they were friends who wanted her to send them a compromising picture by phone. Maybe they were neighbors who wanted his support in opposing the sale of a house to a minority. Maybe they were classmates who wanted her to filch some alcohol or drugs from her parents' cupboard. It could be any number of things they were asking him to do. And each of you, if you have not yet faced such a temptation, you will likely do so someday.

So what do you do? Where do you get the strength to say no, to maintain your integrity? Where do you turn when it seems the world is aligned against you? And if it's not the world, it's everybody you work with or go to school with or know. Sometimes it seems you are the only one who sees clearly the right course of action. How is it that you know what is right and what is wrong? How can you be so confident that what you believe is right? And where do you get the strength to do the right thing?

The psalmist points to God as the source of his strength. And God is gracious, giving him room to discern, to pray, yes even to make a mistake. But God also comforts the psalmist, putting gladness in his heart. Note that his gladness, his happiness, is not linked to external factors, but to his right relationship with God. It's as if he were saying to his friends, I don't need to please you. I don't need to do what you do. I need to please God, to serve him alone. Others might pray to God for signs of good favor, for a good crop, or for much wine. But not the psalmist. No. He gives thanks to God for granting him peace, for filling his heart with joy in serving God.

So many people today are not content with their relationship with God. They always want more. More money. More success. More fame. Some people are not content to live within the boundaries of a right relationship with God. But God blesses us with all we need, enough that we can sleep well at night, knowing that we have been set right with God, and that in Christ, God has claimed us for his own. Serve God in all that you do. And be confident that God hears your prayers and blesses you every day.