

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday, 19 August 2018

“Divine Wisdom from a Mahatma”

Hebrew Scripture: I Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14
Christian Scripture: Ephesians 5:15-20

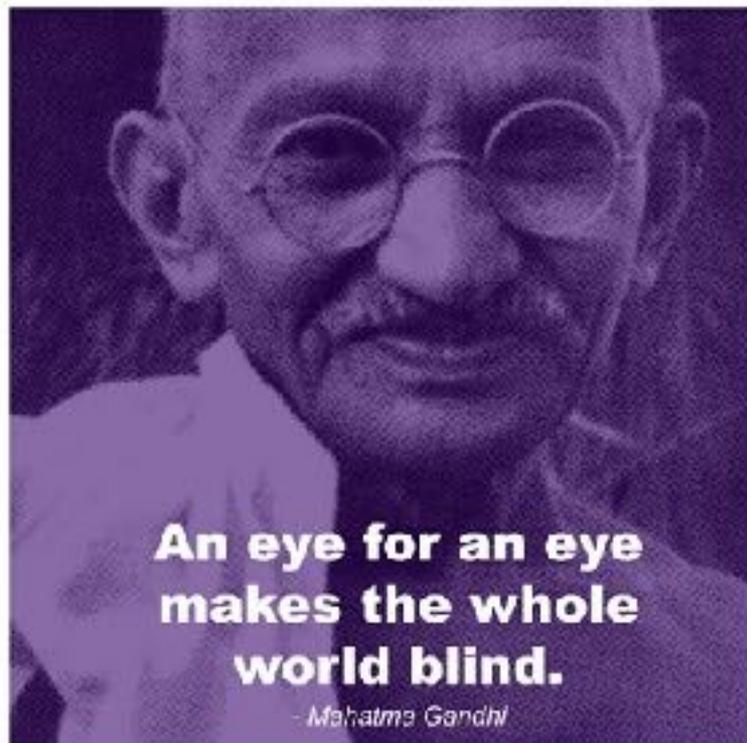
Gandhi established an ashram and built a home in what is known as Phoenix, South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century. One of the wonderful things I miss about living in South Africa is that I resided only seven kilometers from this home. Next year, 2019, will be the one-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Gandhi’s birth.¹ I have always been a great admirer of Gandhi, though he was not without his faults.² I once briefly assisted Pulitzer Prize winning Joseph Lelyveld research a quite a controversial book on Gandhi’s life in South Africa.³

¹ In 1869, Gandhi was born.

² Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed were colleagues of mine in South Africa. Together, they wrote *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* (Stanford, California:Stanford University Press, 2016). This book focuses on Gandhi’s first leadership experiences and the complicated man they reveal—a man who actually supported the British Empire. Desai and Vahed unveil a man who, throughout his stay on African soil, stayed true to Empire while showing a disdain for Africans. For Gandhi, whites and Indians were bonded by an Aryan bloodline that had no place for the African. Gandhi’s racism was matched by his class prejudice towards the Indian indentured. He persistently claimed that they were ignorant and needed his leadership, and he wrote their resistances and compromises in surviving a brutal labor regime out of history. *The South African Gandhi* writes the indentured and working class back into history.

³ *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India* is a 2011 biography of Indian political and spiritual leader Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi written by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Joseph Lelyveld and published by Alfred A Knopf.

Though all of my worldly belongings were stored and shipped clear across the Atlantic, amazingly only one thing was broken: my framed image of Gandhi. On arrival, I immediately had it repaired at Zephyrs. Here it is this morning!



Often considered a saint, few give credit to Gandhi for having a sense of humor. Gandhi once said, “If I did not have a sense of humor, I would have long ago committed suicide”.⁴ Once a reporter asked Gandhi, “Why do you always travel third class on the train?” Gandhi, wryly replied, “I supposed it is because there is not a

⁴ Kunal Dutt, “Gandhi, the Man with a Great Sense of Humour”, *Outlook*, 2 October 2014.

fourth class as yet”.⁵ On another occasion, a reporter asked the minimally dressed Gandhi, “Do you think you are appropriately dressed to meet the King?” Gandhi replied, “Don’t worry about my clothes. The king has enough clothes for the both of us”.⁶ What is rich about Gandhi’s humor is, I think, that it includes much wisdom.

In our scripture reading today, we hear of one of our faith ancestors, Solomon. The author of I Kings rather idealistically portrayed Solomon magnanimously praying for wisdom after inheriting the throne from his father, King David. In return for his magnanimity, God grants Solomon wisdom - as well as riches and honor. Historians might do well to point-out that the prosperity of David and Solomon were not necessarily a result of divine approval. All their gold and riches had more to do with military conquests, force of arms, rather than God’s blessings. In fact, Solomon may not have been so wise. Why? Chapter eleven is entitled “Solomon’s Errors”.⁷ Be that as it may, Solomon prayed to God for wisdom and the narrative tells us that he received it in abundance.

Throughout history, many have provided us wisdom. Gandhi is only one of many relatively recent sources of wisdom. I chose him

⁵ Dutt, “Gandhi, the man with a Great Sense of Humor”, *Outlook*, 2 October 2014.

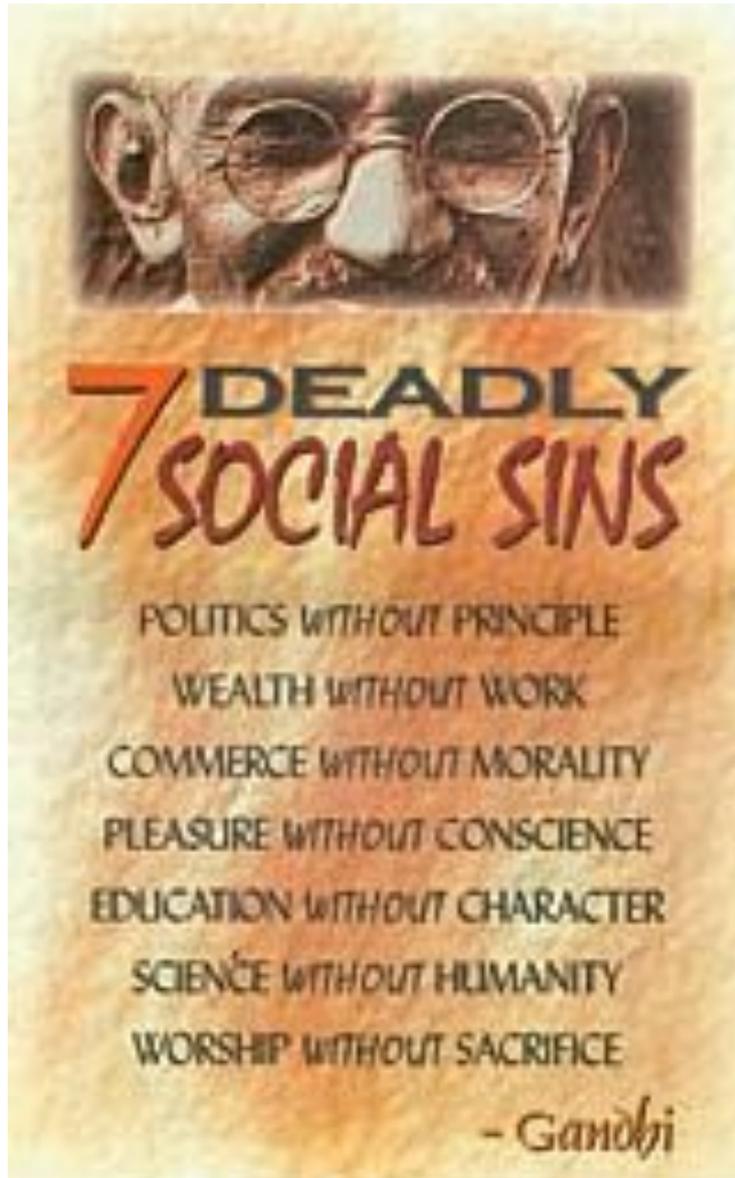
⁶ Dutt, “Gandhi, the man with a Great Sense of Humor”, *Outlook*, 2 October 2014.

⁷ NRSV.

this morning only because I unwrapped his shipped image last week, found it broken, had it repaired last week, and will hang it in my office after this service.

While Gandhi was not perfect, and while the claim that he was a saint is arguable, Gandhi is considered one of the greatest moral leaders of the twentieth century. Neither was Gandhi a practicing Christian. Yet, at one time he considered converting.⁸ Rather, he was a Hindu with a strong interfaith perspective, almost a Unitarian-Universalist. In short, Christianity influenced much of Gandhi's thinking, arguably more so than it does most Christians.

⁸ He once said, "If it weren't for Christians, I'd be a Christian?" and "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians".



Let us examine Gandhi's wisdom found in what is often referred to as the 'Seven Social Sins'. While Gandhi published this same list in a weekly newspaper in 1925 and while he also inscribed it on a note to his grandson in their final day together before his assassination, he was not the originator of this wisdom.⁹ The credit

⁹ Interestingly, Gandhi's grandson added an eighth sin: "Rights without Responsibilities".

should go to Frederick Lewis Donaldson who preached at Westminster Abbey and included the list in his message there.¹⁰

Let us very briefly examine the Seven Social Sins.

Politics without Principle

In the trial of Jesus (Luke 23), the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, like many politicians, often make decisions based on ‘calculations’ rather than principle. Self-interest rather than fairness, or the common good, are the primary determinants. Today, we see politicians on both sides of the isle often sacrifice the good of the country for their own political survival. Or, the dominance of one’s political party is seen as the primary goal, often even at the expense of the same party’s values.

Wealth without Work

In Luke 19, we hear of Zacchaeus, the tax collector. Zacchaeus grew rich as a ‘middleman’, impoverishing the poor by enriching the state and himself. Tax collectors were hated because they were seen as traitors *and* thieves. While most Palestinian peasants toiled and suffered from debt, tax collectors, without producing anything of their own, simply lived and enriched themselves parasitically on those who toiled. Such is the case today, when the income disparity

¹⁰ Gandhi did note in his 1925 article that he received the list from a ‘correspondent’.

between the richest and the poorest people continues to widen. It is clear that those with the most money have the easiest time getting more money (be it with decreased interest rates or with investments) without really doing any more work than someone living on the financial margins. In today's newspapers, we read of jurors trying to discern if there is 'any doubt' or 'just a tiny doubt' that Paul Manafort committed bank and tax fraud on a shocking level.¹¹

Commerce without Morality

The books of Leviticus, Deuteronomy and many prophets condemned dishonest business practices. Leviticus 19:35-36 reads: "You shall do no injustice in judgment, in measurement of length, weight, or volume. You shall have honest scales, honest weights, an honest *ephah*, and an honest *hin*: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt". On National Public Radio, I have listened to many documentaries on how pharmaceutical companies historically mislead the public (just as the tobacco companies did with nicotine) on the addictive effects of these medications. In the paper this week, the Trump administration is

¹¹ Kevin Johnson, "Jury Deliberates, Finds No Verdict on Manafort", *USA Today*, 17 August 2018, 3A.

threatening to sue opioid makers for their less than honest distribution of drugs like Fentanyl.¹²

Pleasure without Conscience

In II Samuel 11, we hear the story of David and Bathsheba. David coveted Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, because she was beautiful. David cared little or nothing for Uriah nor Bathsheba's feelings in his efforts to experience sexual pleasure. He cared so little he had Uriah killed and then took Bathsheba as his wife. As you know, Solomon was the product of this union of 'pleasure without conscience'. We read in our papers today about the sexual abuse scandals within Catholic dioceses in Pennsylvania - this is just another example of 'pleasure without conscience'.¹³

Education without Character

In Acts 22:3, we hear from the Apostle Paul that he was educated by Gamaliel. In Paul's day this was the equivalent of an Ivy League education. But if we read Paul's writings, we learn that all of his knowledge, *when not infused with love*, renders its use contrary to will of God. As my son enters university today, I pray he learns that it is a terrible disappointment, if not a sin, to not place one's God-

¹² John Fritze, "Trump Threatens to Sue Opioid Makers", *USA Today*, 17 August 2018, p. A3.

¹³ Listen to the podcast of Richard Rohr's statement on this subject that I posted on Facebook.

given strengths and talents and one's privileges of training and education to use for others.

Science without Humanity

In the book of Joshua, chapter 10 verses 12-13, Joshua prayed for God to help the Israelites in their battle by stopping the sun:

“Then Joshua spoke to the Lord on the day when the Lord delivered the Amorites before the children of Israel; and he said in the sight of Israel: “Sun, stand still at Gibeon; and you, Moon, in the valley of Aijalon.’ And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nations took vengeance on their enemies”. For hundreds, if not thousands, of years these verses were interpreted literally and that stifled scientific exploration and censored scientific truth. Today the denial of climate change is the new the newest denial of overwhelming scientific knowledge and conclusions. The earth is not flat and the Earth’s climate is changing.¹⁴ A denial of science is a form of violence against humanity.

Religion without Sacrifice

In the gospel of Mark, 12:41-44, it reads that “Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the

¹⁴ Once the *irrefutable proof*, that the conservative fossil fuel advocates insist appears, exists, it will be far too late to reverse the devastating consequences on our children and grandchildren.

crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on”. Let us who are gathered here to worship and praise continue to sacrifice for the ministry of this church and therefore for the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Solomon prayed for wisdom. Whether he acted on that wisdom is debatable. Let it not be so for us.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded: “Amen”!