

Lent Devotion from Steve Black

Scripture Readings:

Matthew 7:12 *In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.*

Matthew 7:1-3 ¹*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?*

John 13:34-35 ³⁴*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

Since I retired in 2018, I have had the time to look back and reflect on my life as a mathematician who became a government contractor after completing college and graduate school. I have often wondered why I gravitated to mathematics as a major. I'm sure part of the reason was because I was reasonably good at it. I'm also sure part of the lure was the fact that most mathematical results are either right or wrong...binary results with few shades of gray. This must go back to my childhood and the guidance in my family's home where my parents made sure we knew the Ten Commandments, practiced the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.") and attended church whenever the doors were open. I grew up as a Southern Baptist and, as a child, I'm sure I believed the first five books of the Holy Bible came to Jews as prescribed in the King James Version (KJV) and the rest of the scriptures were a lot of "thou shalt" this and that and many verses of who begat whom.

Among the other lessons I learned as a child was to always tell the truth and to never break your promises or do anything that would tarnish one's integrity. The adage, "A man's word is his bond" still rings in my ears many years after my dad explained this to me. Truth, integrity and faith formed the core framework of our family's moral being. I thank my parents for setting this moral compass in my character.

My academic preparation to become a mathematician included getting multiple degrees: B.S., M.S. and Ph.D. I enjoy the thrill of discovering mathematical concepts and how the beauty of nature and mathematics are so entwined. One begins to understand there is a higher authority than we mortal human beings and it is this authority that has created and shaped the universe. After plowing through twelve years of post-high school education, I finally had to get a "real" job and begin using what I had learned. I accepted a position as a software engineer working for a government contractor in support of the Intelligence Community. Much of the work I did was bound by agreements to protect sensitive information. I signed an oath and pledged my word as my bond that I would protect these secrets. The work I did provides for the security of our nation. Whether you believe that national security is part of God's mission, it is how I spent over 25 years of my life, serving to support the nobler ideals of this country.

As you can imagine, my mathematical tendencies to want to see things as either right or wrong answers can lead to internal moral conflicts when dealing with others. The Bible provides guidance for people like me. Rather than casting stones and pronouncing judgments on our neighbors, we are counselled to address the matter within ourselves first (“...notice the log in your own eye”) before pointing out the “speck” in your neighbor’s eye. This philosophy has enabled me to be extend patience to others and encourages respect for the opinions of co-workers and others in my friend circle. Throughout my working career, it was a constant struggle to control my impulses to “correct” others to see my way. I’m still a work in progress as God continues to shape me to be a more forgiving and understanding person.

During this time of Lent, when we often want to find something to give up for the season. I plan to give up dwelling on the hate and division that we see in our country. I hear the words in John 13 in which Christ commands that we “love one another...by this everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

Let us pray:

Lord, help us discover and share how your presence is manifested in our lives each and every day. We thank you for the gift of your son and for your enduring love for us. In Christ’s name we pray. **Amen.**