

“Think about these things!”

October 9, 2011

Text: Exodus 32:1-14, Philippians 4:1-9

I.

Often times, in the midst of our life’s struggles, when we observe people doing things we seriously question or don’t agree with—out of frustration—don’t we want to cry out:

What are you doing?

This often happens with me when I’m watching the 2011 version of the Dolphins play football. Specifically, when the quarterback holds on to the ball too long and gets sacked ... or, worse yet, when he throws carelessly into coverage resulting in an interception.

What are you doing?

Or when I see a politician make a decision that seems to be wrong-headed or untimely ... like when Chris Christie was considering throwing his hat in the ring with the Republican Party and launching a bid for the Presidency.

Although he’s only a newly elected Governor in the state of New Jersey, with a lot of the Republican base unhappy with the current field of candidates, there was enormous pressure on him to run.

At the end, he elected not to. Smart choice. But what if he’d jumped in? A lot of pundits would have chimed in: ***What are you doing?***

In trying to weigh the impact on his family for such campaign, Christie had conversations with previous presidential candidates—some who and lost in their bid for the presidency and some who had won.

- The ones who had lost told him it was a total *nightmare*.
- The ones who had been successful and been elected said it was *awful*.

So, let’s see here, we have a choice between *awful* or a *nightmare*. Again, ***What are you doing?***

What I’m reminded of by this question—and also by both of our readings from the Bible this morning—is how amazing it is that people, with such frequency, do not do what’s in their best interests, particularly their long-term best interests.

We see this all the time in investments that people make. We see it in marriages that end in divorce that sometimes could and should be avoided. We see it all the time in elections where people—amazingly—vote for candidates who do not support policies that will make their lives better.

Whether it's a matter of simply not reacting well in the moment or not taking seriously the long-term consequences, we make awful choices.

Once again, *What are we doing?*

II.

The sermon title this morning was initially going to be, *Anticipating consequences*. That's what we put on our church sign out front. *Anticipating consequences* is certainly an important thing to be aware of. It's such an important skill to have in life ... or, at least, to work on.

Anticipating consequences is part of what wisdom looks like. It is a wise person who anticipates consequences ... who thinks long term ... who doesn't get too caught up in the moment and in short-term, immediate gratification impulses. All the time in life, it's important to *think big ... act big ... be big ... and think long-term*.

In Paul's letter to the **Philippians**, right away we can tell that apparently there was some discord in the church.

1. And of course the Apostle Paul knows that discord and division can ruin a church, particularly a new church start.
2. From what we can tell, it seems there was some tension between **Euodia** and **Syntychē**, two likely leaders in the church—over what, we're not told.

To them, Paul wants to say, *What are you doing?* Think about the consequences of whatever it is that is dividing you.

Paul is also trying to alert others in the church of the need to help out ... to do what they can to help these women with whatever they are doing in the church and to help them sort out whatever differences might have risen between them.

And to all of them, he's saying *remember who you are*. As Christians, you should be rejoicing in the fruits of your faith. *Rejoice in the Lord*, he says, *again I say, REJOICE*.

And then Paul adds—and this is Paul's goal for all Christians—verse 7:

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Who among us would not want the peace of God for their lives? And for that to happen, Paul proposes a recipe (a guiding light): in a word, he wants the Philippians (and us) to stay positive ... to remain focused on the good, the sublime:

*For, beloved, he says, whatever is **true**, whatever is **honorable**, whatever is **just, pure, pleasing and commendable** ... if there is any **excellence**, anything **worthy of praise**, **THINK ABOUT THESE THINGS**.*

In other words, think about the good ... think about the best and the highest. Stay positive. Do what's best for the total community. In all things, seek higher spiritual ground.

III.

In our reading from **Exodus**, the Israelites, too, get into some behaviors that make us seriously wonder: ***What are you doing?*** As it turns out, both Israel and God could have benefited from some time to ***Think about these things***.

In the reading, the Israelites are frustrated. For them, it's been a tough road out of Pharaoh's Egypt and they're anxious. Although God has continually tried to reassure them, still, this recently-found freedom is new for them. It's comparable to a man being released from prison where he has spent most of his life. He knows how to live in prison. He's not sure at all how to live on the outside.

1. They had been 400 years in Egypt where, in spite of their hardship, they had grown accustomed to their life.
2. They knew the parameters of their world. Day after day, they knew what to expect.
3. And now, here they are, fleeing Egypt ... crossing the Red Sea ... laboring their way through the wilderness.
4. We have to remember: the slightest hiccup in the plan was unsettling. It made them anxious.

And what was Moses doing so long up on that mountain—supposedly in conversations with God? The Bible says he spent forty days and nights on the holy mountain with God. Why is he so delayed? They'd come to be dependent on Moses.

IV.

So, out of frustration, they prompt Aaron, the second in command and not a strong leader, to make for them some idol gods—gods they could count on, gods that would reassure them, gods that would make them feel more safe and secure.

But wait a minute ... ***Think about these things***. **WHAT ARE YOU DOING?**

What are we doing when we rush to a careless decision on anything? What are we doing when we don't take our time and think things through, when we don't anticipate consequences, when we don't ask ourselves, *do I really want to do this?*

So, check it out: through Moses, they have already received the 10 Commandments, the first two of which have to do with no other gods before you.

1. You shall have *no other gods*; that's the first Commandment.
2. And you shall *not make for yourself any idols*; that's the second Commandment.
3. And right then and there, God had warned them: ***I the Lord your God am a jealous God.***

In the Old Testament, friends, in Old Testament theology, if you want to upset God, violate either of these first two Commandments. *Not a good idea!*

What are you doing?

And so, now, God is furious ... in an awful mood ... and in a heartbeat God wants to bring disaster on them. So, now, what's Moses to do? He can't just stand idly by and see his people destroyed. So he pleads with God to ***turn from your fierce wrath***, he says.

1. What we're left with here, friends, is the uneasy irony of Moses acting more like God than God.
2. Moses has to remind God of who God is: ***turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do NOT bring disaster on your people ...***
 - *Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and your promise to them?*
 - *How you swore you would multiply their descendants and give them the promised land?*

And what's ultimately important here is that God changes God's mind. Imagine that. Perhaps God, too, needed time to ***think about these things*** ... *Who are you, God? What kind of a God are you? What are the limits of your anger and wrath? What are the limits of your judgment?*

V.

What this story relates is how God—just like us—is capable of thinking about things in a different way ... in a new way. In spite of God's personal hurt, God is able to bear—not only that God's people have sinned grievously, but that they will probably keep on sinning. Still, God changed God's mind. What an unfolding!

Friends, in any moment of life, any of us can change. We can choose to think about anything in a new way ... in our relationships ... in the church ... with our priorities.

In other words: we can change ...

We have a lot more power than we realize to control what we think about in this life. Wonderfully, for us, the mind can't think about two different thoughts, ideas, or things at the same time. Which suggests (and it's true for me) that when we're thinking about an unpleasant idea or happening, we can immediately change what we're thinking about.

It's simply a matter of thinking about something else. We are NOT powerless over what fills our minds and thoughts.

THINK ABOUT THESE THINGS, therefore, is good advice ... sometimes, great advice.

*Whatever is **true** and **honorable**; whatever is **just, pure, pleasing** and **commendable**; if there is any **excellence**, anything **worthy of praise** ... **think about these things**.*

1. In other words: look for the good ... lift up the good.
2. Fill your minds and hearts with positive things—with good thoughts, good ideas, with good ethics.
3. And don't hang around toxic stuff—toxic places ... toxic people ... toxic food.

And be tenacious about it. In the gospels, Jesus teaches us that what we put into ourselves—our minds, hearts and spirit—is what comes out.

We're to fill our minds, hearts and spirits, therefore, with good things.

When we are able to do this on a consistent basis, the fruits of the spirit begin to bless us. Our spirit, our mood, our basic orientation towards life changes. We're more positive ... more at peace ... more life-giving.

THINK ABOUT THESE THINGS!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com