

“Doing the right thing”

September 23, 2007

Text: Psalm 100, Deuteronomy 30:11-20, Galatians 6:7-10

I.

In our church, we’re trying to make the 4th Sunday of the month a *family celebration* Sunday, a Sunday when all the families of our church make it a priority to be in worship and when we emphasize a theme that’s relevant and useful to families—families caught in the grip of busy lives and trying to raise their children.

Also, it’s our goal to involve some of our young people in the worship on that Sunday, as well, as the Spirit moves ...

In any event, as families, and certainly as parents, trying to raise our children in the Christian Church, it’s important that our children have a foundational sense of what it means to be Christian. What it means it to *live a life centered in God*.

Certainly, that’s the life that Jesus lived—a life ***centered in God***. That’s what the Christian life is, at its best.

Isn’t this what we want for ourselves and our children? We want our children to *know* God, to have a sense of *God’s presence* ... and to be nurtured on the best of Christianity.

A life centered in God is a life that cares about *doing the right thing* ... about *making good choices*. Choices about sharing and generosity, choices that reflect a *compassionate* heart, choices that reveal a spirit that cares about fairness and justice for all people—particularly the poor and the needy, those who are so often left out and shoved to the margins.

As psychologists and sociologists remind us, most children pick up their values, unmistakably, from their parents ... from us, the principle adults in their lives.

II.

More than we’ll ever know, our lives as parents filter into the lives of our children. It’s more than a little frightening sometimes to note how much our children pick up from us over the years.

Tendencies, manners of expression ... and at the end of the day, *core values*.

As the aging process unfolds in each of our lives, don’t we find ourselves, as adults, reflecting different aspects or traits of our parents? When we hear our spouse comment,

as mine does from time to time: *You're getting more like your father everyday*. That gets our attention. Scary stuff! Now, that may be a good thing!

In the best of our Christian faith, we equate a sense of values (living a life *centered in God*) with a basic awareness of *doing the right thing*.

Making good choices, seeing the BIG PICTURE, lifting up the common good, having a generous spirit and a compassionate heart.

In the Bible, *doing the right thing* has to do with serving the forces of LIFE, the very life that God breathed into Adam and Eve at the dawning of creation. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament), God's overwhelming concern is preserving the *life* of the community.

Therefore, living a *God-centered* life, is to live a life that is ***life-giving***. Actions and deeds that are *life-giving* are aimed at making things better with regard to God's purposes.

III.

Indeed, when we consider the Ten Commandments and their role in the community life of Israel, their primary function ... the reason why they evolved into *commandment* form to begin with, was to preserve *life*, to be *life-giving*. The intent of most of the laws of the Torah was to be protective and preventive ... again, to be *life-serving* and *life-giving* on behalf of the people of Israel.

The *commandments* themselves are safeguards against sin (bad choices) ... bad choices that can lead to destruction and upheaval in community life; bad choices—again, sin—that can lead to death.

Doing the right thing—obeying the *commandments*—is imperative to sustaining the life of the community. I'll never forget one of my Old Testament professors in Seminary saying (years ago):

Violation of commandment introduces an element of distortion into reality.

If you think about it, it's true.

When God is not *number ONE* in our lives, when we don't heed the 4th *commandment* on Sabbath rest, when we don't respect our parents (who gave us life) ... easily, our lives get off track. When we kill, steal, lie, commit adultery, and covet each other's stuff, in no time, our lives become twisted and tainted.

Anger and revenge build up in the spirit of the victims and, over time, stuff happens. *Getting even ... revenge ... retaliation*. Indeed, much of the cause of modern warfare is

all of this.

That's the problem with sin, with *Commandment disobedience*: it distorts life. And it foments disorder and chaos.

In the ancient world, these *commandment* violations were REAL threats to the LIFE of the community. Again, that's how the *commandments* evolved over the centuries to begin with. They are God's truths for God's people.

Why? Because God wants us to live. And we're more likely to live if we're not disrupting and twisting community life with our sinful behaviors. God is always on the side of LIFE. And therefore, the question for us is:

Is whatever we are doing, is it *life-giving*? Does it makes things better? Does it lift up the common good, keeping the BIG PICTURE in mind?

IV.

There are some powerful words of exhortation in **Deuteronomy 30** which capture the *life-giving* emphasis of the Bible in all of this.

It's Moses' final speech to the Israelites. His last chance to help set them on the right track. He's talking to them about the importance of *obedience to Commandment truth* and the future choices they will have to make as a people.

It's comparable to a President's farewell address to the nation ... or a teacher or coach's final words to their class or team ... or to a pastor's final sermon to a congregation he or she has pastored for years. If we had one last chance to *say it all*, what would we say?

So this is a *mountain top moment* for MOSES. He wants to make sure that *they get it*. He's told them before. And so, he has a sense that THEY KNOW. How do they know? Because it is in their hearts (*The word is very near you*, says Deuteronomy. *It is in your hearts*). So, again, THEY KNOW.

And Moses makes it real clear: *I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God ... walking in God's ways ... observing God's commandments, you shall live and become numerous. However, if you do not, you will die.*

Whoa!! He's not mincing any words ... life or death, and they have to choose.

And then, Moses' final appeal: *I call on heaven and earth to witness to this moment: **CHOOSE LIFE! CHOOSE LIFE!***

V.

Friends, every day we have choices to make. Decisions for this, decisions for that. And over time, our choices build into a life-pattern. They become a part of the person we are. We literally *are* the choices we make.

If a child grows up making bad choices ... developing bad habits ... hanging around with the wrong crowd ... not being a good family member, sadly, that establishes a pattern ... and, again, over time, that pattern becomes a life-style.

Living a God-centered life ... *doing the right thing* ... is about being a person of character, a person who stands for something ... a person others can count on ... a person who fulfills their responsibilities, who does their fair share.

On the other side of things, when we're messing up, when we're falling short, most of the time, we know. We know when we're not doing our best. We know when we're dropping the ball and not fulfilling our responsibilities. Sometimes we're just lazy or immature ... or not in the mood, or whatever it is. But still, we know.

VI.

In our reading from **Galatians**, the Apostle Paul is trying to build up esteem and righteousness in his churches. He's also trying to get the believers to aim high in their personal behavior ... in their moral choices.

He wants the new Christians in his churches to be people of strong moral character, every day doing what they can to lift up the common good ... to emulate Christ that they might be transformed as disciples.

And so he says to them, *If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.*

So let us not grow weary of doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.

These words make a connection with us, don't they? *Doing what is right* and not *growing weary* of doing it.

I come across people all the time who are struggling with any number of issues. It may be with addictive behavior or with self-esteem issues; it may be with depression or grief.

Much of the time, a helpful coping mechanism is to just focus on *doing the right thing*, making good choices ... moment after moment, hour after hour, day after day.

The good news is that we can change our behaviors and affect our moods and our disposition by simply changing the moment ... by making *this* moment a good moment. And then *this* hour a good hour ... and so on and so forth ... to the point where a *God-centered* moment builds, over time, into a *God-centered* life.

But again, living a *life centered in God*, is a choice. It's a choice that Jesus made and that he invites us to make as well.

VII.

Every day, every one of us is presented with a myriad of choices. Some of the time, there is a *sort of* creative **tension** in the choices.

With sharing, how much do we share; and with generosity, how much do we give away. We all have to work out a balance, don't we?

Looking out solely for ourselves and our own interests; and looking out for the interests and well-being of the total family or group or community. We have to find a balance that works for us.

*Doing the **right** thing ... or doing something less. And let's be honest, most of the time, we KNOW. We know what we ought to do. We know what living a *God-centered life* invites us to do.*

As I am closing, now, back to **Galatians ...**

Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those in the family of faith.

Which for us Americans, with all of our blessings, means the good of the whole human family.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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