

LESSONS IN LIVING

Choosing

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Rev. Ilene Dunn
July 3, 2011

Scripture Reading: Joshua 24: 14-15 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Be nice; be quiet; be sweet; be polite. Be little ladies: I can't tell you how many times my mother said that to me and my sisters. And then she'd say to me, "You're the oldest. You have to set a good example." But one afternoon when I was eight, all of Mother's admonitions flew out of my head, like my brain had suddenly turned off. I didn't give even a momentary thought to what I should or shouldn't do, didn't think about options – or about the consequences of one's behavior. I just reacted in mindless outrage, mad as the proverbial little red hen, my behavior anything but ladylike.

The three o'clock bell had rung, signaling the end of the school day. I'd grabbed my stuff, lined up with my friends to get on the school bus, found an empty seat and plopped down. Sitting across the aisle from me was a skinny little boy, kind of frail looking. But I didn't really notice him until this big girl got on the bus, probably a sixth-grader, looked huge to me. She grabbed that little boy, yanked him out of his seat, and took it for herself, and the little boy began to cry, and that's when all of Mother's words about ladylike behavior flew out of my head. I leaped at that big bully, who leaped back at me. And there we were, fighting in the aisle, my rage now intensified by frustration because she, with her much longer arms, could easily hold me back; my arms flailing impotently.

The bus driver jumped up, separated us, marched both of us off the bus and into the principal's office, where our parents were called to come get us. Uh-oh; right about then was when my brain switched back on. I was going to be in a heap of trouble with my mother!

But I didn't think it was fair that I should be punished. It was all the bully's fault; it was all because she was so mean. With all the righteous indignation an eight-year-old could muster up, I was ready to protest my impending punishment. But I never got to use my protest. Mother never said a word about punishment. I didn't even get THE LECTURE, the dreaded I'm-so-disappointed-in-you lecture that could be way worse than a spanking. My mother and I just sat down at the kitchen table and had this amazing grownup conversation about choosing better ways to stand up for people.

And there at the kitchen table for the first time I understood, I got it, or at least as far as an eight-year-old can get it, that I myself had to make choices, important choices, that there were decisions and choices my mother couldn't and shouldn't make for me, and that I had to make those choices consciously, with my mind fully engaged. I got it, that growing up has something to do with taking conscious responsibility for your own life and what you do with it. And, though she didn't put it in words, I heard it loud and clear, my mother's confidence in me, that I had it in me to think, to use my brain, to stay conscious and make good and right choices. I heard Mother's confidence in my growing up.

Choosing, making conscious choices, consciously choosing the set of core values that's going to guide your living, consciously choosing the behaviors which are consistent with that set of values, consciously choosing to take appropriate responsibility for your own life, for what you're going to do with the years, days, hours, minutes you have on earth, in other words, consciously choosing to grow up: really, that's what Joshua was encouraging our long ago many-times-great-grandparents to do. Remember, they'd been prevented from growing up for a very, very long time.

For many generations the Hebrew people had been slaves in Egypt, with Pharaoh and his slave masters telling them what to do and when and how, the slaves themselves having no real choices, no real responsibility for their own lives. And it wasn't all that different in the wilderness, with Moses and then Joshua telling them what to do and when and how. But now the time had come for Joshua to set them free to grow up. It was no longer appropriate for them to expect Moses or Joshua or Mom or Dad or their life partners or their teachers or their preachers to do their thinking for them, to make decisions for them. Nor was it any longer appropriate for them to be on autopilot, as if unconscious within their religion, in that sort of unconscious trance in which religion becomes the Pharaoh and the slave masters dictating your behavior, you not using any moral compass of your own, just taking direction from your religion's dogma, you just by rote doing whatever you have to do to avoid punishment or to merit reward, you just drifting along in your religion without thinking, without ever owning your own beliefs and disbeliefs, pretty much disregarding and maybe disrespecting your own spirituality and spiritual yearnings. The time had come for our ancestors to start growing up. And apparently Joshua had confidence in their ability to do that, or he wouldn't have placed them in the choice-making position.

But, you know, some people choose to remain childish, in the trance, on autopilot, mindlessly doing what a leader or a religion tells them to do. That's easier than growing up. See, you can't just one day decide to grow up and – voila! –you're there. Growing up is a difficult and lifelong process, and it's a daily process; every day you're confronted with the choice: either to grow up some more or get stuck where you are.

Growing up: part of what that means for me personally is consciously choosing the better way to stand up for people. And it's not easy; I've been struggling with that my whole life. It's not that I struggle with a decision to stand up for people. There seems to be something in me that can't not stand up for people. I see someone being bullied, even if the bullying is indirect, like through a racist or sexist or homophobic joke, my instant impulse is to get right in the bully's face. There are still times when I forget all about growing up, instantly regress to the eight-year-old me, not trying to use my hands as weapons, no, but words and tone of voice can certainly be weapons, too. I struggle to resist becoming a bully, bullying other bullies. I struggle with consciously choosing the better way. And sometimes I'm successful, but sometimes I'm not.

I wonder if it's like that for you, too. Whatever choosing to grow up may mean for you, whatever principles and priorities and behaviors your growing up may necessitate, I wonder if your choosing to grow up is as hit and miss as mine is. Question is, what's helpful when you're in the midst of a miss, when along the way of your choosing to grow up, there's a lapse in your behavior? Well, I know two things that aren't helpful.

One: it isn't helpful to blame something or someone else for your behavior. That's to turn around and choose not to grow up, to remain childish. See, it's normal for children to do that. The 8-year-old me really thought that what I did was all the bully's fault; she was to blame for my behavior. But, were the adult me to think that, it would mean that my thinking had disintegrated into the realm of what's

irrational for an adult to think. The adult me knows that the bully did provoke my anger, but did not make me try to punch her out.

Blaming our behavior on something or someone else, it's tempting, so tempting to say, If he hadn't done that, if she hadn't said that, if my family were different, if my boss were different, if the culture were different, if the world didn't turn the way the world turns, then I wouldn't have done whatever. It's tempting, but it isn't helpful. In fact, it's harmful, and not only to whomever or whatever gets blamed. It's harmful to the adult who does the blaming. It chains that adult into childishness, thereby preventing that adult from functioning well in the adult world. Growing up means owning up sometimes.

Two: it isn't helpful to wallow around ad nauseam in the owning up. While owning up instead of blaming is helpful, it's detrimental to just wallow around feeling bad about your behavior, feeling bad about yourself. Wallowing around in that quicksand just gets you stuck. It's a waste of time, accomplishing nothing productive at all, period.

So, what is helpful? It's some self-talk the day after the lapse, self-talk that goes something like this. Self, you really screwed up yesterday. You can't deny it, can't blame somebody or something else, and there'd be something very wrong with you if you didn't feel any remorse. But don't get stuck there. Go make whatever amends there are to make, and then get on with your life. Remember, self, there is life to get on with. It's a new morning, full of possibilities, full of new opportunities for choosing what's good and right for you to choose. Choose this day, self – that's what Joshua said to do. He didn't say, Choose according to what your yesterday meant or according to what tomorrow might bring. He said, Choose today the principles, the priorities, the behaviors, the theology that'll center you and form your path. It's a new morning, self, and you're free to keep growing up.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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