

Sermon (2/12/17, Deuteronomy 30: 15-20):

In studies done by James Fowler on the stages of faith development, he notes how very young children tend to perceive the choices they face in a very uncomplicated and unnuanced way.

‘Bigger is better’ is one of the principles they live by. If we were to place before them a dime and a nickel, giving them the option to take just one, most likely they would take the nickel because it’s bigger.

The notion of good and bad tends to be very clear-cut too. Good means following the rules. Good means staying within the lines adults draw for them. Being good means you will be rewarded in some way.

Bad, on the other hand, means breaking the rules. Stepping out of the bounds adults have drawn. To do something bad means that some sort of punishment is sure to follow...at least if they get caught.

As one grows older, this nice, neat way of ordering the world tends to crumble and fall apart. We learn quickly that most decisions are not so cleanly divided between good and bad. We learn that, many times, there are degrees of good and degrees of bad. We learn that while we might long for a black and white world, the truth is that it is mostly gray. Life is complicated. Circumstances tend to shade things. What might clearly be good in one situation might end up being a nightmare in another.

I like to watch the Antiques Road Show on PBS periodically. It’s a show where people bring in their antiques to experts to determine how genuine and valuable their item is. One of the interesting things I’ve learned is that cleaning or refurbishing an antique can greatly reduce its value. There should be no sanding and resurfacing of a piece of furniture, no replacing a worn-out cushion on an old chair, no efforts to clean a tarnished old vase or to repair an old doll. Patina is a word that is batted around often. Keeping and maintaining an object’s patina is essential. Patina is that greenish or brownish film that forms on a piece of metal caused by oxidation over time. Sounds ugly, right? Or it’s that ugly glaze or sheen that develops on the surface of an old piece of furniture.

Good, in my mind, is something that is cleaned up, restored, brought back to life. Good is when that ugly glaze or sheen is sanded down and replaced with a fresh new surface. Good is when that old watch, or piece

of jewelry or fancy pottery is made to shine again. Who would have thought that an ugly patina is a good thing? It kind of goes against the grain of what we think is good. Clean is good. Repair and restore is good. Apparently, those rules don't apply in the antique world.

The older I get, the more it becomes apparent just how challenging choices are even though we make hundreds of them from the time we choose to rise from our beds to the time we choose to return to bed.

The Israelites are on the precipice of entering the Promised Land. Moses, their great leader, would not be going with them, however. So, as one final gift, he gives them the longest sermon he could muster up.

There's an old joke about a Minister standing in the sanctuary of his church on a blizzard Sunday morning. Only one person shows up – a farmer. Not knowing what to do, the Minister asks the farmer if he should proceed with the service.

The farmer says, 'Well, when I call in my cows to eat, I feed them whether one shows up or fifteen.'

The Minister then does the whole service-every hymn, every prayer, every word of the sermon he had prepared.

After the service, the farmer says to the Minister, 'Thank you but, you know, if only one cow shows up I don't give him the whole load of food!'

Well, it seems that Moses is going out by giving them the whole load-for 30 chapters he's been preaching. For a man, not long for this world, he sure has some amazing stamina!

I guess it's understandable. Moses knows that his people will be on their own soon. He won't be there to settle their arguments, intervene with God when God blows his top, or guide them through the complicated days ahead. For most in this group, Moses has been the only leader they have ever known. Moses also knows these people don't have the best track record. Remember the golden calf? Remember how many times they moaned, 'Oh, if only we had never left Egypt...?'

As a parent, I think I have a very small sense of what Moses might have been feeling. Letting my children go to make their own decisions, to struggle through their own journeys, to deal with the consequences of their

own mistakes is so very hard. Every instinct in me wants to protect them, to hold them close, to guide them, to push them towards good choices, to pick them up to kiss their scraped knees and hearts when they fall. It is so very hard to let go. I don't think I will ever be as good as I should be at it.

I'm guessing these are the types of feelings Moses is wrestling with. Moses knew they would have a lot to deal with in this new land. This land they were moving into was filled with established communities with their own cultures, religions, and messes. To be sure they would encounter alternative ethical options, and alternative objects of trust, and alternative understandings of power. In essence, the same kind of stuff you and I face every day of our lives.

Much of what the Israelites will encounter will require them to make a choice...the ways of God or the ways this new land. The consequences of how they choose will be significant.

'If your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them...it will not go well with you...these are the ways of the dying.' Moses warns.

'But if you choose wisely, if you choose to love the Lord your God, to obey him, to hold fast to him...that means life to you...'

This is how Moses ends his long sermon. They are words, I must confess, that make me a little nervous. Not so much because I think there is something wrong with them but, more so, because there are so many these days who seem intent on trying to reduce God to little more than a Genie in a bottle. Choose rightly and you'll get your wish. Choose wrongly and God will strike you dead.

There are too many televangelists out there declaring that certain storms, floods, diseases like AIDs, and bloody attacks by terrorists are somehow God's way of punishing us. There are also those who preach a kind of prosperity Gospel which suggests that if you carefully follow certain God given rules God will make you wealthy. Avoid this and God won't give you AIDs. Do this and God will make you rich. In my mind, such approaches are more about self-serving fancies than they are about faithfulness.

I do not believe that is what Moses is trying to get at here. Out of

deep concern for his beloved children, his plea is for them to make good decisions even when they are hard, even when they go against the grain of popular societal norms, even when it means making personal sacrifices.

Looking back over the many years of their life together, Moses noticed that life seemed to be at its best when they were being faithful – the covenant community functioned well, people’s lives were lived with dignity and hope, there was a sense of goodness which people shared and enjoyed.

Seek that...Moses is asking them. Love God and love neighbor and things will go well...not perfect, not without its storms and diseases and spikes of good times...but, all in all, life will be good, blessings will abound, community will thrive.

It’s interesting to put this in the context of some of the other things Moses had said earlier in this sermon as to what good choices look like:

In Chapter 14 (27-29) he talked about sharing feasts with the hungry.

In Chapter 17 (14-20) he talked about organizing government in a way to guard against excessive wealth.

In Chapter 24 (14-22) he talked about fairly paying hired hands, including resident aliens, what they earned and leaving behind a residue of the harvest in the field for the foreigner and disadvantaged.

In Chapter 25 (1-3) he talked about limiting punishments to protect human dignity.

Choose what is good, Moses implores. They might not be the easy choices, the popular choices, the most lucrative choices but choose well.

It will not be long after we leave here that you and I will again be faced with lots of choices. Some of them will be rather innocuous like where to go for lunch or should I take out the trash or take a nap.

Some of them, however, will be decisions that will either give life or steal life from others and even yourself. Think carefully, choose wisely, live courageously...choose life.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Layperson of the Year Presentation to Betsy Darrow

Before announcing who we have chosen for this year's Layperson of the year, allow me to again say how difficult it is to make this choice each year. We are blessed with so many good people who give so much of their time, their gifts, and their treasure to the well-being of this congregation. Without them, this place would not survive. To choose one among this great cloud of saints is daunting and, we know, a bit risky because it is not our wish to minimize the gifts of others or to make someone who is well deserving feel left out. Equally so, however, we do not want to become a congregation that succumbs to the complacency of taking people for granted. It is all too easy to do and this is our small attempt at trying to avoid this grave mistake.

With that, it's my joy and honor to announce that this year's recipient is Betsy Darrow.

When Betsy's name was brought up at our Consistory meeting as a candidate for this year's Layperson of the Year, we all immediately agreed she was the right choice. It was one of the easiest decisions we have had to make of late!

When our dear friend and former treasurer of our church, David Froehlich, died suddenly a few years back and we were scrambling to hold the church's financial well-being in place, Betsy quickly came to the rescue. As she so often does, she did so quietly, without fanfare, graciously, and with enormous dedication. With Betsy's help, we were able to recover, though it was not easy. Betsy spent many, many hours here at the church and at her home-deciphering the system that David had set up for us, learning the software we were then using, dealing with the church's bank to make the transition to a new Treasurer, and ensuring that proper financial protocols for the church were maintained.

Since then, Betsy has continued as our Treasurer and chair of our Finance Committee with incredible patience, kindness, and a generosity of time, talent, and love that is difficult to describe. She has done all of this without any financial compensation from the church and she has done all of it exceptionally well.

Betsy's skill is outweighed only by her kindness and her deep love

for this congregation. It is apparent in so much of what she does. She worries the details of keeping good financial records including providing us less financially fluent folks on Consistory a cheat sheet each month so we can decipher the church's financial health. She works hard to ensure that we can meet our financial obligations by maximizing our return on invested funds like the legacy fund. She keeps her eyes open for any potential new revenue streams we might be able to procure. She has cleaned up and made more efficient numerous aspects of our church's financial operations.

Not only that, but Betsy sings in our choir, plays the violin, and serves our congregation in so many other capacities including, most recently, agreeing to serve on the search committee for a new Music Director.

I am, personally, so grateful for Betsy. During times when it would be perfectly understandable for her to be frazzled and frustrated, she, instead, somehow keeps her cool, showing incredible patience and kindness. She is a very dear and wonderful lady who is simply a joy to be around and a treasured gift to all who have the privilege of calling her friend. To share this communion of faith with her is a true blessing.

Betsy, words are inadequate to appropriately thank you for all you have done for us and for what you mean to us but, it is our prayer, that today will help you understand how deeply you are loved by us all.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Loving God, we hold before you the many choices that lie before us and the many decisions that we are called upon to make.

Many of them are small ones, with minor consequences in the grand scheme of things. Some of them have a greater impact than we are sometimes able to perceive or understand. Others weigh heavy as we feel the gravity of their importance, complexity, and long reaching influence.

There are some here today, O God, facing difficult choices and difficult decisions. There are some here today who are tortured by bad decisions they have made in the past. There are some for whom there is no shortage of reminders of past mistakes and, thereby, no shortage of unyielding shame. And there are some who bear the brunt of poor and selfish decisions made by those in positions of power and leadership.

Lord, every hour of every day, we are flooded with choices and decisions and we need your help. Help us to choose rightly, even when it is hard to do and the consequences might not be pleasant. Forgive us and help us to forgive ourselves and each other when bad choices are made. Restore us when we are our own worst enemy. Guide us so that we might choose what is good for ourselves, our communities, your church, and the well-being of the nations. Give wisdom to those who lead us and who make decisions that have far reaching consequences.

This day, O God, we give you thanks for Betsy Darrow. For the gift of her life and friendship and for the gift of her service to you and your church.

We pray this, O God, as we also lift up to you those who are hurting, sad, broken, ill, frail, weak, vulnerable, defenseless, and lonely. We pray for our nation and nations around the world –

for their leaders, for those in positions of influence and power, and for those who have the ear of those in power.

We especially hold before you, O God, these prayers we now boldly name either in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.