

EENEY MEENEY MINEY MOE
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
February 13, 2011

Reading: Deuteronomy 30: 15-20 (NRSV)

Today I offer you the choice of life and good, or death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I give you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by conforming to his ways and by keeping his commandments, statutes, and laws, then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to occupy. But if your hearts turn away and you do not listen and you are led on to bow down to other gods and worship them, I tell you this day that you will perish; you will not live long in the land which you will enter to occupy after crossing the Jordan. I summon heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I offer you the choice of life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life and then you and your descendants will live; love the Lord your God, obey him and hold fast to him: that is life for you and length of days in the land which the Lord swore to give to your forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote, "One's philosophy is not best expressed in words. It is expressed in the choices one makes. In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility."

We all make choices every day all day, from what we will have for breakfast to how we will manage a business decision. It reminds me of a story told about British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith. He once spent a weekend at the Waddesdon estate of the 19th-century Rothschild family. One day, as Asquith was being waited on at teatime by the butler, the following conversation ensued:

"Tea or coffee?" asked the butler.

"Tea, please," answered Asquith.

"China, India, or Ceylon, sir?" asked the butler.

"China, please."

"Lemon, milk, or cream, sir?"

"Milk, please," replied Asquith.

"Jersey, Hereford, or Shorthorn, sir?" asked the butler.¹

The Deuteronomist writes that the nation has the responsibility of making choices. The nation will prosper and its future generations will succeed if the people choose to do the good. If the nation chooses corruption and evil the nation will fall. God will bless the people when the people make righteous decision. God will judge the people by allowing them to suffer the consequences of malignant and poisonous choices.

Now everyone in this audience knows this, whether you put the question in social and personal decisions, theological or economic choices. We are constantly telling our children that some of the kids they associate with can hurt them; hard work and study can prepare them for college; and whether they continue their education will make a tremendous difference in their future employment and lifestyle. Every parent I know of wonders about the life partner our children will choose. Heck, we may even sometimes wonder about the choices we have made. From that first invitation to dinner and a movie, to marry or not, to have children or not, to how we will manage conflict, especially deeply hurtful ones, is the constant process of making choices. All of our choices have consequences. It is sort of like the man who said

¹ *Today in the Word*, May 5, 1993. Found at <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/c/choice.html>. Downloaded 2/9/2011.

recently, “I want to die in my sleep like my grandfather, not screaming and yelling like the passengers in his car.”

Everyone here knows that the kind of choices we make create our futures for better and worse. What is fascinating to me about this reading from Deuteronomy is the very idea that we are capable of making such decisions. Another way of phrasing that is to say that we are good enough to choose the right from the wrong. We are able to distinguish the good from the evil, and be aware of the fact that those futures shape our destiny. Why is that important?

Most Christians since the fourth century have not been told that we are good enough for or capable of moral discernment. We have been taught that since Adam human beings are a fallen race. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “It was through one man that sin entered the world, and through sin death, and thus death pervaded the whole human race inasmuch as all men have sinned.” (Romans 5:12) And to the Corinthians he wrote, “By Adam all men die.” Augustine took these words of Paul and others in the Bible to develop his doctrine of Original Sin. For centuries afterward both Protestants, like Luther and Calvin, and Roman Catholics embraced the idea that human nature is corrupt and passed from generation to generation by human sexual reproduction. Typical words used to describe human nature are “corrupt,” “stained,” and “polluted.” By this way of thinking, it is an unavoidable reality of the human condition. We do not have within us the resources for goodness. We just can’t do it.

We are like the Irishman who moves into a tiny hamlet in County Kerry, walks into the pub and promptly orders three beers. The bartender raises his eyebrows, but

serves the man three beers, which he drinks quietly at a table, alone. An hour later, the man has finished the three beers and orders three more. This happens yet again.

The next evening the man again orders and drinks three beers at a time, several times. Soon the entire town is whispering about the Man Who Orders Three Beers. A week later, the bartender broaches the subject on behalf of the town. "I don't mean to pry, but folks around here are wondering why you always order three beers?"

'Tis odd, isn't it?" the man replies. "You see, I have two brothers, and one went to America, and the other to Australia. We promised each other that we would always order an extra two beers whenever we drank as a way of keeping up the family bond."

The bartender and the whole town was pleased with this answer, and soon the Man Who Orders Three Beers became a local celebrity and source of pride to the hamlet, even to the extent that out-of-townners would come to watch him drink.

Then, one day, the man comes in and orders only two beers. The bartender pours them with a heavy heart. This continues for the rest of the evening - he orders only two beers. The word flies around town. Prayers are offered for the soul of one of the brothers.

The next day, the bartender says to the man, "Folks around here, me first of all, want to offer condolences to you for the death of your brother. You know-the two beers and all..."

The man ponders this for a moment, then replies, "You'll be happy to hear that my two brothers are alive and well... It's just that I, myself, have decided to give up

drinking for Lent."²

You see, we just cannot be good, despite our best intentions.

I would like to share with you the fact that neither Augustine nor Calvin were the first and last word about being human and the grace of God. I am thinking specifically about that Celtic lay monk and heretic, Pelagius. In fact, it was the teachings of Pelagius that so riled the soul of Augustine. He and other fathers of the church such as Jerome determined that the Pelagian heresy needed to be routed out of the minds of Christians. Some believe that part of the mission of St. Patrick to Ireland was for that very purpose.

What was all of the fuss about? In the first place Pelagius believed in Original Goodness. In his letter "To Demetrias" Pelagius wrote:

"Whenever I give moral instructions, I first try to demonstrate the inherent power and quality of human nature. I try to show the wonderful virtues which all human beings can acquire. Most people look at the virtues in others, and imagine that such virtues are far beyond their reach. Yet God has implanted in every person the capacity to attain the very highest level of virtue...
When he created the world, God declared that everything he made was good..."³

In other words, when God finished the Creation as is reported in the book of Genesis, "God saw all that he had made and it was very good." (Gen. 1:31) That goodness is not diluted or destroyed by anything that happened subsequent to the first creation story of Genesis. The original goodness is presumed throughout all of the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the Bible does not use the term Original Sin. It is not an idea that is found in Judaism, Buddhism, or Hinduism, for that matter.

² Fish Eaters at <http://www.fisheaters.com/jokes.html>. Downloaded 2/11/11.

³ Pelagius, "To Demetrias," *The Letters of Pelagius: Celtic Soul Friend* (Worcestershire: Arthur James Ltd, 1995), pp. 4-5.

Clearly the Deuteronomist assumes that we are good enough to make the choice between sin and righteousness. Yes, we can choose to do the evil, but there is enough goodness within us to make the moral choices that safeguard the future of our people. And where does that goodness come from? Pelagius believed that God gave it to us. J. Philip Newell wrote, “He believed that the newborn freshly come forth from God, contains the original goodness of creation and humanity’s essential blessedness.”⁴ Into every creature of the earth God’s breath of life fills the newborn with grace. The essence of God cannot be destroyed. Yes, the human being might try to smother it, contain, or deny it. But Pelagius believed that the *vital élan* of God could never be fully expired in human beings.

We can be good because God’s goodness lies within our own breast. That does not mean that we do not or cannot commit sins or make evil choices. I want to leave the service today understanding this radical idea that we are made in God’s image. Because we carry the impetus of God in our own souls we are essentially good from birth and ever capable of greater righteousness.

Now here is one last bit of Pelagian heresy that I would like to lift up. God’s goodness is found in the heart of every human being. It is not unique to Christians, but to every child of God, regardless of race, culture, ethnicity, nationality, or religious affiliation. Pelagius did not think that what believe about Jesus Christ was essential to salvation. He did believe that people who loved their neighbors, offered compassion to others, and treated people justly were following in the footsteps of the Nazarene. Can you imagine the radical implications of Pelagian Christianity for us today?

⁴ J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (New York: The Paulist Press, 1997), pp.13-13.

Pelagius teaches us that even the people we are most afraid of, or uncomfortable with, or positively despise, have within them the *Imago Dei*, the Sacred Impulse that pounds within their hearts and courses through their veins. Think about that in this age when civic discourse seems fashioned on contempt, the demonization of persons and political parties, and the tribalization of nations, cultures, and subcultures. Think how difficult it has been for us to be in relationship with people whose lifestyles or beliefs are difficult and troubling. I immediately think of how difficult it is for this nation to be in right relationship with gays and lesbians, or Muslims, or Jews, or people of color, or immigrants. Choose your nemesis. At the heart of the antipathy we feel for other human beings is the Augustinian assumption that there is something fundamentally wrong with them. Pelagius argues that there is something fundamentally good about them.

The challenge for us is to find the good within ourselves and seek the good in others. The challenge for the church is to renounce the doctrine of Original Sin, dissociate itself from the presumption of judgment, and teach us all the truth of Original Goodness. God has planted the seed of grace in each and every person. It is our responsibility to cultivate the seeds.

I am sure that you have been paying attention to the people's revolution in Egypt these past few weeks. One story that got very little press happened on February 3rd. With thousands of people gathered in Tahrir square the Muslim citizens were called to prayer. As you know Muslims pray on their knees sometimes their foreheads touching the floor or ground. This position makes them extremely vulnerable to attack. But Christian Egyptians gathered around them, faced outward holding hands.

They had formed a protective ring around their fellow citizens. Ancient division and animosity were no longer important. On that day they found the common good amongst them.

The late Unitarian minister, John Haynes Holmes wrote:

O God, whose love is over all
 The children of Thy grace,
 Whose rich and tender blessings fall
 On every age and place,
 Hear Thou the songs and prayers we raise
 In eager joy to Thee,
 And teach us, as we sound Thy praise,
 In all things Thee to see.

To see Thee in the sun by day,
 And in the stars by night,
 In waving grass and ocean spray,
 And leaves and flowers bright;
 To hear Thy voice, like spoken word,
 In every breeze that blows,
 In every song of every bird,
 And every brook that flows.

To see Thee in each quiet home
 Where faith and love abide,
 In school and church, where all may come
 To seek Thee side by side;
 To see Thee in each human life,
 Each struggling human heart,
 Each path by which, in eager strife,
 Men seek the better part.⁵

Pelagius invites us to seek the better part of every human being, the part that God plants in every human heart. Search the souls of every person you meet, expecting to find Original Goodness.

Finis

⁵ John Haynes Holmes, "O God, Whose Love is Over All," *Masterpieces of Religious Verse*, James Dalton Morrison, ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 71.