

"Truth AND Consequences"

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 13, 2011

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON - Psalm 119-1-8
NEW TESTAMENT LESSON – MATTHEW 5:21-30

In his short story "*Leaving the Yellow House*," Saul Bellow tells the tale of Hattie Simmons Waggoner, an elderly woman who lived alone in a house that she inherited. It was all she had. And was everything to her; she had no children and no husband.

Living alone and becoming increasingly frail, she turned in on herself, and turned also to drinking too much. She knew she had to make a change. She could not continue in that big rambling house. She had to go somewhere else, to leave the house (that's one of the meanings of the title 'Leaving the Yellow House'), and she had to leave it to someone in her will (that's the other meaning of the story's title).

She knew this, but for years did nothing about it. Then, one day, driving while drunk, she had a minor traffic accident. Her arm was broken, and her license was taken away. She recovered, but the arm was slow to heal. Friends came to tell her she had to leave, had to get out. Still she couldn't. One night, thinking that she'd finally come to a decision, she sat down and began to write a will:

"I, Harriet Simmons Waggoner, being of sound mind and not knowing what may be in store for me at the age of 72, living alone at Sego Desert Lake, instruct my lawyer, Harold Claiborne ..., to draw my last will and testament upon the following terms."

She lifted her pencil from the page, thought a bit, took a drink – (and) realized she spent all her life waiting. She thought to herself, I was waiting, thinking, "Youth is terrible, frightening. I will "wait it out". And men? Men are cruel and strong. They want things I haven't got to give." "Upon the following terms ... Because I have suffered much. Because I only lately received what I have to give away ..., "It's too soon!" she thought. "Too soon! ... even though by my own fault I have put myself into this position.

And I am not ready to give up on this. No, not yet. And so I'll tell you what, I leave this property, land, house, garden, water rights, to Hattie Simmons Waggoner. Me! I realize this is bad and wrong. Not possible. Yet it is the only thing I really wish to do, so may God have mercy on my soul."

In her hour of extremity and need, all she could think to do was to try, insanely, to leave the house to herself, to perpetuate a tragic situation. She could not accept and would not choose the decision that was forcing itself upon her. She could not leave the house.

Perhaps, like Hattie Waggoner, some of us here today have avoided the decision in front of us for too long. Perhaps we are approaching the point where we should give up whatever it is that's holding us back, if we ever want to move forward, or stop neglecting ourselves, or causing distress or upset for that other person in our lives. What have you put off for too long?

Perhaps over the years we've succumbed to the temptation of "waiting it out," and we're now in danger of having waited too long, of having no hope of letting go of what it is that's holding us back, and no vision of who or what we'd turn to if we *were* suddenly free to move on, to take that first step.¹

In Matthew, Jesus provides a graphic picture of what's holding us back when we've decided to just "wait it out." "If your right eye causes you to sin," he says, "tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your (body parts) than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." This, suggests that often we lead ourselves astray, that it's something inside of *us* or some part of us that keeps us from letting go of destructive habits or thoughts. But rarely would it take something as drastic as plucking out an eye to get beyond what's holding us back.

If you want to be healthy, ... stop doing those things that harm you. (Instead, start eating better and exercising more.) If you want harmony in your life, ... stop doing those things that cause discord. (Try encouraging your spouse, helping your little brother or sister.)

If you want a closer relationship with your children, ... stop doing those things and saying those things that build up walls between you. (Start listening from the other person's perspective both child a parent.)

If you want to rekindle romance in your marriage, ... stop doing those things that create animosity and boredom. (Carve out some time to spend with one another, remember the little things he likes, the small gestures she appreciates.)

If you want to live in a close-knit, caring community, ... stop hiding behind your front door. (Take part in community activities or things going on at church.)

If you want a spiritual life that fills you up, ... stop pouring all your energies everywhere but toward God. (Take time for daily prayer, make it a family, friend or even co-worker thing.)

"It *is* possible to stop bad habits and destructive behavior. But it is not easy."² What is it that gets in the way when we get a glimpse of what it might take to make a difference in our lives?

Jesus digs into the root of our blockage in his list of "do's" and "don'ts." He says, "You have heard that it was said ..., 'You shall not murder' (the sixth commandment) ... But

¹ Michael Scrogin, *Practical Guide to Christian Living* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985), 14-15.

² Bob Kaylor, senior minister, Park City United Methodist Church, Park City, Utah.

I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment (and hell fire).”

And concerning adultery? (The seventh commandment.) “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you,” says Jesus, “that everyone who looks at a woman (or man) *with lust* has already committed adultery ... in his (or her) heart.”

From murder to anger; from adultery to lust. Jesus is backing us up one step, saying that “the anger” that can cause us to kill someone (or wish them dead or never born) is where the blockage is; “the lust” that can cause us to cheat on someone (or take something that doesn’t belong to us) is where the blockage is between us and a happier, healthier life.

Jesus is saying that it’s our inner attitude that gets in the way. What thought or attitude gets in your way of making progress on a goal? Our attitudes – our basic assumptions about life – these are the hardest things for us to change. Our basic attitude is at the root of our actions, it’s what gives rise to our very being, and often it’s what perpetuates our bad habits.

An old teacher was once taking a walk through a forest with his students by his side. The old man suddenly stopped and pointed to four plants. The first was just beginning to peep above the ground, the second had rooted itself pretty well in the earth; the third was a small shrub, while the fourth was a full-sized tree.

The teacher said to his young companion: “Pull up the first.” The boy easily pulled it up with his fingers. “Now pull up the second.” The youth found *that* task not so easy. “Now the third.” With this plant, the boy had to pull with all his strength and use both arms to uproot it. “And now,” said the master, “try your hand at the fourth.” Well, the trunk of the tall tree, clenched in the arms of that little boy, it barely shook a leaf. “This, my son, is just what happens with our bad habits. When they are young, we can cast them out more readily, with the help of God. But when they are old, it is hard to uproot them, though we pray and struggle with all our might.”

When we’ve always done it that way, or have come to look at an issue from a certain perspective, it’s hard to see any new possibilities. The longer we hold onto old habits and ways of thinking, the harder it is to shake free from them, even if they no longer serve us. Like Hattie Waggoner, we often decide it’s more comfortable “waiting it out” than making a change for the better. And that’s OK, if that’s what you choose. Some of us are content to be full-grown, well-rooted trees. But even some of us trees would like a little pruning from time to time. And still, we don’t see what’s needed. Sometimes we cling to even the dead branches because we can’t see that there’s a better way to health and wholeness, another choice to make.

One day a young girl watched her mother prepare a ham for baking. At one point, the daughter asked, “Mom, why did you cut off both ends of the ham?” “Well, because my mother always did,” said the girl’s mother.” But why?”

“I don't know – let's go ask Grandma.” So they went to Grandma's house and asked, “Grandma, when you prepare the ham for baking, you always cut off both ends – why do you do that?” “That's what my mother always did,” said Grandma.” But why?” “I don't know – let's go ask Great-Grandma.”

So off they went to Great-Grandma's. “Great-Grandma, when you used to prepare the ham for baking, you always cut off both ends – why did you do that?”

“Well,” said Great-Grandma “the pan was too small.”

It may not matter if you cut off both ends of a ham before baking. But when it's your life we're talking about, wouldn't it be helpful to realize when you're cutting yourself short for no good reason?

Whether we're “waiting it out” or thinking too small, our preconceptions and bad habits have their consequences. But if and when we're ready to shake free from our set way of being – to “think outside the baking pan,” so to speak – that's when we can begin to get rid of our destructive or wasteful habits. But to do that, we have to face both the truth *and* the consequences.

When Jesus says, “... If you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire,” he's talking about consequences, shining light on attitudes and actions that have inevitable and often undesirable outcomes. The truth is, we are often our own worst enemy, and our actions or inactions have consequences.

But Jesus also does point to a way we can overcome bad habits and give up any ill-advised attitudes and actions. Regardless of what you believe about the fires of hell, it is clear that compared to any earthly measure, judgments concerning heaven and hell rest with God. When Jesus makes us liable to the fires of hell, he's telling us to submit our thoughts and actions to God's scrutiny. He is telling us to look at our deepest, most ingrained motivation and ask what it might take to bring them in line with God's will for our lives.

And then Jesus does something interesting. After showing us how useful it is to look at ourselves from God's perspective, he instructs us to get right with each other before even approaching God. “When you are offering your gift at the altar,” says Jesus, “if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ... first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

So, yes, it's important to check our deepest motivations in the sight of God who knows our innermost thoughts, but then we must act on what we've discovered about ourselves. We have to clean up whatever it is that our angry or lustful or otherwise damaging thoughts and actions have caused.

It may be that we need to let go of our resentment of a friend or family member who had the audacity to fall short of *our* expectations of them. We may need to apologize to someone for holding a grudge, or pay back mom or dad for some of *their* money that somehow ended up in *our* pocket. We may simply have to forgive ourselves for not

being perfect and then, in the space created by that forgiveness, plant a new habit or a new thought of our choosing and pledge to ourselves and others to nurture its growth.

Whatever it is, these acts of cleaning up our messes are the only way of moving forward. Otherwise, we remain mired in the mud, which make it that much easier next time to ignore the mess.

At our first service,

Today is Scout Sunday. In a few moments, we will join the boys of our Cub Scout Pack in the "A Scout is Reverent Litany." When these young people pledge "to do their best," they are making a decision – and a declaration – to avoid getting into messes in the first place. They're pledging to uproot any bad habits or negative tendency as they appear and while they're still easy to unearth.

Some habits we have are still young shoots just peeping above the ground, some have rooted themselves well into our lives, and some are full-sized trees that we can't imagine uprooting. Regardless of what's holding you back, we all have been given as God's children what it takes to clear the way for a more joyous and peaceable life.

Because God will always honor our efforts to get right with the people in our lives, to turn away from that which we know is hurtful or even self destructive. Who do you – who do I – need to clean things up with?

In the end, we can't control our relationships with other people or even sometimes how we feel about ourselves or our past. But in the moment – at some point this very day – *we can* do what it takes to get right with another person in our lives, knowing that only by doing so, can we rightly approach God and open ourselves to the continued blessings in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Almighty God, you who have made all things for us, and us for your glory. Sanctify our bodies and souls, our thoughts and our intentions, our words and actions, that whatsoever we shall think or speak or do may by us be designed to the glorification of your name,

and let no pride or self-seeking, no impure motive or unworthy purpose, no little ends or low imagination stain our spirits or profane any of our words and actions.

But let our bodies be servants to our spirits, and both body and spirit servants of Jesus Christ.

For it is only in knowing Christ as the source of our goodness that we can be good to others. O God, ignite in us such devotion to you, that it never again becomes more about us than the other in our midst.

We know that you are among us, God, taking joy in our success, smiling on our acts of compassion, and delighting in our genuine desire to serve you.

Hear our prayers this hour for those in need – for the lonely, for those who are distressed, for any who are suffering from physical or mental illness.

We pray for those who have lost a loved one, either through death or some form of estrangement.

Let those in need feel your healing touch, sense your calming presence, be uplifted by the power of your spirit.

And let us be ever-mindful of the One through whom we are lifted up, the one who never lets us down. That one, is Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying ...

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.