

What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

Preached at St. Francis Episcopal Mission, San Bernardino
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; I Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
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"It seemed like a good idea at the time." How many have had this insight after suffering the consequences of a really dumb choice. Or maybe we just didn't think at all. Obviously, I wasn't thinking too hard about my academic success while spending late nights in the pool hall. And my grades in physics and calculus were what you may have suspected. After two years in the Army, my thinking improved. By then I definitely knew what I did NOT want to spend the rest of my life doing. I would leave that choice to such honorable men as Col. Vindman and others.

I remember coming back to our construction yard during the time when I was running our family's contracting business to find some very expensive aluminum scaffolding all crumpled up by the back fence. A crew had been working that day taking off a chimney as part of getting rid of a fireplace at one of our projects. I called the foreman Paul over and asked him what had happened to our scaffolding. He told me that instead of dismantling the chimney brick by brick, they thought it might be easier to just lever the thing up whole and shove it off the roof. "It seemed like a good idea at the time." And here was four or five hundred dollars of crumpled up scaffolding that the whole thing hit on its way down to the ground. *What could possibly go wrong?*

After that costly mistake I would ask the crews every morning before they left the yard to consider any plan they might be unsure of. Ask yourselves, I would counsel, ***"What could possibly go wrong?"***

Remember Murphy's Law. If it could possibly go wrong, it most likely will. And remember the corollary to Murphy's law. "Everything that hits the fan is not equally distributed." 'Nough said.

On a more serious note, we all need to be asking that question of ourselves as American citizens. If we disparage the foundations of our democracy, what could possibly go wrong? If we trash the news media, if we neglect to adequately educate our children – if we fail to support those institutions that are bastions of our communitarian life – our churches, and temples, our service clubs, the PTAs and all the rest – *what could possibly go wrong?* If we jigger the tax code so all the benefits go to the top five percent – *what could possibly go wrong?* And some businesses like Amazon, Wells Fargo and Google pay hardly anything or nothing at all...? Go wrong???

Plenty, it would seem.

This is the point of our lesson from Deuteronomy put in the starkest terms: There are the ways of life. There are the ways of death.

As the Hebrews were about to enter the promised land Moses is reputed to have gathered the tribes together and instructed them.¹

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord, your God that I am commanding you, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess."

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

¹ Deuteronomy 30:15-17, RSV

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live..."²

There are ways that lead to life abundant and ways that lead to dissolution, to life squandered. St. Paul, over and over, reminds his community to choose LIFE. You know, the part about love being patient and kind, not boastful.

Now, let me digress for a moment. There's the false notion some Christians have that the Old Testament being the book of Law. It's the book of EAT YOUR SPINICH. Or whatever food you detested as a child. For me it was tomato aspic – bluck! AND the New Testament being Gospel -- the book of God's grace and love.

Those who believe this, I would aver, have read neither, Old or New. There's both gospel and law in the Old Testament as there is gospel and law in the New Testament. In fact, we must understand the law as also a blessing. The purpose of the law in scripture was to retain the blessings of God's freedom won for us at great price from Pharaoh.

How can we enjoy the benefits of civil society if no one can trust that the weights are not manipulated or that testimony given in court is truthful? It is because, and only because we have agreed to keep to certain standards and a basic trust in one another that life can flourish. Thus, these basic laws are solely to maintain and secure these blessings to ourselves and our children. That's the entire purpose of the law – to keep the freedom God has won for us from all that would oppress.

Down through the ages, the understanding of law, or Torah, has changed. Jesus reinterpreted the legal inheritance passed down to him in our lesson from Matthew. When law fails to secure the blessings of God's providence, we are not under its demands. St. Paul certainly

² Ibid, 30:19

reinterpreted the law. That is why we have several different injunctions concerning divorce.

The bottom line of our faith is that the glory of God is a woman, a man fully alive. We need a little discipline and self-transcendence to keep this godly gift. That's the sole purpose of the Law, and that's why the law is indeed a blessing. The dissolute life is definitely NOT a blessing, though it may feel good at the time.

A Presbyterian clergy friend was telling me the other day how excited he was about the eager youth in his confirmation class. They were really ready to explore in depth the faith they had received as children. Unfortunately, too many Christians are left with a fourth grade Sunday school understanding of the faith. Confirmation classes offer the opportunity to go deeper.

I was taken down memory lane to one of my confirmation classes. I had come into my office a bit late and apologized for my tardiness. And I moved to get the class focused, "Okay, guys, lets get started." Angie protested, "We're not all guys." Before I could say another word, macho Tom interjected, "Well, you're sure flat enough." This was definitely NOT what you tell a junior high girl! Angie jumped up in tears and stormed out the door. I quickly followed her as she almost ran into the arms of our associate pastor, who had been coming up the walkway. While he took charge of comforting Angie, I returned to the class.

Complete silence. More silence. After I believed that we had taken in what had just transpired, I finally told them that today's lesson had just changed. Today, the lesson would be about what creates community and what kills community. Slowly, a few began to speak. Finally, Tom said, "I guess I have to apologize," at which point the entire class like a massive Greek chorus intoned, "YEAH, TOM."

Set before us are the ways of life and the ways of death. If the operating ethic is solely ME FIRST??? What could possibly go wrong? YEAH, TOM! Set before us are the ways of life and the ways of death. Choose life, Tom.

I found out that later that week Tom had In fact apologized. Angie had accepted his remorse and the following week we gathered back as a group. A summation of what we call the Ten Commandments could be the title of that Aretha Franklin song: R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Respect your life. Respect your neighbor. Respect your community. And above all, respect the Mystery that brought you and everything else into being. That's the sole purpose of the Law. When we neglect the duty of R-E-S-P-E-C-T what could possibly go wrong? Most likely, everything. Ask Tom.

Robert Fulghum, a Unitarian pastor wrote a wildly popular book some time ago, *All I Really Need to Know I learned in Kindergarten*. This is just another iteration of the laws which make for human community. In the pages of that book were common sense guidelines for playing nicely in the sandbox. You remember some of the rules. Law, if you will --

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

All of which add up to RESPECT. They are the sort of guidelines that make for kindergarten being a fun place, a good experience. I also found out that it also helps if you can sit quietly in story circle. And

keep your hands to yourself. Do these things and kindergarten will be a blessing.

But sometimes folks don't keep their hands to themselves. Just can't. Some folks grow up in homes that are so damaging they don't have a chance of success. In their homes, alcoholism, sexual violation, violence and anger destroy for generations. They are bound to failure as tightly as Ulysses was bound to the mast of his ship.

Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn, a husband-and-wife pair of Pulitzer Prize winning authors, in their new book, ***Tightrope***, tell the stories of Yamhill, Oregon, the small logging community in which Nick grew up. Almost forty percent of those with whom he rode the number six bus to school every day are gone – gone to drugs and alcohol, gone to incarceration, gone to suicide, victims of sexual abuse and family violence, gone to accidents caused by risky behavior, gone to disease from poor lifestyle choices.

Reading through their book, following some of the families, chapter after chapter – depression set in. Lack of employment and poor schools, lives of poor health choices. So many lived lives of desperation. America has ignored these people. The result has been death. The death of a huge swath of our nation.

But in chapter eleven, a burst of sunshine brightens the pages of their book. Nicholas and Sheryl tell the story of “Women in Recovery.” This is a two-year residential diversion program for non-violent drug offenders. It is a program in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that is helping “shattered people rebuild their lives and families.” Second chances are the ways of LIFE.

In these pages I encountered women and children who, by ordinary odds, would not have had a chance of escaping the fateful trajectories of their lives. Called junkie, they die junkies. But with the blessing of

enlightened division programs, many are now taking charge of their lives. They choose LIFE. America, choose LIFE!

In the opening pages of that chapter I was invited to a graduation ceremony of seventeen women of “Women in Recovery.” There they were in their finery with hair and nails done to a tee. No longer called junkies and whores, these women are proud tax payers, productive workers, and moms. They had cheated, lied and stolen from most of the hundred or so in the crowd who came to celebrate their accomplishment. And in the front row sat a number of the very judges who had sentenced them applauding enthusiastically. They stood proudly to “raucous cheers from family members and even police officers who previously had arrested and scorned them.”

The attorney general of Oklahoma was one of the graduation speakers. He called these woman “heroes.”

“I thought we’d be planning a funeral instead,” said one audience member whose younger sister had started using meth at age twelve and was now graduating at thirty-five.³

This is what happens when a society chooses the ways of LIFE – chooses the way of a second chance for those bound for failure. It is what happens when women such as these take responsibility for their bad choices and seize the opportunity for LIFE. To conclude:

At the end of the ceremony there was another standing ovation. Then these women themselves shouted, “Thank you, judges,” and gave a return standing ovation to the judges. The giddy scene offered a crucial lesson that the rest of the country hasn’t appreciated: there is hope even for people with addictions whom society has given up on—if they get the right help.⁴

³ Ibid, p. 124.

⁴ Ibid.

Through the hopefulness and the generosity of spirit of those who create and support such programs as Women in Recovery, God offers life abundant. Such programs make the offer real to the drug offenders that society has given up on – choose LIFE.

These women have weighed, through lives of misery and degradation, those two choices. Through the grace of God, they have chosen LIFE - - as have the police and drug court judges who are the backbone of Women in Recovery. As has the state of Oklahoma.

Through another innovative program in New York public schools I met a homeless young immigrant from Nigeria, Tani, and his family. This homeless boy worked his way through an innovative school chess program to take back trophy after trophy to the homeless shelter in which his family was living. Up until then, Tani had never seen a chess board. His chess teacher, looking at Tani's progress remarked. "One year to get to this level, to climb a mountain and be the best of the best, without family resources...I've never seen it."⁵ Tani worked more chess puzzles than his teacher ever remembered any other student doing. Tani won the New York state championship for his age group. That's God-given freedom to shine like the sun. LIFE!

America, what could possibly go wrong when we deny opportunity to our people? Plenty. We see it in the hollowed-out eyes of those we have given up on.

BUT -- here's what can go gloriously right when we serve up opportunity in huge dollops. Followed with responsibility and respect.

America, choose Life that your inhabitants and future generations may enjoy the blessings of liberty. Choose opportunity! I set before you the ways of life and death. Choose LIFE. Amen.

⁵ Nicholas Kristoff, Sheryl WuDunn, Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2020), chapter 10, "Interventions that Work."