

Choose Your Life

First Sunday in Lent

March 10, 2019

Deuteronomy 30: 11-20

Rev. Sarah Campbell

“Do I contradict myself? Very well then. I contradict myself.” Walt Whitman said.
“Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” Ralph Waldo Emerson said.

If you are paying attention to our church life this Lent, you will have noticed major contradictions. You are being asked to please sign up online for a photo for the church directory. And to please take the online survey about our church, how well we are living our mission. And invited to read the attachments of readings for Lent and this week, with our low turnout, we'll also ask people to listen to the attached sermon, the first in our Lenten series. This is more tech activity at Mayflower than I can ever remember! At the same time, you are being invited to give up something tech for Lent, to limit your screen time. “Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds...!” ☺

Our Lenten theme “Tech Savvy: Discovering God’s Will” is complex. Let’s shine a light on the subject. Become more aware of the impact on our lives, positive and negative. And begin to make conscious choices about its use.

There are these subjects in life that you are not supposed to broach in polite company because they are so private and they make people defensive... “woa, that’s *my* business” ... subjects like death, money, sex and could it be? tech? screen time? But religion, if it’s worth its salt, like a good therapist, hones in on those deep, private things—shines light on it, stirs it around a bit, with the trust that we’ll come out all the better on the other side after such reflection. Mayflower is never shy about going in to those touchy subjects. Including, now, tech!

About these devices that are so much a part of our lives, our smart phones and lap tops, it needs to be said at the outset that these instruments are amazing. Let us not underestimate all the good they provide. They are knitting us closer together as a community—think of the survey and the directory and the shared readings and so much more. They are life savers for many humans on this planet. Think of the refugees and how they use their smart phones to find safe places and to stay connected to their loved ones. Think of young parents who can work from home and those with disability whose lives expand exponentially through this technology. Think of trans youth in rural parts of the country and how the trans teen chat from

the LGBT national health center literally saves lives. Think of how nimble and powerful the Black Lives Matter organizing is because of this technology. Think of how grandparents can watch their grandbabies developing from across the world and how adult children can be with their aged dying parents too, via this technology. The list goes on and on....

But it can also have detrimental effects, which we are only beginning to understand... the unintended consequences of this tech on our souls Have you ever had a salesperson tell you the other truth about these devices? Say a recent liberal arts grad, a philosophy major needing a job, who while showing you the latest in smart phones, says to you: "So these merchants of your attention—Google, Facebook, Twitter, Apple have given us this remarkable device which you will become tethered to not only by compulsion but also by the pleasure principle." She'd whisper to you out of earshot of her supervisor "Our pleasure principle, long prey to the manipulations of capitalism—has been turned against us, irretrievably yoking us to ends that are not ours, ends we cannot fully comprehend." Then this bright young philosopher would sweep her arms around the apple store and proclaim: "These are transforming us into economic subjects. They are redefining our humanity. This technology has enabled the very movements of our mind to become a steady stream of revenue to someone, somewhere. This device will be with you everywhere, a constant companion, drawing you in with endless diversions, like the warm ping of social approval delivered in the forms of likes and retweets, and the algorithmically amplified outrage of the latest "breaking" news. It will be in your hand as soon as you wake and command your attention until the final moments before you fall asleep." She's brilliant, this young philosopher, but you do wonder how long she'll keep her job. (Akhtar)

"It's just the way things are" they told them when they were slaves in Egypt. But somehow the Israelites knew that this was not the way it had to be; that there was another way; that God created them to be free and have life abundant. God made a way for them out of this slavery and they, courageously and with fortitude, took it. The sea parted. They left. They wandered in the desert for 40 years, getting clarity about who they were, and who God is and how they were to live as God's people. Maybe it took them that long to liberate their own minds from that slave mentality; that: "it's just the way things are". Finally, when they are about to enter the Promised Land, to enter this long awaited chapter of life, their leader Moses becomes deathly ill. He does not enter the Promised Land with them. Instead he offers his final sermon, so the story goes... He warns them that there will be new things in the land ahead, things they can't yet even imagine-- great prosperity, other religions, and more; and that adaption will be necessary, but be careful, he says, be wise, lest the adaptation make you forgetful, idolatrous, enslaved-- duping you into thinking you have no choice, that "it's just the way things are".

He reminds them that God longs for them to live every day in freedom, in joy, in gratitude, in love, that is, in God consciousness. *God be in my head and in my understanding. God be in my heart and in my thinking. God be in my eyes and in my looking.* This God consciousness, he tells them is not baffling, it's not esoteric, it's not hard to reach, it's very close. But you have to choose. Choose your life. Choose how to raise your children, what you allow in your home. Choose what you pay attention to. Choose what you give your heart to. "Oh my beloved people", does Moses say?, "don't you become in bondage to anything ever again"

I remember, as a little girl in church, and my daddy was the very tall preacher man in the pulpit, I remember once singing the doxology and very loudly singing out at the end instead of "amen", singing, almost yelling, "awomen!" My awakening consciousness of my gender oppression and my refusal of it, refusal to accept that it's just the way things are, must have been stirred by my mother's involvement in the YWCA and the Ms. magazines sitting on our coffee table. In high school I was in a women's consciousness raising group, we 16 years olds called ourselves women, and I vividly remember the first time I was led in a guided meditation in which all of the language about everything in the world was changed from the masculine to the feminine, including God language. My mind was forever altered. I was a second or third wave feminist so my work on my own brain and my own life and on society was different than the earliest pioneers but it *was* liberation work, much of it about the ongoing freeing of my own mind. How many of us have liberation stories? Don't we all? (liberation from internalized and socialized homophobia, binary gender thinking, racism, toxic masculinity, perfectionism etc.)

And so, like the Israelites in a new land, new chapter of life, I'll be damned if I'm going to be led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them; to unthinkingly submit to a new powerful thing, like these devices. I've worked too hard for freedom. I'm going to choose how to use them and not let them use me. Do you resonate?

You will notice that during Lenten worship at Mayflower we are using the ancient potent language of the "confession of sin". Of all the definitions of the word sin, what rings most true to you? How about this one? Sin is the *path of least resistance*. Sin is allowing others to manipulate your desires and what you give your time to. Sin is shrugging your shoulders and saying: It's just the way things are. Henri Nowen writes: "Do we want to let others decide what enters into our mind and determines our thoughts and feelings? Clearly we do not, but it requires real discipline to let God and not the world be the Lord of our mind."

"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live!"

I leave you with two images this morning and a challenge.

Image one: a beautiful early July Saturday in downtown Chicago at the intersection of Michigan avenue and Adams street, stunning architecture, a brilliant blue sky, a Saturday- not a work day for most, street musicians, a marvelous diversity of humanity, a multitude of possibilities for sweet human interaction like asking for directions, but the reality of this scene is this: Everyone has their head *in* their smart phone. It was like a black mirror episode.

Image two: another Saturday, a cold early winter day in Mpls, at a community meeting at the Pillsbury house in Powderhorn. We're all sitting around tables just about to eat when one of the chefs of the feast featuring wild rice and sweet potatoes and more, he's a chef from the Native American Gatherings Café was given the floor to speak to all of us. Chef Ben Shendo comes from the Jemez Pueblo of the southwest and he spoke to us about what was most on his heart, out of concern for our souls. He spoke to us as an outsider, almost like someone from another planet landing here, in Minneapolis. He said: "I got off the plane, got into the city, and what do I notice first of all? Everyone's head is *in, way in,* their smart phone. I've never experienced anything like it", he said. "How do you see the sky? Hear the birds? Feel the breeze? How do you smile at the stranger? Or make small talk with the person next to you? How do you see the world around you? How do you feel the Great Spirit? He said all off this gently to us.

What will you give up this Lent? For your soul? Fill out a commitment card and put it on your fridge for 40 days as a reminder. The card has suggestions like removing notifications for your phone, computer, and/or tablet. Or you can choose your own. I'm committing to a Lenten practice of only checking my emails three times a day. For me this will take great discipline. I'm not giving up email. I wouldn't even if I could. I'm grateful for this tool. It keeps me connected to all of you, to what's going on in this active church, and to our faith partners. But it has gotten away from me, driving my work day in a way that I don't choose. Sometimes it gets in the way of my being fully present to people. And so I was elated the other day when meeting with the young adult Lenten group leader, Claire, who told me that she does this already, and then she gave me tips for how to do it. I started the next day. Can I stay with it? Will I choose to continue this practice after Lent is over? We'll see.

God * be in my head and in my understanding. God be in my heart and in my thinking. God be in my eyes and in my looking. May it be so...

* What does this word "God" mean? Some call it *infinite holiness, the great mysterious, the ground of all being, oneness, source, the cloud of unknowing...* But we can never really know what it means. But you know it when you feel it. More contradiction! Did you feel God in the

candlelit cave of the chapel chanting with others on Ash Wednesday? Do you feel God when you are in the heart's secret room in centering prayer? Or when you look up while on a walk and perceive the glory of nature all around you, the sky, the water, the trees? Or when you have a brief heart connection with a stranger?... Do you feel the intensity of longing for God even in your unknowing....?

Sources

Akhtar, Ayad, "One Mind, One, Heart, One Body", New York Times, Dec 31, 2017.

Roose, Kevin, "My name is Kevin, and I have a phone problem", Irishtimes, Feb 24, 2019.