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June 26, 2011  
The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Today's sermon is taken from the letter of Paul to the Romans.

*O God, we come together because we need you, we need one another, and we need to hear your word; and if we hear it here, let us become so possessed by it that we become servants of it out in your world. Amen*

I know that most of you, given the week that you've had, don't need the rector in front of you to complain, but I've had a rather challenging week. It's something I feel like in terms of my battery being run down because of things that have challenged me emotionally and spiritually, things that were part of the ministry but in a given week sometimes things go round and round. I happened to come across, as I've been trying to rest for the past couple of days, I came across from Dr. Seuss that I want to share with you this morning:

“Congratulations! Today's your day. You're off to great places, you're off and away. You have brains in your head, you have feet in your shoes, you can steer yourself any direction you choose.”

Those rhythmic words of advice come from the delightful little book by Dr. Seuss titled *Oh, The Places You Go*. “You're on your own,” he continues, “and you know what you know, and you are the one who will decide where to go. It's up to us,” says Dr. Seuss, “the world is ours and we are free to choose what kind of life we will have.” It even provides a warning: “You look up and down streets, look'em over with care; about some you'll say, ‘I don't choose to go there.’ With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet, you're too smart to go down a not-so-good street.”

I wish that were true, don't you? I wish we only went places that our brains told us to go, that we always made rational choices. Life is about choices. That's where I want to begin this morning.

The human being is the only creature on earth that is not the prisoner of its programming, but it is the master of it. Birds are programmed to fly south in the winter. They don't suddenly decide that because of the bad economy they had better stay home this year. Beavers build dams, fish swim in schools. Only humans decide to build a dam or to go back to school. We have the power to decide.

That doesn't mean, of course, that we always make good decisions. Some of you will remember an episode of Seinfeld in which George Constanza is frustrated because every decision he makes turns out to be wrong. Jerry says, "Here's your chance, George, to do the opposite. If every instinct is wrong, then the opposite would have to be right." George realizes that Jerry is onto something. If he would act and react completely opposite of his normal actions and reactions, he might have better results. George makes a decision to alter his behavior. "Yes, I will do the opposite," he declares. It turns out that Jerry was right. Whenever George does the opposite of his normal reactions, the situation always turns out in his favor. You really have to have a perverse view of the world to make such an approach to life work for you, but that is why the comedy on Seinfeld worked.

And yet many of us will have to confess that there's something within us that invariably draws us toward making bad choices. A customer in a bakery was carefully examining all the rich looking pastries displayed on the trays in the glass cases. A clerk asked him, "What would you like?" The customer answered, "I'd like that chocolate-covered, crème-filled donut, that jelly-filled donut and that cheese Danish." But with a sigh he added, "But I'll take an oat bran muffin." (hearty laughter)

Why is it that we are drawn to that which is bad for us? Especially when we know that making bad choices can sometimes be disastrous. There are many choices that people make that end up costing them their lives or their families, or their health, or their peace of mind. Anything that causes you to hurt yourself or to hurt someone else is going to be a bad choice.

Some of you will remember the story of a teenage girl who was out on a date one night. Her boyfriend suggested they go to a party where there was going to be alcohol and drugs and all kinds of illicit activity. This particular responsible young woman said, "No, I'm not going to do that, and if you're going to do that, you can take me home." Her boyfriend said, "What's the matter? Are you afraid your daddy will hurt you?" She said, "No, I'm afraid that I will hurt my daddy." She knew that what her boyfriend was suggesting was a bad choice.

"You look up and down streets, look'em over with care; about some you'll say, 'I don't choose to go there.'" The Bible says that we are drawn to bad choices because of our sinful nature.

In today's reading that John Dingess did from the epistle, St. Paul writes: "When you are slaves to sin you are freed from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap in that time that you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death, but now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

St. Paul contrasts people who are enslaved to sin and those who are servants of God. We need to understand what Paul is saying. First of all, let's acknowledge that we're all sinners. Even

the best of us are sinners. Thirty years ago a psychologist named William Glasser wrote a very helpful book entitled *Positive Addiction*. Think about that term for a moment -- positive addition. Usually when we think of addition, we think in negative terms of drugs and alcohol and online pornography and violent video games -- and anything we can become so obsessed with that it will be destructive to us, mentally or physically or spiritually.

We know how many lives have been damaged by negative additions, but Glasser noted there are some activities, however, that we can become addicted to that will result in positive benefits for ourselves and for others. One of the most obvious is physical exercise. Glasser came to understand the power of positive addiction from his experience as a runner. Running or almost any physical exercise can become addictive. Not only can you get to the point where you actually look forward to slogging down the road in the wind and the cold, but you are irritable and disoriented when something interferes with your daily run. It becomes an addiction, a positive addiction.

On the other hand, the benefits of a positive addiction can be amazing -- weight loss, decline in blood pressure, regulation of blood sugar, improvement of your cardiovascular condition. This list of possible health benefits is amazing. I know myself when I've done that I feel so much better, so much better.

You can become addicted to all kinds of positive activities. Glasser listed such things as gardening and juggling and swinging a bat and bathing, creative but non-critical writing and knitting. Just about anything can become a positive addiction if it is something you do religiously, if it benefits you and those around you, and if it does not cause you to neglect other positive activities you ought to be involved in.

Positive addiction is like being a servant of God. It means daily making choices that are in keeping with God's will for wholeness and health. It means choosing daily, with God's help, attitudes and actions that bring God glory.

Positive addiction, servants of God, or as Dr. Seuss says, "You look up and down streets, look'em over with care; about some you'll say, 'I don't choose to go there.' With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet, you're too smart to go down a not-so-good street."

Life consists of making choices. The Bible says that we are drawn to bad choices because of our sinful nature. But does it have to be that way? We can train ourselves by God's grace to daily make good choices.

Several years ago I went to Memphis, Tennessee, and in that process there were several of us who wanted to go to Elvis' home Graceland. In the process of getting ready to do that I read about Pastor Tommy Barnett who had an encounter with singer Elvis Presley many years ago. Elvis was in the congregation at the church where Barnett was preaching, and Elvis seemed

moved by the sermon and wanted to talk to Barnett after the service. Elvis knew that he needed to repent in his lifestyle and return to his Christian faith which had been so important to him. But the allure of show business was so strong that he felt like he had no choice but to keep going in the same direction. With tears rolling down his face, Elvis asked, “What if I renounce show business and find that serving God won’t bring joy to my heart?” Sounds like a sensible question, doesn’t it? Of course, we all know what show business did to this wonderful and talented man. Elvis had it all, but became a poster child for, and ultimately a victim of, bad choices.

Choosing Jesus invariably helps us to make better choices. That’s one reason the Christian faith has stood the test of time. When people give their lives to Jesus they become better parents, they become better citizens, they live happier, more fulfilled lives. We all know that to be true. But let me say this: It happens only if you make your faith the most important part of your lives. It works only if you take your faith seriously.

I’m not being judgmental here. Studies show that people who only show up at church occasionally, who have only a casual relationship with God, are as clueless as everyone else of what it takes to have a fulfilled life. They make the same bad choices; they have the same emptiness as the world outside. Only when Jesus becomes a real presence in our lives do the benefits of faith show themselves.

The words “servant of God” may rub us the wrong way, but they emphasize the completeness of the commitment that is required. The choice is put squarely to us by St. Paul. He writes, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The choice couldn’t be any plainer than that. Or, as Dr. Seuss puts it: “Congratulations! Today’s your day. You’re off to great places, you’re off and away. You have brains in your head, you have feet in your shoes, you can steer yourself any direction you choose.” With God’s help, you can.

*Amen*

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs