

**CHARACTER FLAWS & LONGING**

6/3/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 4 (B): 1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 4:5-12; Mark 2:23-3:6

What's your character flaw? Last weekend, when I was trying to disengage, and just be, I watched the new Peter Rabbit movie. It's pretty goofy, but there are some interesting life lessons in the middle of the slapstick humor, like the way Peter Rabbit talks about character flaws. Because, of course, he is this wild and rebellious rabbit, who sneaks into Mr. McGregor's garden, even when he knows he could be caught.

So one of the times, when he's about to run into the garden, because he's determined to teach Mr. McGregor a lesson—even though the old farmer is in plain sight, Peter refuses to let his sister accompany him. He knows how reckless he's being, so when she whines, "But...why do you get to go in?", he answers, "Because that's my character flaw."

After Peter calls to his cousin Benjamin: "We're going in!", the sister cries again, "Why does he get to go in?", to which Peter replies, "Because that's his character flaw. He goes along with everything I say, no matter how stupid or reckless it is."

Do you know what your character flaw is? Since I just admitted to watching a silly movie as a tactic to get myself to disengage, I guess I'd have to say one of my character flaws is I can't just sit and do nothing—even when I'm supposed to be taking a day off, I'm busy re-potting plants, or sewing drapes or re-painting furniture, so that when I come back to work, I'm exhausted from all the work I was doing at home!

I suppose I could take a little solace in today's Gospel reading that "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath." And, yet, I realize that isn't really what Jesus was getting at. He was talking about making decisions—taking actions—that are in alignment with that which is life-giving.

As he heals the man with a withered hand, Jesus asks the religious leaders: "Do you think we should be helping people experience life on the Sabbath? Or should our observance of the Sabbath ignore people who need help?"

Obviously, one of Jesus' character flaws is he can't keep his mouth shut—even when he knows he's in a dangerous position. He knows challenging the Pharisees in this way is going to get him in trouble. I mean, he's just like Peter Rabbit—he knows they're watching him—but he can't help but restore this guy's withered hand. And, sure enough, the Pharisees run off to conspire with the Herodians to destroy Jesus. So why does he "go in" anyway?

Well, first of all, it's Jesus—God incarnate—but also, in his actions, Jesus demonstrates for us that sometimes "going in"—doing that which is life-giving—is risky, and, yet, even scientists are now proving that we as humans are hard-wired for compassion. We are geared—at a very cellular level—to care for each other!

That's one of the major points made in the book our group is currently reading, *Becoming Wise*. The author, Krista Tippett, argues that humanity is completely connected. Not that we should do certain things so that we all become connected, but that we are already, by the fact that we breathe the same air, live on the same earth, compete for the same resources—we are already connected.

So our goal, then, should be to make decisions and take actions that acknowledge our connection in mutually beneficial ways. The book highlights the spiritual virtues important to living lives that are, not just using our intelligence, but nurturing our God-given wisdom.

Tippet hosts a weekly podcast called “On Becoming” So in this book, she highlights some of the interviews she’s done with an amazing and diverse group of people over the years. They are astrophysicists, neuroscientists, sociologists, nuns, priests, poets, mathematicians, and activists. Besides asking them about their work in the world, she finds ways to invite faith and compassion—even redemption—into the conversation.

Tippet writes and talks with her interviewees about how the Enlightenment period, and the age of mechanization, sold us short by convincing us we could figure out everything with reason and logic. But now science is now pointing us back to the mysteries of the universe, and how there are some things we may never be able to “prove” but still know that they are true.

So I find it fascinating that scientists are proving that human beings are hard-wired for compassion. Another scientist points out that having weakness in any system is natural; the key is to provide places where the pressure of the weakness can be released. The weakness, when given opportunity to release in healthy ways, often leads to growth, evolution, and transformation.

For example, communities that are rigid crumble like a landscape ripped open by an earthquake, at the first sign of weakness, instead of evolving; whereas a flexible community can wrestle with the weakness in the system, and evolve in a way that’s healthy for the good of the organization.

Sometimes this “weakness” in the system is seen or experienced as darkness...the dark night of the soul, for instance, alluded to in the section left out of this morning’s Psalm. The Apostle Paul, in our passage from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, counteracts that sense of darkness, imploring us to “let light shine out of darkness.” He lists those times that could lead us to doubt: when we might be afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. And, yet, he says, through Christ’ companionship, we are not crushed, driven to despair, forsaken, nor destroyed, but transformed.

Paul also mentions the idea of having God’s treasure in clay jars. As I read that I got hung up on how dark the inside of a clay jar is, but in our discussion about this month’s sermon series, Richard pointed out to me that those clay jars are often cracked, and that’s where the light gets in. Darkness is also a place for germination. So, many times, the evolution is already happening before the light ever comes through. Our Psalm refers to one of those times, when we were knit together in our mother’s womb.

Of course, Paul is quick to remind us that when the light shines through the weakness in the system, revealing God’s presence, it’s done so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies. In other words, we “go in” for the good of the whole—so that we are taking actions that are life-giving.

There’s another reminder in one of the *Becoming Wise* interviews that I really appreciated. The author was talking to Sister Simón, an activist nun, about knowing when to “go in”, or avoiding the overwhelming feeling that the world needs so much help, and we have so little to give. In response, Sister Simón pointed out none of us can do everything. We’re not good at everything, we don’t have time, and we can’t be everywhere all at once. All we need to do, she says, is use our particular gifts to do one thing.

Which got me to thinking...maybe what we're calling character flaws are really the shadow side of our unique gift. Today, in the business world...even the church world, we insist that leaders should be willing to fail, to experiment, to take risks as we "go in" to situations others might avoid. So instead of "reckless and stupid" we are "willing to take a risk". It's all in the spin, right? And the other side of my not being able to sit still is the shadow side of my ambition and drive which gets a lot of things done around here.

From that perspective our character flaws might just be God calling us to "go in"; which is why we've called this month's sermon series: "What am I here for?" An Irish poet, John O'Donohue, describes that in his poem called, "For Longing":

blessed be the longing that brought you here  
and quickens your soul with wonder.

may you have the courage to listen to the voice of desire  
that disturbs you when you have settled for something safe.

may you have the wisdom to enter generously into your own unease  
to discover the new direction your longing wants you to take.

may the forms of your belonging – in love, creativity, and friendship –  
be equal to the grandeur and the call of your soul.

may the one you long for long for you.

may your dreams gradually reveal the destination of your desire.

may a secret providence guide your thought and nurture your feeling.

may your mind inhabit your life with the sureness  
with which your body inhabits the world.

may your heart never be haunted by ghost-structures of old damage.

may you come to accept your longing as divine urgency.

may you know the urgency with which God longs for you.

So what if our character flaws are really about our longing to make a difference, and what if our longing, as the poet says is really "divine urgency"? What if your character flaw is really God calling to you as he did Samuel. Are you ready to respond, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening"?

-AMEN

## The Collect

O God, your never-failing providence sets in order all things both in heaven and earth: Put away from us, we entreat you, all hurtful things, and give us those things which are profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

## **1 Samuel 3:1-10**

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

## **Psalms 139:1-5, 12-17**

1 LORD, you have searched me out and known me; \*  
you know my sitting down and my rising up;  
you discern my thoughts from afar.

2 You trace my journeys and my resting-places \*  
and are acquainted with all my ways.

3 Indeed, there is not a word on my lips, \*  
but you, O LORD, know it altogether.

4 You press upon me behind and before \*  
and lay your hand upon me.

5 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; \*  
it is so high that I cannot attain to it.

12 For you yourself created my inmost parts; \*  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

13 I will thank you because I am marvelously made; \*  
your works are wonderful, and I know it well.

14 My body was not hidden from you, \*  
while I was being made in secret  
and woven in the depths of the earth.

15 Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb;  
all of them were written in your book; \*  
they were fashioned day by day,  
when as yet there was none of them.

16 How deep I find your thoughts, O God! \*  
how great is the sum of them!

17 If I were to count them, they would be more in number than the sand; \*  
to count them all, my life span would need to be like yours.

## **2 Corinthians 4:5-12**

We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

## **Mark 2:23-3:6**

One sabbath Jesus and his disciples were going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.