

Feel free to pick or choose

Taylor Tresselt July 25, 2021

Good morning First Congregational. I have offered a handful of summer sermons in the past and they have always felt a bit like extended confessions--in that regard, this one may be the worst of the bunch.

Growing up I clearly remember two religious discussions which struck me as inexplicably unjust, and even mean-spirited--one in the youth program at First Congregational in Hartford and the other in junior high history class. The first is summed up nicely in today's reading: "Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job?"

In history class, in learning of the early Calvinists, I was amazed, irritated and a bit horrified by their belief in predestination--that God had already elected who would be saved-- plus the concept of "double predestination"--that God would actively create people who were born pre-damned. Wow, that is just unbelievably harsh.

Perhaps ironically, I now have what my younger self would surely see as an even more rigid and ridiculous stance--not about salvation and damnation--but about individuals' ability to freely make choices in their lives. I'm not weighing in on salvation or damnation--no surprise there--but I have come to believe that individuals are not able to actively choose what they do or even what they think.

I now point out the really good news that this is THE FINAL recorded service--whoop hoo!--so everyone has the option, has what may seem to be the choice, to embrace technology and fast forward through this sermon to the next part of the service.

There is a part of me which is inclined to delve into exactly why I have come to this conclusion about free will. It's a pretty significant proposition for me to simply drop at your feet and beg your indulgence, but I acknowledge that a worthy explanation behind this view would take longer than anyone would like (even with YouTube's option of viewing at twice the speed), so I will not fully subject you to it. But I ask those who are still listening to follow me with how liberating this view is when attempting to follow the teachings of Jesus.

So where this comes from... I have talked in the past of the importance of meditation and centering prayer in my own life, and there is a direct correlation. Psalm 46:10 --Be Still and know that I am God--is a very powerful direction for me.

The practice of centering prayer is very simple and the tradition comes from Jesus' teaching, in Matthew 6:6, "When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door and pray to God in secret. And God, who sees in secret, will repay you."

Practice is very simple: sit, be still. Many will choose a word to help focus. When thoughts arise, recognize them, watch what happens to them, and return your focus to a selected word or perhaps to your breath. Simple. Day in and day out, there is no more accessible way to know God.

After you have practiced this for a while, you may come to see how thoughts actually arise. They come unbidden. And this is important. You find that you don't think but rather thoughts simply occur. Practitioners of centering prayer recommend you acknowledge that these thoughts come forth from the spirit. Consider that nothing is more powerful than thoughts when it comes to establishing who we believe ourselves to be, or for that matter, for distracting ourselves from the present and the presence of this creation.

With this observation, what follows may seem disconcerting at first, but I suggest you'll find that the concept of free will is a construct which doesn't hold up: you simply don't have the ability to choose like you have convinced yourself you do.

Here it is in a nutshell:

if you pay close enough attention to how thoughts arise you'll see that you don't create them yourself...they flow through your consciousness, auditioning for your attention, at which point you're carried off by one, sometimes acting on it.

While this is difficult to accept as it runs counter to our very identification of who we believe ourselves to be, there are actually some pretty straight forward examples which, when paying very close attention, don't require any experience with meditation at all but can quickly showcase how our decision making process works, and why we all naturally convince ourselves that we have, in fact, made a choice.

To be clear, this is not my idea--I'm taking it from others, and for those familiar with the work of neuroscientist and author, Sam Harris--decidedly not a religious man--this is straight from his work. But regardless of personal beliefs, the lack of freewill is completely compatible with God's creation and the teachings of Christ.

For those who are still watching, let me know if you'd like to discuss this part further, but I won't belabor the point for now. Again, I acknowledge that this is a major assumption I'm asking you to make but follow me with the concept as if it were true to you, and I ask you to examine this idea more thoroughly yourselves. So much of what we believe to be our own free will is connected with our insatiable need to believe in our own control and, just as importantly, our need to believe that others have that control themselves.

As Christians, we believe that this creation is God's. The teachings of Jesus command us to put all of our faith in God. Technically this should not be a difficult step, but of course it is.

Now this is another important part: rejecting the notion of freewill does not equate to a fatalistic perspective of "why bother, it's all in motion, predetermined and nothing can be changed." No, fatalism like that is fully different from determinism. A deterministic view I'm suggesting understands what God has created--and appreciates that lives for individuals in this creation are put in motion as a matter of circumstances and luck. At its core, it means that if you, or anyone, were able to rewind--to go back in time--you (and they) will do the exact same thing each and every time. With everything the same, you would do the exact same thing--you would make the same exact choice--and if that's the case, it really isn't a choice at all. Now then what you do, what you plan, what you learn, who you encounter, and random events along the way--these things all affect what will happen in the future, no question--but the decisions you make to plan, what to focus on at any given time...well, you don't actually choose these things along the way yourself.

In a trivial example, consider the people who have already gotten irritated by this sermon and have skipped ahead in the service. There are an infinite number of reasons they may have done so--and I know they would do so again given the exact same (infinite) set of circumstances. But it is also possible that if something had been different for them in that moment of "choosing"--they may have stuck around. Regardless--and this is what I'm getting at--I can't blame those people for not wanting to stick with me on this.

The idea that people don't actually have the ability to choose can be unsettling. So much of how we interact with and judge people in the world is predicated on the assumption that we all make choices, and these choices largely define who we are in this world.

People who particularly struggle in this life, struggle with the infinite circumstances of this creation---we may sympathize "there but for the grace of God go I" --but really, for lots of people, there's a strong urge to believe that if they applied themselves more, or been smarter, or made different decisions....

Sure we all know that life is unfair, but there's a balance, right? And the success we've had ourselves is deserved.

"Satan, have you considered my servant Job?" This seems the very beginning of a horror story, or a sick joke. After it appears that Job has lost EVERYTHING, he finds he still has a few friends...with helpful suggestions.

In Job 4: His friend Eliphaz, says, hey, we know you're down but you've always been good with advice in the past, so do you mind if I jump in here? And proceeds, "Think! Has a truly innocent person ever ended up on the scrap heap?"

Do genuinely upright people ever lose out in the end? It's my observation that those who plow evil and sow trouble reap evil and trouble. One breath from God and they fall apart, one blast of his anger and there's nothing left of them."

Thanks, Eliphaz. It's clear to me why Satan took away everything from Job, but didn't mind leaving a few friends like these in place. While I'd hope that none of us would be as obnoxious to a friend in need, or have such friends when in need ourselves, I'm sure the best of us can't help but mentally come up with explanations as to why unfortunate or bad things may befall others.

People who are successful--they've worked hard, and yes they've had opportunities, but they've made the most of them, because really it's the intelligence, grit, ambition, determination and other character traits and factors like these which led to this success. Right? There's no question that's right. But the question of deserving?

Let's go back, break this down. Think about the unbridled luck we all have just to be alive in this time, and to be in this country. More specifically, how lucky are some to be born with a certain amount of intelligence or tenacity in the first place? The ability to focus attention for significant periods, or to retain information, or make amazing connections--are these things that can be worked toward? Or do traits that determine success--even seemingly basic ones such as an inclination to work harder--do characteristics like these simply emanate directly from God-created consciousness?

Those listening aren't trapped in Syria, nor were born during the Dark Ages. And personally, I challenge anyone that they could have kinder, more loving and nurturing parents than I have.

To be clear, luck and circumstances are different from choice, but they make up a critical part of the infinite number of variables which create the thoughts and decisions of anyone in any given moment.

People can become uncomfortable because these notions of choice and free will inevitably bring up questions of justice. "So, Taylor, I guess criminals shouldn't be put in prison because they really didn't have the ability to refrain from committing their crime at that moment." No, no, no--this really isn't a slippery slope. Just because people don't have the ability to choose what they think and do doesn't mean that suffering isn't very real, and that we as individuals and a society shouldn't do everything we can to reduce the suffering of everyone. That includes laws and systems to do our best to ensure that dangerous people will not be able to harm others. Again, it can be easy to mix up the idea of fatalism, "why bother," versus acknowledgement of the deterministic nature of God's creation and the way our consciousness works. Rules and laws still affect people, act as a deterrent and most importantly can be used to keep people safe--but acknowledgment of an individual's lack of choice should bring up questions of when, how, and why we put people in prison in the name of justice.^[1]

And here's the rub: as unsettling this notion may be, it is liberating and transformative when considering the commands of Jesus. "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also." It's an incredible ask. Imagine your outrage if you received that slap--your reaction and the flash of what you'd like to do to the person who delivered it. But "turn to them the other cheek also." With deep understanding that the person who has slapped you literally did not have the ability to act in another way, it is then considerably easier to at least imagine the course Jesus asks of us.^[1]

I am hoping that those who are watching do not have extreme examples of horrible people in your lives. Suffering is very real, as is humanity's innate desire for vengeance. Could I blithely point to a lack of personal accountability in the infamous hypothetical posed to Michael Dukakis? Of course not--I can't even repeat the question out loud--but it doesn't make it any less true.

While I hope everyone is lucky enough to escape the most awful of life's situations, we all know it is impossible to interact with others in this world without encountering people who do awful things.

Just to use a triggering example we all frequently discuss amongst ourselves, the polarizing nature of our national discourse is mind boggling. For me, it is impossible to understand those who believe in the conspiracies espoused by QAnon and the QAnon curious. I think they are extremely dangerous and believe that thousands, even hundreds of thousands of people have died because of the cynical and flippant way some politicians have exploited these beliefs. Jesus says, "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...." Acknowledging that people who believe these things have no choice makes it possible to understand what Jesus is asking. I also need to view the politicians and media personalities in the same way. Fight these people and ideas? Of course. Hate them because of

their ideas? Shoo...the outrage and indignation make it really, really tempting. But the lens of compassion is somehow possible to use.

Now consider the mundane and all too common examples of the person who cuts you off in traffic, or co-worker who lets you down. Acknowledging that these actions are inevitable can greatly reduce the amount of time you'll spend infuriated.

Extend this to the people you love, and who love you

The number of annoying and irritating things that I do that my wife, Christine, has to deal with? Perhaps I'm offering this entire meditation as an attempt to convince her that no matter what I've done or said in the past, given all of those circumstances, I'd have done the same again, no matter. All I can do now is take those moments and learn from them so that I can influence a small portion of the infinite number of God created variables in my future.

In some ways, the most powerful notion is extending this understanding to yourself. So often we want to do better, to do more. We beat ourselves up over mistakes, whether made recently or made in the distant past. These mistakes and learnings will be a part of the infinite number of variables which determine future "decisions," but you can actually forgive, release yourself from these mistakes because they were, in fact, inevitable. Whatever the mistake was, I hope you don't do it again but, back then, you would always have done just that...so let it go.

Your own consciousness is THE greatest mystery in God's creation. Jesus commands us to love God and love one another. Trusting in God's creation while realizing the limitations of agency within God's creation is a path for both. So recognize, and love.

I offer this confession, in Jesus' name Amen.