

## “COMMANDMENTS AND CHOICES”

John 15: 9-17

The Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 17, 2009

University Church of Chicago

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Let me introduce you to my friend Ben. He’s a middle-aged man who has enjoyed a fairly successful career in American capitalist society. He graduated from college in 1964 and went to work in public relations. He worked for the U. S. Government for several years in what turned out to be a pretty boring job that certainly didn’t test his intelligence but gave him a great deal of time for reading and generally goofing off. Then, in his quest for more money and achievement, he went to work as a stock broker and began to acquire the things he had always wanted: a nice home, status in the community, success, the freedom to travel and make friends with important people.

But something in Ben was unsatisfied, there was always this gnawing feeling of meaninglessness. He would never describe it as despair—too strong a word—but when he and I have talked about it late at night after the kids are in bed and we’ve moved past the usual male, macho pretenses and posings, Ben comes pretty close to talking honestly about life’s meaning.

Of all the cardinal sins, despair has been considered the most fearful. Ben and I studied under a professor who loved to quote Dante in the *Inferno* who saw written over the portals of hell, “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.” Hell in most Christian literature is eternal separation from God—which means those condemned to hell live in a sphere of unrelieved despair.

When Ben and I talk about such matters with any degree of honesty and thoughtfulness, I say something like, “Just examine the statistics of mental health, substance abuse, violence, crime, suicide in our contemporary affluent society, and you can’t help but resort to the language of despair.”

Ben’s quite intelligent retort goes something like, “Despair may *inform* destructive behavior, but it is not to be equated with such behavior. Despair comes from within, from your soul, if you will. Destructive behavior is, in fact, usually a way of *avoiding* the truth of one’s despair.”

At this point, I get quiet. Both of us do. Because we know we’re getting close to one of those territories we don’t want to enter, an area polite friends don’t discuss. Ben knows—as we all do—first hand about destructive behavior. After marrying his high school sweetheart and fathering four children, Ben had an affair with a younger woman he met in his office. The guilt, the stress, all the lies and deception sent him into a profound depression, and he was briefly hospitalized. Subsequently he and Janet got a divorce and he married Robin, but that marriage failed for the same reason as the first. Ben retreated to a cabin he built in the north woods of Wisconsin to write the Great American Novel.

He stayed up there for almost two years in virtual isolation, making artificial flies for fishing and going into Eagle River every afternoon to drink himself into oblivion.

Then he got tired of living with the pedal to the metal. He got tired of the greed and the cheerful, thoughtless way he had hurt others. He woke up and came back.

He is one of those people who has flirted, if you will, with the church most of his adult life. He was for years what Loren Meade calls a “church graduate.” You know the type: raised in a Christian home, went to worship and Sunday school almost every week, went to Methodist Youth Fellowship regularly, confirmed in the eighth grade, went on some work projects to Appalachia.

Then came college. Ben stopped going to church, stopped praying (except in extreme situations of need or despair), became cynical about the politics and power plays in the church and repeatedly condemned the church’s hypocritical leaders and its lack of involvement with the world. Kierkegaard once characterized the life of the church to being trampled to death by a flock of geese, and that inability of the church to move beyond the fluttering and squawking.

But he kept coming back. Ben knows the truth of Harry Emerson Fosdick’s great dictum which speaks of “the impossibility of being irreligious.” His quiet, pervasive, dominant sense of futility kept compelling him to sneak back to church. He could wear the mask of well-being like his peers and contemporaries at the office, and he could masquerade with the best of them, ultimately deceiving nobody but themselves.

Ben knows about repression. We human beings cannot live with a conscious, unrelieved sense of the vanity of our lives and endeavors. If our goals die, if our optimism is dashed by events, if our hope diminishes, then we very likely will construct bogus hopes out of thin air. Ernst Becker rightly claimed that repression is to the human what instinct is to other animals.

When we have these long, late-night discussions about theology and politics and life’s meaning, he remembers his alcoholic father, “He was an atheist when he was sober and a fundamentalist Christian when he was drunk.” He pauses for effect, then goes on, “You preachers are preaching out of a medieval understanding of humanity. You keep trying to make the people in the pew feel guilty. Those days are gone. Guilt and condemnation are no longer viable descriptions of the human condition.

“Remember Diane Sawyer, who worked as an assistant to Nixon before she went into television, attacking the Dixie Chicks because one of them remarked that she was ashamed of what our country was doing in Iraq and Afghanistan? We live in the Age of Oprah, and people like her and Ms. Sawyer play the role of the priest and the audience acts as the congregation.

“You look out there at your congregation on Sunday morning, Rip, and you will see a crowd of people as diverse as those in Soldier Field at noon on an autumn Sunday when

the Bears take on the Packers: some feel doubt, others have guilty consciences, there's a whole bunch of Emerson self-made types, some with hot religious passion, people who cling to old creeds and disposable ideas, everybody in the congregation infected with postmodern secularity—all jostling together, wondering if there's any hope."

And then I quote Karl Barth: "Humanity cannot stand up to God's wrath because it is the wrath of God's love. The reason why God's curse falls so hard upon us is that it is surrounded by the rainbow of God's covenant. . . Those whom God loves, God chastens. Those whom God will have for herself, God pursues to the remotest corner where their backs are to the wall and they can no longer escape from God. For those to whom God wills to be all in all, God strips everything else."

Preachers want, as Kierkegaard reminded us, "to poetize God, making God a little bit other than He is, a little bit more a loving parent who all too much indulges the child's 'only wish.'" So, in most twenty-first century mainline churches, both Protestant and Catholic, God becomes the CEO of the Make A Wish Foundation. God will not only forgive, because that's God's business—as D. H. Lawrence told Kate Mansfield when he admonished her not to worry about her guilt—but God's business is also, according to the preachers, to give us whatever we want.

My relationship with my old friend Ben informs my reading of John's Gospel and this passage about love. The word "Love" is highly ambiguous. It demands explanation, concretion, new understandings. Jesus knows he cannot say, "Love one another" and leave it at that. He needs to describe this love and offer examples. The Jesus of the Fourth Gospel does not give a list of commandments but summarizes all in the one commandment of love. He makes clear that we are chosen. The disciples are astounded. They thought they had chosen to follow, that they were making their own decisions. Now, they learn in a way that does not eliminate or minimize their own responsibility, that the initiative has been with Christ. We live in this paradox between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

We like to gather on Sunday morning, move through the familiar liturgical pattern, sing some familiar hymns, hear the Word and expect God to show up on time, on our terms, at our convenience. Yet the living God's comings and goings are not at our beck and call. God is free, holy, sovereign and comes when God is ready. It's another sign of grace. Therefore, anyone who would follow Jesus must be prepared for surprise, even for shock, for the grace of not being in control of things spiritual.

Do you remember that song we sang in churches all across North America in the late sixties and early seventies? "They'll know we are Christians by our love. . . . yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love." The Reverend Peter Scholtes composed that hymn in 1966 at the height of one of the most tumultuous times in American history. It is still sung worldwide. He set the lyrics to music quickly, in less than half a day, not only because he was moved by Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson and other involved in the civil rights movement but also because he was steeped in the worldview of the Fourth Gospel.

Scholtes was a white priest who volunteered to lead a half-Irish, half-Black parish on the South Side of Chicago. For him, love was not just a romantic notion spouted by theologians. It took on concrete daily meaning in the parish he served. He weathered protests of white parishioners when he and his associate hung a sign outside the church welcoming Dr. King on his first trip north. He offered a cup of coffee to King, took him to the church basement where parish women knew all about accommodating those hungry and thirsty with tangible signs of God's love. He watched in disappointment as white congregants migrated out of the changing neighborhood.

We persist in thinking church is a place and a time when we can nail things down, get our act together, firm up our faith. But God breaks in and upsets our neat little equations about worship and prayer and the Word. We get surprised over and over again by God's grace.

I return to one of the great scenes in Western literature. In *The Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene depicts the hero or anti-hero of his novel in a seedy, alcoholic priest who after months as a fugitive is finally caught by the revolutionary Mexican government and condemned to be shot. On the evening before his execution, he sits in his cell with a flask of brandy to keep his courage up and thinks back over what seems to him the dingy failure of his life. "Tears poured down his face," Greene writes,

"He was not at the moment afraid of damnation—even the fear of pain was in the background. He felt only an immense disappointment because had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him at that moment that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint, and a little courage. He felt like someone who had missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint."