

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 1, 2012
Lessons: Revelation 21:1-4 and Luke 2:22-35

THE DIFFERENCE IT MAKES

The pivotal word has just six letters but is a very big word in human life: *should*. That little word implies a gap between the way things actually are and the way someone wants them to be. Between “is” and “should be” lie judgment, opportunity, hope, and despair.

“Tommy, your hands should be clean when you come to the supper table.” Uh oh. Tommy’s hands are still dirty from play, and suddenly he’s not so glad to be seated at the family table for a meal that had looked and smelled wonderful just moments earlier. But Tommy learns. The next evening he comes to the table with freshly washed hands if, admittedly some dirt under his fingernails. “Tommy, let me see you hands. Good! They’re pretty clean tonight.” Tommy, willing to get by with “pretty clean,” gets ready to enjoy the meal. “Tommy, if I go into the bathroom, will I find that the soap is clean, too? And what about the towel?” Tommy is learning a lesson, but which lesson? Is it: (a) the proper way to wash his hands before supper and clean up after himself, (b) that the family table is a place for criticism, or (c) that he’ll never be able to satisfy all the requirements, so why bother? Is he learning to wash up or tune out? Context, of course, will make the difference. If this minor judgment over washing his hands properly comes within a larger context of love and encouragement to be himself, he’ll be fine; if it comes within a context of constant criticism, it is quite unlikely that he’ll be fine.

My example is trivial in substance – the “should” is quite basic and easily enough satisfied as Tommy gets older. But the method employed in the service of “should” is shaming Tommy by calling him to account in front of others, including his sister who may be enjoying his judgment and feeling quite pleased with herself because her own hands are clean and she has left the soap and towel with no evidence of dirt. So, in a small way, we have the making of one transgressor and one self-righteous good person – a sinner and a hypocrite.

“Should” remains a very important word without which we would have no change, no progress or even improvement, and no goals for the betterment of our society, our world, or our selves. Without “should,” there would be no “should not,” and all sorts of evils would go unchallenged. No one would be safe, and human life would be left completely uncivilized

and brutal because no one would have a conscience about anything. And Tommy would be quite content to eat with filthy hands or leave a mess for others to clean up after him.

So, we need to keep “should” in our vocabulary, but there are two different kinds of “should,” and the differences between them are great in their impact upon human life. “Susita, you *should be* able to read these books in English by May, and you will be tested to see if you can.” Or, “Susita, we are going to help you learn English, and by May (mayo) you will be able to read your books in English. So don’t worry, we’ll go step by step, and I promise you that you will be able to take each step until you reach the goal.” Both ways of speaking to little Susita in terms of the same goal employ the concept of “should” but in very different ways. The first presents *the should* as a standard against which the girl is to be measured when her time is up; the second presents *the should* as a promise for which the teacher will be with her each step forward. One way employs fear of potential failure and the shame of it; the other employs hope, respect, and encouragement. Did you notice the Spanish word “mayo” in the second way of speaking to Susita? Why use the Spanish name for the month of May when the goal and standard is English? Two reasons. First, “may” is a confusing word to a child learning English because it has another meaning that may be more familiar. Secondly, the word in Spanish acknowledges the validity of the child’s own language and so extends a hand across the barrier. The standards method will proceed by testing for failures at each check point along the way; so failure will have the focus. The way of promise will proceed by pointing out and experiencing successes along the way; so success will have the focus, and Susita will build success upon success. She will not only learn to read in English; she will also learn to learn successfully and know herself as a girl who succeeds in learning.

The distinction between standards and promises is the difference between law and grace. People, including Christians, have often made the mistake of imagining that grace sees no “should,” but that’s nonsense. With no vision of what *should be* the nature and course of human life, we are left without hope for anything better than what we are and what we have now. That’s not grace; it’s abandonment to stagnation and eventual despair. God is working with us, not giving up on us and accepting us as hopeless cases.

God meets human beings in their times and places with promise and the offer of covenant relationship: *we will walk together, and I will lead you to a better place, a promised land*. Jesus tells the fishermen he calls to become his first disciples, “Follow me, and I will turn you into fishers for people.” Promise is not the abandonment of the goal but real hope and help for getting there.

Understandably, we are skeptical of human promises because they are so often empty if not intentionally deceptive. On this day of New Year’s resolutions, we have only to think

of all the ghosts of resolutions past to see the poverty of human promises even when the intentions are good, but God is faithful even though fulfillment is long in coming because the human mind and heart must be transformed for the creation to be healed. Revelation's picture of a new heaven and a new earth where the sorrows of the present are put behind us forever gave a glimpse of the promised outcome to people about to be killed for their faith; today it offers us a vision of the world we should want so that wanting it can move us in its direction.

What we receive from God is promises rather than standards, for which we can be very grateful because standards would judge and condemn us. Admittedly, Christians are always tempted to replace standards of law with standards of faith. Those who wish to judge want standards, and the standards of faith may be doctrinal or experiential – the proper beliefs or the proper experiences for a true Christian. But faith set to standards and judged by them works the same way as religion set to law and judged by it, and the outcomes are the same: defeat, failure, shame, and guilt or false pride in looking better than others, judgmentalism, and hypocrisy.

The way of promise is not easy. Simeon tells Mary her son is destined to be opposed, and a sword will pierce her own soul as well. God's grace is not an easy way out of the fierce struggle for redeeming this world from its proud evils and turning it toward the way of life intended by God. Hope is not an easy burden to bear. Hope calls us ever onward and upward. It never says of life, "Just let it go," or, "Let it be." Hope goads us against the flow of easy ways because we have been given a vision of the world and the humanity God wants for all. Jesus could not just deliver an upbeat message, make everybody feel good, and reap the benefits. He had to give himself to suffering and humiliation because he brought out the worst in people as well as the best. He had to lay down his life for a world that rejected him.

Standardization does not work with people because one size does not fit all. Life is relational and personal; it is a shared thing that values the differences among us for the shared strength they give us and the compassion they teach us. For sure, we have learned to be suspicious of promises in a world that uses them to deceive and manipulate, but I am talking about God's promises for a world from which God will banish all things that hurt and destroy because God's people will have rejected them. Having been given that vision, we oppose with our quite limited means and very partial wisdom the things that hurt and destroy now, in the present, because they do not belong to the vision of God's promise. Standards and promises may both reveal what should be but is not yet, but one lays blame and urges us on with fear of judgment or desire for superiority; the other gives hope and walks with us along the way, step by step, until we find ourselves exclaiming with Susita, "I can do it! I can read!" or with Dr. King, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we're free at last!" Amen.