

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for October 10, 2010
Lessons: Jeremiah 29:1,4-7 and Luke 17:11-19

WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF IT?

One side tells me I am who and what I am, and there's nothing much I can do about it. My genes determine the levels of my health, intelligence, height, weight, stamina, susceptibility to addictions as well as diseases, and just about everything else in my nature and the quality of my life. Further, what is not predetermined by my biology is fated by my prenatal conditions and my experiences as an infant which I, of course, do not even remember. So, what are my choices? Few to none, I am told. "What will be will be." If I listen too much to this side, to the voices of determinism, will I not feel like a victim and maybe even begin to think and live like a victim?

The first card game my older sister taught me was called "war." Each of us was dealt half the cards, and then we simply flipped one at time each with the higher card taking the trick until one of us had them all. It was the perfect game for a five-year-old to play against his thirteen-year-old sister because we had equal chances of winning. The outcome was predetermined by the deal. We made no choices. There was no strategy. Of course, it took me a while to figure out that my playing made no difference. Is that really the truth of human life? The deck is stacked, and we simply play out the hands we are dealt, celebrating our victories and mourning our losses while pretending our choices matter?

Do you see why I resist all forms of determinism, including the supposedly Christian form that does little more than substitute *God's will* for the pagan notions of fate and destiny? If all the real choices have been made in advance, how I ask you are we to understand ourselves as created in the image and likeness of God? If the outcome is predetermined, what is salvation, just a deck stacked in my favor? What is grace? A bit of divine cheating? An extra ace slipped into my stack of cards by Jesus?

The other side tells me my life is whatever I make of it, no excuses. Any success is my own; all failures and blame are mine, also. This view of life and self-made destiny works very conveniently for the successful and comfortable, glorifying their achievements, validating their superiority, and excusing them from empathy and compassion or even justice. It is the doctrine of the rich and powerful, and one of its favorite tricks is pointing out the exceptional among the disadvantaged – the outstanding individual who rises above his or her circumstances to succeed against all odds. In this doctrine of the self-made, those rare

exceptions justify blaming all the rest for their failure to prosper so no need is felt to adjust the unfair odds. Circumstances mean nothing. Disadvantage is just an excuse. Complaining about the stacked deck and the unfair rules made by the powerful to their own advantage is dismissed as class warfare. If I listen too much to this other side, telling me life is entirely up to me and what I make of it, will I not become cold and judgmental – rough on myself and unsympathetic toward others?

Between these two extreme views of human life and destiny we live in daily need of the grace of God and with daily responsibility for responding to God's grace with our choices and hopes. Our responses to God's love and mercy comprise the life of faith.

The one man of ten, all cured of their leprosy, who runs back to Jesus to thank him and praise God does far more than just mind his manners, as we were told to do when I was a child. "What do you say, Susie, for that nice gift?" "Thank you, Mrs. Jones." What our parents were teaching us, of course, was supposed to be more than manners, politeness, proper form. We were meant to be learning to look beyond the gift itself to the giver – the person who cared enough to give us something.

Delight in life's good things and experiences becomes a trap unless the pleasure we feel is subordinated to the gratitude of friendship or love. We know how drugs addict by giving pleasure or alleviating pain. Soon the person needs more to get the same results. Then more. So it goes until the drug no longer satisfies but still must be taken. Do we realize it is the same with wealth, achievement, popularity, triumph in competition, prestige, acquisition of goods or status symbols, or anything else we learn to crave? Outside relationship, all pleasure is just a drug on its way to enslaving us. Only love produces the relational gratitude that enables us to enjoy life and stay free, because love cares more for the giver than the gift.

All ten are cured of their leprosy. Nine run off delighted at the sudden, unexpected opportunity to stop dying a slow death in isolation and return to their families and communities. One chooses to return to thank Jesus and praise God. That one man takes it personally, looking beyond the gift to the Giver. So, his new life, wholeness, and freedom are relational and not just circumstantial. Yes, his circumstances are vastly improved, but that's not all.

The judgmental streak in all of us might like to alter the story's ending, suggesting perhaps that leprosy returns to the ungrateful nine, but Jesus is not cruel, and the moment's opportunity is not all we are given, thanks be to God. We are to learn from the one, not speculate about the other nine. Life is not a television quiz show – give a wrong answer or select the wrong door and the game's over. But life is relational, and God is Person – Person

who loves and, therefore, wants our responses to the love behind the gifts. Further, all of life is relational, because God loves those other people, too. Sin is denial of relationship. He's not my brother, she's not my sister, they're not my neighbors. Not a child of God to me. Delight without gratitude fosters a lack of empathy with other people that denies our need to be compassionate in our living and just in our choices. Delight without gratitude enables the false and deadly attitude that life is mine, health is mine, prosperity is mine. It is the folly of the self-made man or woman who holds life as a possession, an achievement, and says of others struggling, "I did it for myself; let them do the same." This is the mentality that sits comfortably atop the hill and warns of the "moral hazard" risked by attempts to provide a little more security, help, or fairness for those down at the bottom.

But all human beings must be respected and, therefore, enabled to make choices that matter. If I say my choices in life have made all the difference, I am being an arrogant fool, ungrateful to God and self-deluded about the advantages I have enjoyed that are not available to countless others. Do I not realize how many times I have been given a leg up in life? The other side, however, is that the poor are not "poor things" to be cared for as irresponsible children but human beings created in the image and likeness of God to share freedom and responsibility for the well-being of the human community.

When we see something puzzling, we ask, "What do you make of it?" Life is puzzling and is not meant to be lived apart from God or each other. Without God's grace, my circumstances are just my circumstances, and the truth is there is not always much I can do to change or improve them significantly. We hate to admit that vulnerability, but it's real. We are living in a time when hard work and diligent preparation, even sacrifice, may not pay off. It is a time when knowing somebody seems more important than any achievement, skill set, or experience, and even knowing somebody may not help. But God's grace does not take away from me the question of, "What do I make of it?" God's grace gives me the opportunity and strength to respond and a path clear enough to go forward toward life that is truly abundant; it does not just hand me a life and a self made whole and free.

What do I take from painful experiences? Understanding or bitterness? Empathy with others who get hurt or cynicism about life? Do I move closer to God or pull away? And what do I take from good experiences? Self-satisfaction or thankfulness? A sense of entitlement or a sense of responsibility? Jesus says to the tenth man, the foreigner, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." The word translated "well" speaks of being rescued, delivered, saved. This salvation is not heaven someday but life in relationship with God in the "here and now." That's what salvation really is and what it shall be forever: the ongoing gift of life in relationship with God. The Samaritan looks beyond delight in his improved circumstances to the One who has restored his health and set him free. That's wellness beyond the cure. Amen.