

LET'S QUIT BEFORE PAYDAY

Sermon, July 2, 2017

Text: Romans 6:11-23

*"Congratulations, today's your day. You're off to great places. You're off and away.
You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose."*

Those words of advice are opening lines from Dr. Seuss's final book, a book published just a year before his death at age 87, entitled **Oh, the Places You'll Go!** It's a book often given as a graduation gift for graduates of all ages (and a book I introduced during the children's message just prior to the sermon). One enthusiastic reviewer wrote about the book in a Seuss-like ode:

*Now first of all let me explain from the start,
That I love Dr. Seuss, he had such a good heart.
His stories are nonsense, but also have meaning,
The wisdom found here is quite surely worth gleaning.*

*Some say it's for children; they'll love it a lot,
But it's everyone's book, so don't think that it's not!
In fact, I would say that while kids love the tale,
The adults will understand more, without fail.*

So, the book begins,

*"Congratulations, today's your day. You're off to great places. You're off and away.
You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
You're on your own, and you know what you know. And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go."*

In other words, "It's up to you!" says the good Doctor. The world is yours and you are free to choose what kind of life you will have. He does go on to provide a warning, though:

*"You'll look up and down streets. Look 'em over with care. About some you will say, 'I don't choose to go there.'
With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet, you're too smart to go down a not-so-good street."*

Yes, we're too smart to go down those not-so-good streets, aren't we? Oh, how we wish that were always true. How many times in our lives HAVE we gone down those "not-so-good streets;" how many times have we chosen, frankly, bone-headed and even dangerous pathways that have only led us into difficulty and trouble? How many times have we made wrong choices? How we wish we only went to those places our "heads full of brains" told us to go; how we wish we always made rational and intelligent choices. But ... we didn't, and we don't.

You may know the word "intelligence" comes from two root words: *Inter*, meaning "between," and *legere*, meaning "to choose." The very word implies an ability to make smart choices; a truly intelligent person in the literal sense of the word is one who uses his/her "head full of brains" to make good choices ... between good and bad, between truth and falsehood, between gentleness and cruelty, between humility and arrogance, between constructive and destructive, and ultimately, between life and death. *"You'll look up and down streets. Look 'em over with care. About some you will say, 'I don't choose to go there.'"*

Life is about choices, choices we make in the present, choices we make right now, in the day we have, choices that inevitably and always go on to affect our future for good or for ill. Why is it we are so often drawn to that which is not-so-good for us, especially when we really do know deep down inside and with our "head full of brains" that making such choices can often be so disastrous and destructive in the long run? There are so many less-than-best choices ... bad choices, dumb choices ... that otherwise intelligent people make that wind up costing them (and those loved ones, family members, employers and/or friends who may be depending on them) dearly ... costing their emotional stability, costing their integrity, costing them at times their families, or their health, or even their very lives.

Paul tells us in the lectionary reading from Romans that we are prone to bad choices because of our sinful nature that is prone to destruction and dissolution. He also points out that by the power of God's grace in our lives it doesn't have to be that we go on making those bad choices we are so prone to make, not anymore! Listen again to the inspired words of Paul, *"When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? (In other words, what good did those bad choices bring you?) Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 6: 20-23).

Yes, Paul writes, we are prone to bad choices because of our sinful nature, but it doesn't have to stay that way! By God's grace and the help of God's Spirit, we can train ourselves to make good choices beginning *right now*, in the day and the hour and the moment we have. Like all habits, goodness is a habit that is strengthened through repetition and reinforcement. The more we become habituated, the more we become controlled by that habit ... it is possible (*and a good and productive and life enhancing thing!*) to be "enslaved" by goodness! For a quick example, when you determine to always be truthful, to never lie, exaggerate, deceive and/or otherwise mislead, you may find it difficult at first but you'll slowly begin to find that it actually becomes harder and harder to speak untruthfully the longer you discipline your tongue. You are becoming "enslaved" to speaking with integrity, and that's a good thing! Try it; you'll like it! Regardless of what choices we may have made before or what may have occurred in times past, Paul encourages us to determine by God's grace and help to make right choices NOW ... not tomorrow, not someday when things get "better," but now in the moment you have ... for your sake, for the sake of those who love you and may be depending on you, and for the greater good of all.

And we will be better enabled to make good choices and go on making good, life-enhancing choices if we make the truly INTELLIGENT choice of making our faith in Jesus Christ the most important part of our lives each and every moment of our lives! That's the only way we are going to consistently make better choices ... by taking our faith seriously, daily, hourly, moment by living moment, not just casually on the occasional Sunday morning.

The choice is put squarely to us by Paul when he concludes, "*The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" The choice couldn't be any plainer than that. I like the church sign that read "*ROMANS 6:23 -- THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH. ... 'SO QUIT BEFORE PAYDAY!'*" I've mentioned that sign in one or two sermons before, but realized the point may not be as clear as I assumed when I saw on an online forum this little excerpt: "*So I need help understanding a church sign near my house. The sign says: 'The wages of sin is death, so quit before payday.' Now, everyone is going to die, sinners and non-sinners. So, why would this particular saying convince me not to sin? Enlighten me, please!*"

Well, let me attempt to do so. Wages are the product, the end result, the payment for something we have done. Wages are what you get when you choose to do certain things; to mix metaphors, you might say certain things "wage" destruction on your life! The time to quit those activities that are waging such destruction, that are paying you deadly wages, is right now! You "work," you can expect to get paid in kind. The sooner you quit, the less you'll get "paid" those deadly wages ... if you stop "working" you won't get paid as much. Life is full of choices, make the right choices and you will improve your lives. Make the wrong choices, and destruction, dissolution, decay result. That's your wage. That's your pay.

The choices we make have consequences. If we choose well, we often reap rewards. To put it another way, the law of sowing and reaping has not been repealed. We sow a good life ... a life of integrity, a life of kindness, a life of doing good things, of life of treating people with kindness and respect, a life of paying attention to our relationships with God and our neighbor and our loved ones, a life of taking care of our bodies, a life of nourishing our minds and our souls ... and we will reap good benefits, good "wages" like lasting friendships, better than average health, contentment, accomplishment, serenity. However, take the shortcuts, or be a cheater, or be a slacker, or be dishonest, or stifle the voice of conscience and God's spirit, or be a scoundrel, and eventually life will find you out and you'll get "paid", all right. You don't have to live very long to discover this is the way life as God designed it works. The sooner we learn to make good choices, the better our chances are for finding lasting contentment, a contentment, by the way, that through the grace of God in Jesus Christ will continue on forever and ever! I believe this is one of the most important insights the Scripture gives us about God's calling in our lives.

God's calling is always focused on the present tense. The question is never, "*Who is God calling you to become?*" The question is always "*Who has God called you to BE, and what has He called you to DO ... today? Right now?*" The gifts God has invested in you are not to be relegated to some time in the future. You don't know about the future. All we have is today, the present tense. It is important we pay attention to what God is calling us to do and say today, right now, in the day we have, right where we are, that we take our faith seriously right here and now in the present moment! Again, that's the truly *intelligent* choice that will go on to positively govern all our future choices for good.

(The following excerpt was edited out of the spoken sermon due to time constraints; I include it here – slc) The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, "*What is the chief end of man?*" Every good Presbyterian should know the answer. That question isn't asking, "*What's the end destination of the human race?*" It is, "*What is our chief PURPOSE ?*" The answer given is that man's end, as in *purpose*, is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever ... beginning right now, *today*, in the day we have, and to make choices accordingly. *(end of excerpt)*

As we once again celebrate our independence and our freedom as a nation this Tuesday, let us never forget that "*freedom is not so much the right to do as we choose as it is the opportunity to choose to do what is right.*" (*which was the theme of the children's message, BTW*). Let's use our God-given *brains in our heads* to make good choices, Let us use the feet in our shoes to avoid the not-so-good streets and to walk the right roads ... and to help others do so as well.