

NOT-SO-DESIRED Skill SETS

Sermon, September 15, 2019

Texts: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; I Timothy 1:12-17

I've always liked this old story, one I told this congregation June 1997 (*over twenty-two years ago, and if you remember it, I'm impressed!*) about a naval battleship conducting maneuvers in a dense fog somewhere off the coast of Long Island. The signalman on board peered into the fog and saw what he perceived to be the lights of an oncoming ship, and he saw that if their courses remained the same, they were going to collide. So the signalman frantically signaled the oncoming ship, "Change your course thirty degrees to the north, or we're going to crash!" The other signalman signaled back, "YOU change your course thirty degrees to the south, we ARE going to crash!"

So they were still coming toward each other, and the commanding officer got on the bullhorn and said, "Listen! This is Admiral Jones, United States Navy, you change your course thirty degrees to the north!" The other signalman also got on a bullhorn, "This is Seaman Second Class Shultz, United States Navy, you change your course thirty degrees to the south!" Admiral Jones got on again, "You don't seem to understand! This is Admiral Jones, United States Navy, you change your course thirty degrees to the north, WE ARE A BATTLESHIP!" Shultz got on and said, "You don't seem to understand. This is Seaman Second Class Shultz, United States Navy, you change your course thirty degrees to the south, WE ARE A LIGHTHOUSE!"

I've since found this story to be in the genre of "urban legend," which is one reason I stopped using it, but eventually decided it's still a good story to illustrate an important concept: that our Lord intends for His church to be a lighthouse; it's long been one of my favorite images of the church. A lighthouse, firmly rooted on the Rock of our salvation and the rock solid truths of the Bible, giving clear direction and hope and illumination to a world that is often lost and adrift in the darkness and the fog. If I may mix my metaphors, we are called to be a superstructure which holds high the Light of the World as a beacon of hope, a fixed guiding Light providing steadfast direction in a society growing increasingly foggy on issues of moral, spiritual and ethical import, in order to keep people from shipwrecking their lives. This is part of the church's calling, our duty, to be a beacon of hope, a fixed guiding light, as the grand old hymn puts it, "to lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim till all the world adore His sacred name." The "Admiral Joneses" may choose to keep plowing ahead and finding their own ways in the fog, and/or trying to get the lighthouses to change direction, but it's sadly tragic when a lighthouse loses its way and floats adrift in a sea of moral and spiritual confusion, thus losing its whole meaning for existing!

In our Epistle reading today, "Admiral" Paul remembered and regretted the destruction and hurt he caused others when he was sailing headlong into the fog in his misguided religious zeal. As I mentioned before when we've looked at the dramatic conversion of Saul of Tarsus into Paul the apostle, I'm sure you've heard people say, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe it with all your heart. Sincerity is what matters." I said then as I say now ... do we realize how silly that is? Especially after the eighteenth anniversary last Wednesday of a despicable evil perpetrated by nineteen murderous fanatics following their sincere religious convictions? Paul, then Saul, was an intensely religious man following the dictates of his convictions. Saul sincerely believed something with all his heart, but he was sincerely *wrong* ... and it was shipwrecking and even killing a whole lot of people around him! He meant it when he wrote to Timothy in today's text that he, Paul, was the worst of sinners; he wasn't using hyperbole. He knew he had been a violent, blasphemous, ignorant brute, in need of mercy and forgiveness and direction, and he found that mercy and forgiveness and direction in Jesus Christ, the Light of the world. But evil has consequences, serious consequences, and he agonized over what shipwrecks he helped cause in his misdirected devotion.

(I made the decision to edit out the following during the delivered sermon mostly due to time constraints; I include it here) Just as a bit of an aside, Paul would be the first to say that forgiveness is not simply sentimental tolerance. Without genuine repentance on the part of the offender, forgiveness can degenerate into a condoning acceptance and even an enabling of evil of the worst kind. The late New Testament scholar Douglas Hare of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary warned against confusing forgiveness with sentimental toleration by "forgiving too much too quickly." He wrote, "The misbehavior of alcoholics is not to be laughed off. Ministers who fail to control their sexual impulses are not to be lightly excused. Teenagers who betray their parent's trust are not simply to be forgiven; a much more loving course of action is to insist that they amend their behavior so they can regain trust. Premature forgiveness is an easy way out that does little to help." And terrorists who ruthlessly take innocent human life are not to blithely forgiven or tolerated; they are to be stopped. Life is sacred, and those who trifle with innocent life are not to be put up with. We are not to repay evil with evil, however. We are not to hate. Ann Lamott wrote that harboring hate within is like feeding yourself rat poison, and then waiting for the rat to die. Yes, we are to be gracious; where there is genuine

repentance, forgiveness is our obligation. But beware of forgiving and forgetting much too quickly; be certain there is a genuine repentance. Evil has consequences, serious consequences, and is not to be readily tolerated ... that's not a skill set we should try to acquire. Tolerating evil is not something we want to get good at! Because it really does no one any good, and it certainly doesn't help them find the light.

Our Old Testament reading mentions a skill set we really shouldn't try to acquire, something we don't want to get good at. God says through the prophet Jeremiah, *"My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good."* And as a result, calamity is about to overtake them. That's what happens when people get skilled at doing evil ... we lose sight of how to do good! We can't just "turn it off." We don't want to become good at doing what is wrong. For example, we don't want to practiced liars, because eventually we'll find ourselves unable to speak truthfully ... practice truthfulness, not deceit! Take every opportunity, large or small, to practice goodness and compassion! When we become skilled and experienced at practicing evil, we eventually lose the ability to be faithful spouses, good parents, conscientious citizens, honorable businesspeople, good neighbors and we shipwreck our lives. As God echoes through the prophet Jeremiah, it's foolish to be skilled in doing evil.

In 1800, a Rhode Islander by the name of Asa Mann cleared a large amount of forest in northern Pennsylvania and called it Mann's Field (*now the town of Mansfield on PA Rt. 6 not far from Elmira, NY*). Mansfield University of Pennsylvania is there; my old college team used to play them in football. In fact, Mansfield is the place where the first night football game was played under electric lights, on September 28, 1892 (*no, I didn't play in that game*). The Lambs Creek Bible Church is in Mansfield. On Palm Sunday 2010, the church posted on their outdoor sign "THIS SUNDAY: NATIONAL ATHEIST'S HOLIDAY". In that year Palm Sunday fell on April 1st ... April Fools Day. Below that line were the words of Psalm 14:1: *"THE FOOL SAYS IN HIS HEART THERE IS NO GOD."*

Interestingly, in the Hebrew text of that Psalm the words "there is" are not there. In the original, there is no "there is" there. What the verse literally says is, *"The fool says in his heart, 'No God.'" (In the King James Version, the words "there is" are in italics to show they weren't in the original.)* If one would just add a comma in the right spot (*and as you may or may not know, there are no punctuation marks in the original text*), you would have *"The fool says in his heart, 'No, God!'"* Both interpretations and/or nuances are warranted!

In effect, there really are two types of atheists: the intellectual atheist, and the practical atheist. The intellectual atheist is the person who believes there is no God; by the way, these people are far fewer in number than we might think. People see a car and they say *"Yes, there is an auto manufacturer;"* people see a beautiful portrait and they say *"Yes, there is an artist;"* people see a Rolex watch and they say *"Yes, there is a watchmaker;"* people read a book and they say *"Yes, there is an author;"* but few intellectually honest people can look at the complexity and intricacy of creation (*which is far more complex and intricate than any watch, car, book or painting!*) and honestly (*and foolishly!*) say *"There is no God."* That's the intellectual atheist. The *practical* atheist, on the other hand, is the person who says, *"No, God!"* He or she knows, acknowledges, admits there is a God, but lives and behaves as if there is no God. This is the person who wants nothing to do with God's principles, God's purposes, God's directives. This person wants to live by his or her own lights, without any deference or submission to the Divine. These are the Admiral Joneses who want the lighthouse to change direction, rather than submit and change their own direction. These people are far greater in number than we might think.

It's been my experience and perspective that professed atheism often has a moral root, not an intellectual one. Not to over-simplify, but practical atheism often begins with a person saying, "No, God!" in some moral area of life, and then calamity inevitably results. Life just doesn't work well when we say, "No, God!" The resulting calamity often goes on to make a person bitter, not better ... bitter toward life in general and religion in particular. It is not so much that God is vindictive and punishes us when we say, "No, God." The reality is that the painful consequences are the natural result of our foolishly trying to get the Lighthouse to change direction.

In short, this is what is happening in Jeremiah's day. The people no longer listened to God, and we are told they are becoming really good at doing evil! These foolish people had said, *"No, God"* so often that apparently they have come to a point where they no longer even knew how to do good, and as a result shipwreck and calamity are about to come upon them. God really does know how things work. He really is the Designer, the Architect of life and He knows how things are supposed to function! He knows what it takes to live life that is full, enjoyable, a blessing to others and to ourselves, and He really does love us and wants the best for us.

That's why He sent the Light of the World, the Rock of our salvation, into this world; He really wants to keep our lives from calamity, to save our lives from becoming shipwrecked.