

What Do You Feed?

March 19, 2017

As I read our passages from Exodus and the Gospel of John today and listened to the headlines across the world and across the state, I'm reminded of an old native American lesson. An old grandfather said to his grandson who came to him with anger at a friend who had done him an injustice: "I too, at times, have felt a great hate for those who have taken so much with no sorrow for what they do. Hate wears you down, and does not hurt your enemy. It's like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die."

"I've struggled with these feelings many, many times in my life," the grandfather continued. "It's as if there are two wolves inside of me. One is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with those around him. He will only fight when it is right to do so and in the right way. The other wolf is full of anger. The slightest thing will set him off in a fit of temper. He fights everyone all the time for no reason. He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great."

The grandson pondered for a bit and then asked his grandfather. "How do you live with these two wolves inside of you? Which one wins Grandfather?"

The grandfather replied quietly, "The one you feed."

Which one do we feed? In our Exodus story, which Eli read so well today, the Hebrews are angry. It's the story of Massah and Meribah, literally "the place of the test" and "the place of the quarreling." The Hebrews were grumbling because of a very real problem, but they also weren't being honest. They weren't being honest with themselves nor were they being honest with God. In their anger, they disregarded all of the problems in Egypt. They chose selective amnesia around all of the oppression and injustice of Pharaoh.

It's interesting that as the Hebrews are struggling and lying both to themselves and to God in their anger, Moses has to decide which of the wolves he is going to feed. Is he going to feed the anger, the lack of honesty? He could have fought fire with fire, but instead he called out to the Lord whose instructions were to address the Hebrews' concerns, to find them water, but also to not let their bad behavior go unacknowledged, thus naming the towns of Massa and Meribah, "the place of the test" and "the place of the quarreling."

The wandering in the desert, our wandering in our own spiritual and existential deserts, is a consequence of our behaviors and choices. The current societal desert we find ourselves in is a consequence of our society's collective behaviors and choices. So the question once again is: What do we feed? Do we do as the ancient Hebrews did, choosing to feed the wolf of resentment, and blame, and alienation? Or do we choose to behave as Moses did in this passage, feeding the wolf of compassion, and mercy, and building up rather than tearing down.

The story from our Gospel, then, the story of the woman at the well, is often read as a fast woman who's been ostracized by the upstanding ladies of the community. This misogyny has been read into this text by centuries of tradition. It's not in the Bible anywhere that she was a woman of ill repute. The centuries-old misogyny stems from ideas that are not part of the text.

Remember, women weren't allowed to divorce in this culture; only men could do that. Therefore, if she has had five husbands it doesn't mean that she was promiscuous. It means that she's either been widowed or divorced. She's either grieving or has been cast aside.

This is not a story of this wayward woman finding her way to truth. What it is is the longest private conversation in the New Testament, the very longest interaction anyone has in all of the Gospels with Jesus. I'll admit, it's a snarky woman with a chip on her shoulder. She's a little bit bunched, a little testy.

Now I know that when I behave like that it is rarely, if ever, about the person that I'm encountering. Almost always it's about something that's going on with me. (I see lots of nods of agreement.) She's behaving this way, the way that people do when their guard is up, when they're hurt, when they've been hurt. She is NOT WELL, and Jesus tells her that the cure is the WELL, is a relationship with him. She's shocked that Jesus isn't judging her.

And what Jesus does within this story, then, is draw her out of her broken behavior, out of her hurt that was spiraling deeper, and deeper, and deeper into herself. And he invites her into the depths of compassion and mercy which are the centerpieces of who Jesus is – not just receiving mercy, but also being merciful. A truly healthy life in Jesus cannot separate those two, cannot separate both receiving mercy and being merciful.

Jesus sees her rightly, as a grace-filled child of God, rather than how she has come to understand herself in this life. Jesus helps the woman to decide to feed the wolf of health and kindness instead of the wolf of dysfunction and spinning her wheels. This lesson holds true both on an inter personal and societal level. The health of our world is dependent on which wolf we as the human race decide to feed. We can, like so many in politics right now, feed the wolf of aggressiveness, of self certainty, of self aggrandizement and indifference to contrary views. Or we can choose to feed the wolf that people like Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day fed.

Kwame Anthony Appiah writes the Ethicist column in the New York Times. In his book, *The Honor Code*, he shares his research that fear and humiliation do not breed change. Think about that for a moment. Fear and alienation do not breed change. What does? Honor. All major experiences of societal change have an experience of honor. In the 1800s, U. S. society started shifting, deciding that slavery was not an honorable pursuit. After the Great Depression our society decided that taking care of our neighbors was an honorable pursuit. The fact that we're now talking about not feeding hungry children and elderly is rooted in what our society currently understands as honorable. Today, too many people believe that feathering one's own nest and protecting only one's own interests is what's honorable.

So how do we make this honor shift? It needs to happen both personally, internally, as well as corporately. Personally some things that we can do to shift what it is that we understand to be honorable are to fast from negativity and to feast on God's blessing. Try that just for a week. Try just for a week to fast from negativity. When you get down on yourself, when you're complaining about the news, when the people in your household or driving their cars next to you are bothering you, fast from negativity and, instead, feast on God's blessing.

In fact, create a blessing pyramid. Today, before you go to bed, write down five blessings from God. Tomorrow, write down ten. Tuesday, write down 15. Don't repeat. I guarantee you, you

can do it, that there are that many blessings in your life. What it is that you focus on, what it is that you feed is what will shape how you see the world. Feed the wolf of gratitude, and healing, and abundance, and compassion, and grace.

Some of the ways that we can make the societal shift, then, is perhaps making a One Great Hour of Sharing jar for your house and putting a donation in it every single time you smile. Put a donation in every time that there's something good that makes you smile. If you're really up for the challenge, put a donation in that jar then also every time that you make someone else smile. See how it is that you can become a blessing.

Teach your children that sacrifice, putting others ahead for the common good, is the highest of honors. Commit yourself to learning and then living and promoting Martin Luther King's six principles of nonviolence and six steps of nonviolent social change. And, if you don't know what those are, I will include a link to them when we publish this sermon. Commit yourself to being part of what makes the world a better place. Feed the wolf.

<http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub2>

Many of us are hurting, scared, and so many more throughout our world are hurting and scared. In this season of repentance and conversion in which our God offers to heal us, and to soothe us, and to create a new heart within us, let's take God up on that opportunity. Let's find a new way of being. Let's feed all that is of God within us, choosing, therefore, not to feed that which is self-serving, the greed, the negativity, the anxiety, the fear which threaten to rule the day.

Let's instead feed the mutuality, and the compassion, and the grace, and the inclusion. Together with God, we can do it. And if we do, our lives and our world will be one step closer to being well. Amen.

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Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-29, 39 – Woman at the well
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