



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Stages of Faith and The Wolf Within

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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At the Olympics in Turino, Italy, in 2006, a Norwegian women's cross country skiing coach made a choice that cost his team a shot at a medal. A Canadian skier, who was one of the favorites, broke her pole which made it virtually impossible for her to remain competitive. Without hesitation, the Norwegian coach came to the edge of the track and handed her a new pole. She went on to beat his skiers and deny them the bronze medal. It was above and beyond the call of good sportsmanship. He could have done nothing and no one would have thought any less of him but he made a different choice.

Moses told his people about the choices that God would have us make. They sound easy and straightforward. We have in front of us life and blessing or death and curses. It seems like a no brainer, of course we would choose from the life and blessing column.

Today we have a good example of how the readings chosen for any given Sunday really work together. This passage from Deuteronomy makes it sound so simple; obey God's commandments and you will have a great long life and real estate. As much as I love this passage, I can imagine how it must sound to people who struggle everyday to live good lives and make ends meet. I must sound like somehow, they are outside of God's favor or just not getting it right. These things are never as easy as they sound. So, we have Jesus' discussion about choices that we make, not just with our actions, but with our thoughts. He takes the commandment to choose life and applies it to our inner lives. And we also have Paul, writing to his unruly congregation in Corinth, applying a dose of realism with his understanding that people cannot get to a place of spiritual maturity without the journey of spiritual growth. He nearly cycles back to the commandment in Deuteronomy and challenges his people to begin by understanding what it means chose choose life, this new kind of life which is defined by spiritual laws rather than human nature.

This teaching of Jesus today is truly a challenging one for us all. In one conversation he takes faith from obeying commandments and doing good things into being responsible for what we think. Implicit in his prohibition against death dealing thoughts is a power that often goes unknown. Every action begins with a thought. Thoughts, therefore, must be acknowledged as creative agents, thought create. They do not just sit in our head. We love to believe in the power of prayer, particularly fervent petitions on behalf of a sick loved one, or looming disaster. We are gratified when our prayers produce the desired outcome. But do we ever stop to think that our negative thoughts may be likewise powerful?

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

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However, I don't think that Jesus is concerned that we might cause damage in the world by our angry murderous thoughts. He is concerned about what we are doing to ourselves. Harboring ill will against another hurts us more than we know. Not only might it lead us to regrettable action but even without that, we have created the image of it within. It sits there like poison in the soul. This is very advanced spiritual journey work. It takes training to learn to discipline your thoughts so you are not choosing death and curses in your mind.

Dr. James Fowler is a Methodist minister and a now retired psychology professor from Harvard and Emory Universities. He is best known for his book *Stages of Faith* in which he outlined basic sequential stages of faith development from childhood. He began with preschool children who have learned to differentiate between self and others. They are very mythic and stories help to develop their imaginations. By the time they have entered school, God has become a person and the children hear the stories quite literally. They are seeking to understand the world and want it to be fair. God is seen as being in charge of fairness. There are some people who never leave this stage.

The third stage dawns in the teenage years usually brought about by an awareness of contradiction which can lead to disillusionment with previous teachings and teachers. They are, after all, teenagers. One of two things usually happens. Either the disillusionment wins and faith is cast aside, or they will seek consistency for their chaotic world. Groups and institutions are given great authority and any challenge to those institutions can be upsetting. Dr. Fowler says that many, possibly most people do not move beyond this place. To do so requires an embrace of uncertainty and a willingness to think outside of previous boxes. This becomes a difficult time because it means leaving people and ideas behind in order to stay open to something deeper.

The work of the church, as Paul discovered is to help people keep moving on their faith journey. Baptism does not make us mature Christians; it merely gives us the place in which to do the work of spiritual growth. We have to seek and stay open to the promptings of spirit. To discern which teachings we are ready for and then what to do with them. At the same time, we should keep some big ideas close at hand, like understanding the kinds of choices. Yes, choose life and be willing to ask the probing questions about what that looks like for you. Yes, learn that your thoughts are powerful things and you do get to choose which ones live in your heart. Here's a wonderful story from the Cherokee people.

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An old Grandfather said to his grandson, who came to him with anger at a friend who had done him an injustice, "Let me tell you a story.

I too, at times, have felt a great hate for those that have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do.

But hate wears you down, and does not hurt your enemy. It is like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die. I have struggled with these feelings many times." He continued, "It is as if there are two wolves inside me. One is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him, and does not take offense when no offense was intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way.

But the other wolf, ah! He is full of anger. The littlest thing will set him into a fit of temper. He fights everyone, all the time, for no reason. He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, for his anger will change nothing.

Sometimes, it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit."

The boy looked intently into his Grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which one wins, Grandfather?"

The Grandfather smiled and quietly said, "The one that I feed."

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