

Can We Do What Is Right?

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I hadn't seen my friend Damien in many years. Damien and I had been close as friends in school, and even kept in touch while in college. But shortly after I graduated from Seminary we drifted apart. There was no dramatic falling out, just the usual reasons. I pursued my career in ministry in Nebraska, and he got married and moved to central Indiana. Damien was not what you would call an early adopter of social media, so it was a long time before we reconnected. Indeed it was just in the past year when he moved back to the small town in Michigan where we grew up.

So as I said, I hadn't seen Damien in a few years until last summer when I was back home. We did a lot of the same things we used to do. We had dinner in our favorite pub. We browsed through our favorite bookstore. We cruised past parts of the old neighborhood and reminisced. He hung out at my parent's house and got reacquainted with them and newly acquainted with my children. After Damien went home, my Mom commented, "You guys act just like you did in High School!"

And she was right. I had the same feeling spending time with my friend of twenty years ago. Somehow in those hours I had the experience of time having gone backwards. It was as if decades had been erased. Damien and I are the same age; heck he is even a grandfather now – a fact I never let him forget. But the inner experience of being with him again awoke a younger version of myself that had been dormant for a long time. And it wasn't just how I felt; my mother could see it in how both of us talked, and interacted with each other.

I am sure you have had similar experiences reconnecting with an old friend or perhaps at a high school reunion. Social psychologists explain this change in behavior and personality by what they call “situational influences.” I once worked with a woman who was from England. She related to me that her mother had come to visit her in Michigan, and they were going to take the bus downtown to do some shopping. It took them both several minutes to realize that they were standing on the wrong side of the street. All it took was one other person from England, where traffic flows in the opposite direction, to create a situational influence. It only takes two people to keep a culture going.

These examples of situational influences on us are pretty benign. However, they can be powerful, powerful factors in influencing our behavior. Situational influences can push us

toward ethical decisions we might otherwise have not made. Perhaps the most vivid demonstration of this was the Stanford Prison Experiment. In the summer of 1974 a group of sophomores at the University of Stanford were randomly divided into prisoners and guards. The purpose of the experiment was to see how middle class, intelligent young men react to confinement and institutionalization. What it revealed was not so much about the prisoners but about the guards. That it did not take long for those with power to denigrate and dehumanize those who did not have power. There was name calling, physical punishment, humiliation, and torment between the guards toward the prisoners. In fact, even the researchers doing the study got caught up in it. They were so keen on studying what was going on, that they failed to recognize the immoral behaviors going on as part of their experiment. All it took was one factor in situational influence to bring about this dramatic alteration. One group was the guards and one group the prisoners. That was all that was necessary. Even the researchers bought into the rules of the experiment. Finally, it took the head researcher's girlfriend to intervene to point out to him that this was madness and it needed to end. From beginning to end, these situational influences turned Stanford students into Abu Graib prison guards in just two weeks.

Actually the Abu Graib reference is not by coincidence. Some of the torture done in that prison was almost identical to what the Stanford guards did to their prisoners. So much so, in fact that the lead researcher of the Stanford Prison experiment, Philip Zimbardo, was an expert witness at one of the trials for an Abu Graib guard. In his book The Lucifer Effect, Zimbardo does not excuse such behavior. The Abu Graib guards were guilty in both the legal and moral sense. Rather Zimbardo is interested in these situational influences that exert such power over us so as to make it very difficult to resist evil. In addition to Abu Graib he discusses at length examples such as the Salem witch hunts, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and Adolf Eichmann. In all these cases, people perpetuated unimaginable evil because some authority designated a particular group of people (Jews, witches, Tutsis) as less than human. That one situational influence, an authority claiming that some group was not human, was all it took for evil to flourish.

I think Philip Zimbardo's book The Lucifer Effect is the most powerful and insightful examination of human evil, and heroism, since Voltaire and Augustine. I also find it personally challenging, and challenging to our Unitarian Universalist faith. If you were here two weeks ago, you may recall I preached about an old Unitarian theory of salvation called "Salvation by Character." For

those of you who may have missed it, Salvation by Character is the idea that we are saved not just by doing good things, but by becoming better people. That something within us, our essence, is transformed into someone new and better. A kind of this-worldly version of heaven. With our inner essence transformed into something just a little lower than the angels, everywhere we walk would be paradise. It is a lovely 19th century, Transcendentalist vision for our life.

Until Philip Zimbardo comes along and throws cold water on it all! Zimbardo asserts that people are not as consistent as they like to think they are. I act very differently around my friend Damien. In that case the situational influence might not affect my moral choices to the degree that it did for Adolf Eichmann. However Zimbardo makes a powerful and dramatic point: our character is shaped by our social situation. Who we associate with has an effect on us. We are nurtured by our communities while at the same time we make them come to life with our presence. Therefore it is vitally important to be around people who have values that exert positive influences upon us.

A community asserts its values onto its members. I once heard this framed a different way: that we become the average of the five people we hang around the most. Two of them will be better than us in some respects, two worse, and I will be in the

middle. If those four other people jog every morning, I will likely wind up in third place. Now I don't swear by the exactness of this formula, but it illustrates the point that social and situational influences shape our character beyond our realization. Therefore it behooves us to be very intentional about the kinds of communities we are a part of.

Which I suppose is the moral of the story that Kathleen Norris told in our reading this morning. If there was ever on the Earth a community of people who were intentional about their values and living them out in their day to day behavior it is the Benedictines! St. Benedict in his Rule for the community knew something about the power of situational influences. Our communities shape us at least as much as we shape them. In her reflection, Norris notes that the community really isn't about abstract theology and theories of salvation. The spiritual growth and nurture comes through more by example. The real teaching comes by living in close quarters with people who demonstrate their faith with their actions. It is the earthiness of the women who put together a feast for the community that speaks to her. Their humor, their wisdom, their reactions to the events of life, are how they live out their values and in turn communicate those values to each other.

I believe religious community is different from every other kind of community because of the intentionality of living out its values. Our individual character is not locked in; it is a dynamic ever changing aspect of ourselves. Our character can grow, as the Unitarians envisioned it growing into a kind of salvation by character. But as Zimbardo points out, our character can diminish too. As a church it is useful to ask ourselves, are we helping people grow in character or do we diminish them? Both are possible. There are lots of churches that demonize and dehumanize gay, lesbian and transgendered people. The “Lucifer Effect” is alive and well in religious communities and churches just as surely as it is any other social situation. There is a joke among ministers that says church is like nitroglycerin: it can be used to heal your heart, but it can also blow up in your face!

Thankfully we too have a heritage that our faith can draw upon. The Pilgrims, whom we will be celebrating this week, did something unique when they arrived in America. They were part of a “free church movement” meaning that they were free from the Church of England. They created a covenant among themselves. This covenant was an explicit statement of their values and how they would live them out. Our Unison Affirmation, which we repeat at every worship service, serves a similar purpose. It names who we are and the values we aspire to live into. History

of course tells us that the Pilgrims were imperfect people who were oppressive to the Native Americans and hostile to people who believed differently than they did. But they started a practice of naming those values and promises to each other, even if they didn't always live up to their own ideal.

Covenants can be powerful situational influences, to borrow Zimbardo's term. They set the stage, and create a framework for how to understand our relationships. They are not magic guarantees that everyone will behave according to those values. But they at least name our aspirations as a sort of touchstone that tells us both who we are and what we wish to become. It is a powerful moment in the worship service to stand here on the chancel and hear the entire congregation recite that Unison Affirmation together. It feels like we receive a blessing from you every time it is spoken.

Not long ago my son Matthew asked his older brother Thomas, "Do you love me?" Thomas responded with, "No I don't love you." But said it in a way that was sarcastic or ironic. That he meant, "Of course I love you, why do you have to keep asking?" But Matthew didn't understand the subtle meaning, and got upset. When I heard this, I was aghast. Not so much at Thomas' behavior but at the recognition that that level of irony and sarcasm had come from his parents. Sharon and I are of

Generation X; we swim in the ironic. Sarcasm is a second language for my generation. We had become a situational influence on our children, and not in the way we meant to be. So we created a covenant of sorts. It is an agreement, a promise to each person in the family, to say nice things to each other.

There was a study done between couples that divorce and those that stay together. Part of the research was how often couples gave each other compliments. Among the couples who reported having a happy marriage decades in, they complimented each other nearly twenty times a day. This turned out to be one of the best predictors of a happy relationship. Twenty compliments a day doesn't happen by accident – these couples intentionally sought out opportunities to compliment the other person. It was a powerful situational influence. Covenants can work in our families just like they work in our churches. Say nice things to each other – it's a simple promise to make, and powerful commitment to keep.

Which is a good thing to remember as we all come together this week to feast with our families. I like my family's new covenant to always say nice things to each other. I am going to need to remember it this week. Goodness knows I will need something that is going to help me resist the temptation to throw one of my Mom's crescent rolls across the table at my obnoxious

uncle. Yeah he will probably be bragging about Republican victories in the election. I can probably deal with that. It's when he gets going on how his precious Michigan State Spartans beat the tar out of my beloved Wolverines last month that I am going to be sorely tempted to start hurling food at him. Maybe even a utensil or two. See how powerful situational influences are?!

So join me, won't you, in celebrating the Thanksgiving holiday in a renewed spirit of peace, joy and love. Gratitude is a lofty aspiration. It is a noble spiritual practice, but some years it takes a lot of effort to get up to gratitude. But by remembering our covenants, the promises we make to each other, the road to gratitude can transform our character. May it be so for you, this year. Amen Blessed Be.