

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
February 12, 2017
Matthew 5:21-27, Sirach 15:15-20

Choices

First, a word about the reading from Sirach this morning. I doubt if many of us have really heard about this book, which is contained in some Christian Bibles, but not in others. Catholics and Orthodox churches chose to include it in their Canon or authorized scriptures. Jewish Bibles don't include it in their canon, but it shows up in a lot of rabbinical writings. It was written by a fellow named Joshua ben Sirach, or in more common English, Jesus the son of Sirach of Jerusalem. It is dated about 180-175 BCE, well before Jesus was born. Sirach was a scribe in Jerusalem and unlike many books of the Bible it is claimed that he actually signed this work as his own. It is a book filled with wisdom teaching, sort of a book of proverbs. (See "Sirach" in Wikipedia.) It is a book about wisdom—wisdom about making the right choices, at least in the mind of the author.

I had a friend in high school who had a choice once. As it turned out, it was a profound choice as he realized later in life. My friend was a star athlete, received really good grades, was popular in the dating scene, played several musical instruments in the school band and sang in the school choir. But my friend also had a wild side. He liked to take risks and enjoyed taking his friends along some risky rides with him, and not just in his hot car either. He liked to experiment, too.

Now, growing up in a small rural farming town, it can get kind of boring, you see. There's not a lot to do, so as kids, we had to make up our own games and adventures. Things like driving cars fast well before you had your driver's license, hopping freight trains and riding in box cars down to the next rural town on the rail line, and pulling all kinds of pranks on Halloween, some that were funny and others just plain destructive to property and feelings, and sometimes bodies. But the one thing that a lot of the younger generation did, and their parents I guess, too, was have a few beers once in awhile. In fact, probably more than once in awhile. Addiction doesn't differentiate between urban and rural residents. It's a plague on all kinds of houses—city condos or rural farm houses. If you want to help our young people here in Danvers, because, yes, we have addictions here, too, get involved with Danvers Cares who work really hard to educate our young folks about the dangers of addictive substances.

Back to my high school friend. I wouldn't say he was addicted to alcohol, but I would say that he often used it to "party" as we would call it back then. Of course, being an athlete, there were times when we all would swear off drinking alcohol because our coaches told us it was against training rules. They wanted us physically fit, of course—and safe, too. The rule was: you drink alcohol, you're off the team. One morning during football season our coaches and football captains called an all-team meeting. We all filed into the

math classroom as our head coach also taught math. The coaches explained to all of us teenagers that there had been reports that some of the team members had been caught drinking alcohol after a Friday night game and they had been removed from the team. But before they were kicked off they had claimed that they were only doing what they knew other players were doing as well. So, the coaches and the team captains decided to call a team meeting. The head coach asked the assembled team to raise their hands if they had been drinking alcohol anytime during that season. About six players raised their hands. The coach told them to leave the room and said they were off the team for the rest of the season. The coach asked again for a show of hands of those who had broken the rule and no one else raised their hand. Then we were all sent back to class.

An hour later my friend was summoned to the principal's office. He grabbed his books from the English class he was attending and headed down to the office. When he was ushered into the office, his father was there with the principal. His father asked if he had anything he wanted to tell them. My friend confessed right then and there that he, too, had broken the rule. The look on his father's face was one of embarrassed heartbreak. Not only had his son lied in that meeting with the football team, but he had lied to him. My friend was crushed. Crushed. But, he learned a valuable lesson that stayed with him the rest of his life. He learned that the truth will always come out. Sooner or later the truth catches up with us all. He also learned that although there may be times when telling the truth is really hard, it's a whole lot worse if you get caught in a lie.

Listen to words of the Gospel of Matthew:

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord...’ Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, anything more than this comes from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37)

From the wisdom Book of Sirach we heard,

He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given. (Sirach 15:16-17)

Folks, one of the greatest gifts God gave us when we were created was the gift of free will. But like a lot in God's creation, there is a sense of opposite in everything—for every act there is a consequence, for every action there is a reaction. There is night and there is day, there is truth and there is falsehood. Our gift of free will and the ability to choose is both a blessing and a curse. In some sense we all live in God's democracy—we have been given the ability to choose. It's not always easy to make the right choice. It seems there are little choices that we have make in every moment of life. And, our choices matter. Just ask my friend. And sometimes, there are choices we make that we make out of wanting to avoid the pain of the moment that really only delays the reckoning of the pain. It is so ironic that one of the greatest gifts we have been given—the gift of choice—also can be fraught with such danger and pain. Not only pain for us, but pain for those whom we love, or others we don't even know. Telling the truth or telling a lie. It's just

the physics of the universe that truth always comes out in some way or another. The gospel writer and the Jewish scribe remind us of the better part of wisdom—tell the truth. Take your choices seriously because they do matter, no matter how small you think they may be. Amen.

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