

OBLIGATIONS VERSUS HEART-FELT CHOICES

Psalm 119: 33-40; Romans 13: 8-14

Why do we do what we do? – for family, friends, work, personal life-style choices?...
Why do we do what we do?

Sometimes we do what we do out of fear - fear of getting into trouble, fear of what others will think, fear of earning their disfavour or abuse, fear of losing a relationship, fear of losing a source of income, fear about our health if we don't change things in our lifestyle, fear of God and of divine punishment... Fear is a big motivator for doing what we do and how obligated we feel about it all.

Another reason we do what we do is because we carry the burden of responsibility. There are a lot of 'musts', 'oughts', shoulds and 'have-tos' in our lives for any number of reasons. Feeling responsible is about caring, but it can also be about other things as well like guilt or judgement - the judgement of others, of society, of God. Judgement binds us and obligates us in ways that are often quite unhealthy.

The founder of modern psycho-therapy – Sigmund Freud, called this sense of responsibility and obligation our 'super-ego.' The super-ego is the composite of all the values and requirements that have formed us and are part of society that pressure us and impose themselves on us. From our private history with our families and how we have been formed as we have, to social pressures many of us feel, we do so many things out of a sense of obligation, responsibility or duty even if they're not things we find life-giving. According to Freud, if there was no superego, people would step over each other and neglect one another far more than they do. To avoid social chaos, some measure of the super-ego must obligate us. Fear and a sense of responsibility can keep us and society in check.

From observing speed-limits or stop signs, to wearing masks and following the rules to stay safe and keep others safe in this time of Covid-19, to social order in the face of mass protests, the combination of fear, guilt and social responsibility are great motivators for us collectively.

But what about doing what we do from the heart, with intention, as a choice we make fully ourselves rather than something externally imposed on us? How do we

turn things we have to do into things we choose to do with our hearts? And conversely, how do we find the courage and permission to let go and give up things we choose not to do because the reasons are not worthy, and in fact, oppressive and dehumanizing? How much are we being manipulated and abused by other people or by the system because we don't recognize or are scared to recognize that we always have more freedom to choose than we imagine we have? As the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr prayed the prayer that has become the bedrock of Alcoholics Anonymous: Lord, grant us the grace to accept what we cannot change, the courage to change what we can change, and the wisdom to figure out the difference. We need grace, we need courage and we need wisdom.

Now today is also labour day Sunday, a time in the year when we ponder the necessity, the gift and the challenge of work. From migrant workers, to PSWs in long-term care facilities, to teachers and others going back to school, to police officers under the spotlight of criticism and yet also trying to do a difficult job, to those who are out of work right now, work is a gift, it is a necessity, but it is also a challenge and a struggle even when there are lofty purposes in it. How do we as societies recognize and honour the dignity of work by providing safe conditions and proper compensation? How do we do more and more of what we do from the heart, out of an inner freedom that says: I choose to do this and by so choosing, find fulfillment and meaning in it even when there are things about it that are challenging?

Let me tell two brief stories of two people I've met over the years as a minister.

Abdela and his family emigrated to Canada from Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, Abedela was a university professor. He came to Canada, initially, to finish his PH.D. But at some point during his studies, he and his wife decided they had to emigrate. Why? It was all for the children. Their children would have opportunities here and a future here that they could never have in Ethiopia. And so, they came. But once here, it was really hard to find work in their fields. Abdela's Ph.D work was focussed on politics in Africa. Getting a job at a Canadian university with this kind of focus was very difficult. And so, Abdela ended up doing work as a cleaner and care-taker at a church. And even as he taught a course here and there at the university, the likelihood of making a career as a professor was slim.

But here's the thing about Abedla: He was a profoundly contented human being. He was grounded in who he was and he fully embraced every choice he made. He found joy and purpose in cleaning and in engaging others at the church. He was a man with a deep faith that was all about love. And the love that lived in his heart was the prime motivator in all the choices he made.

Abedela was also someone very engaged in the wider community and especially, his own Ethiopian community. His passion was reconciliation, especially between groups who had been divided over centuries long conflicts and grievances. The gospel was all about forgiveness and loving God and neighbour was the sum of the law. But love is not something you can dictate by law. It has to live and grow in your heart, with intention and it has to be chosen freely again and again. I learned so much from Abdela.

But then, there was Dean. Dean was a miserable human being. But when you looked at his life and pondered it from the outside, there was little reason for Dean to be so miserable. He had been a highly successful executive. But his work was all-consuming and the pressure was relentless. At one point, Dean had a major nervous breakdown and he was hospitalized for over a month. After coming home, Dean knew he had to do something else with his life. A generous package from the company allowed him to pursue another dream, opening up his own business. The town I was ministering in had no decent gym. Dean would design a state of the art facility and he would develop his knowledge and teaching as a personal trainer.

It was a great gym. Dean had many clients. But somehow, Dean could never find contentment within himself. Resentment, complaint and dissatisfaction would ooze out of him, so much so that after a while many people sought to avoid him. Who wants to be around negative people or people so engrossed in themselves and their issues? Everything Dean did was obligation. It was a burden. He resented it all and the grass was always greener elsewhere. It was always someone else's fault and if only this or that were different, life would be so much better. Dean was a church attender, but I must say, I'm glad he wasn't a member of my church. I tried to avoid him in as gracious a way as I could.

OK, so how do we live, work and relate to others from our hearts rather than simply out of obligation, duty or fear? How?

I'm sure there are many ways, but as Christians a pathway is laid out in our scriptures read through the lens of Jesus. Jesus didn't dispute the values of the religious authorities around him. They were very zealous and strict about observing the commandments. No. Where he was conflicted with them was over motivations. Why do you do what you do? Is it because you have to, to avoid condemnation or receive some reward in terms of divine favour or the acceptance of others? Well, according to Jesus, when it comes to the important things we do in life and the important relationships we develop in life, if we don't do what we do out of love and from the heart, then it's not worthy of the humanity God gave us.

And this is exactly what our scripture readings are teaching. Psalm 119 is all about religious commandments and the law. But rather than fear, duty or obligation, the psalmist is seeking to evoke the beauty of embracing the law from the heart: "Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end. Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart." And further on, the psalmist contrasts the motive of love as the foundation of observing the law over against other motivations that live in us all, motivations like selfish gain, vanity, dread of being disgraced or rejected. These are all reasons we do or avoid doing so many things in life but they are not love, and therefore they are demeaning and dehumanizing.

And our New Testament reading from Romans makes the law of love even more explicit: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law... Love does no wrong to neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." And just like the psalmist, the apostle names so many other motivators for the choices we make and the ways we live life that are not love. When we are not receiving the oxygen of love and being inspired accordingly, what happens to us? Bad motivations lead to the kind of choices and behaviour that wounds others and render us miserable. Our misery then leads to further dehumanization of ourselves and poor treatment of others. The apostle uses words like revelling and drunkenness, quarrelling and jealousy, debauchery and licentiousness. These are big words that point to behaviours that arise when resentment, pain, grievance and misery crowd out the passion and fullness of love in our hearts.

But here's the thing. Love is not a choice the way choosing the flavour of ice-cream is. If love has to be a matter of the heart to be love, we can't just make our hearts feel love. We need inspiration. Love needs to be drawn forth and cultivated. The Psalmist turns his poem into a prayer to God pleading for God to do in the heart of the Psalmist what the Psalmist can't just do for himself.

The apostle follows a similar flow, except that he is more of what's called a "Christ-mystic." Jesus not only taught and embodied what divine love looks like in the flesh. In his now risen state, alive in the Spirit, Christ is the energy-flow of love that may enter us and kindle the fire of love in and through us. The imagery the apostle uses is especially beautiful. He says this: "**put on** the Lord Jesus Christ." The imagery is that of clothing, like a warm sweater. Put on Christ and feel the warmth of his love until it becomes you. Put on Jesus Christ and let his Spirit burn through you until you are a flame of love, and let this flame shape more and more of what you do and the quality of how you do it. Let such love that is Christ burn off the false burdens you carry, the obligations that weigh you down out of guilt or judgement, fear and resentment. Like Abdela, embrace the circumstances you are in and discover a new freedom and empowerment to love within all the things you do and the choices you make. How do we turn our obligations into heart-felt choices if we choose to hold on to them?

In this season of Covid-19, this season of fear as school is about to begin again, this season where we feel trapped and hemmed in, restricted and anxious, this season of protest against injustices that we cannot accept anymore... may we put on the Lord Jesus Christ daily, and may we find fresh inspiration to become the hands, feet and heart of our Lord in all our relationships, work-commitments, situations and protests.

Feel that energy-flow of divine love... pray for it and pray through it for others... pray for healing and pray for new life... pray for sustaining and pray for those who cannot find a way to turn their obligations into heart-felt choices. Pray for the fire of love to burn through you ever more brightly; Amen.