

MORAL DILEMMAS
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You might have noticed that I flipped the reading and the sermon around in the order of service. This is not one of my usual gaffs that I like to blame on Gaby. The reading today is kinda sorta my conclusion, and in a sermon that poses a number of ways to approach a moral dilemma, a completely different set of ideas to run your soul and mind across. I believe, the more perspectives on moral decisions one can have the better, and today you are given a few

As I stated, Barbara prompted this sermon by sharing the tension she feels in holding the value of wanting to stay politically informed and the troubling feeling this commitment causes her. Barbara's question of how she should manage this had an earnest plaintiff cry. And like those in our seekers group can attest, I get excited when the talk turns to ethics. It's a thing.

Barbara's moral dilemma of how to care about our culture without being dragged down is a great moral dilemma. A classic problem for people with conscience. I am sure we all have our own slightly different versions of this ethical tension.

Others in our congregation struggle with the moral dilemma of how to hold onto their faith and beliefs with which they were raised, while they find they reject the authority of the institutions and sources of authority their faith rests on.

Nearly all of us struggle with how close distant, responsible, and/or liberated we wish to be from family or close friends that we love and/or try our souls.

It's a lot different from the stage we were at with the Ten Commandments. We are smarter and more nuanced for simple rules to guide us.

The big problem and great thing about any good ethical dilemmas is that they don't have a single right or wrong answer. Which is after all what makes them a dilemma.

The other terrible and wonderful thing about moral dilemmas is that they are always unique to each of us, and universal in their own way.

Barbara's particular tension of wanting to be informed but not overwhelmed, to care but not despair, is not one that plagues me. My long-practiced cool-headed response to her dilemma would be to pick a few places and ways in which I chose to constructively act, but not allow myself to care much or be consumed by the details. And, mostly that works. For me at least, if not the world. But that doesn't mean that is her answer. Or that my answer matters.

My dilemma is similar. My dilemma is that there is no clear line in the world, or in my heart, as to where the feeling of having done enough for others can be fixed, where my contribution is paid off, and the world I live in is made right. If Barbara's dream is that her attention to the news was always more inspiring than depressing, my dream would be to live in a world where there was a clear objective standard of volunteer hours, or charitable giving, where my job as a person of conscience is objectively over. I struggle with the lack of clarity between what I have earned and what I owe.

We as a nation are of course torn up by this as well. How collective and or cooperative do we want to be, and in what ways, and where is the line where protecting people from hate speech violates free speech?

Let's let Barbara's dilemma be a prompt for all of us to engage in one of our own moral troubles.

You can't therapy another person to health. We've all tried that. Which means we all have work to do.

This is an interactive sermon, but it's not interactive between me and you. It is interactive with you and your head. It works much better if you have what you feel is a moral problem, so find one.

The service I feel compelled to write is on one hand a validation of Barbara's deep concerns, and on the other, an encouragement to give up.

That said, the second thing I want to say is that I believe that most of the things in our lives that cause us grief are not going to be solved. Yes, you heard me right.

That most of the things that stress us are simply the result of two values that are inextricably linked. Most of the problems that plague us are different commitments that are held in tension with one another, trapped together if you will, pulling the singular thing that is us in different directions. And that takes them from the realm of questions to polarities.

Vocabulary.com described a polarity as the relationship between two opposite characteristics or tendencies, like the polarity of two sides of a debate. Here are a few. Interdependence and freedom. Relationships and privacy.

They are bigger than us, and rather than thinking that we are called to solve them like a puzzle that eventually we can put away, these tensions are built right into the nature of life itself and our very bodies. And given that most moral dilemmas are inescapable, I think it helps to remember that how we manage these tensions we cannot answer once and for all are decisions that define who we are. Essentially, literally saying, the way I am going to handle this impossible to escape, unwinnable situation is this is who I am, and make peace with it.

That said, in a sermon cautious about giving advice, I would encourage you to steer clear of the indifferent F-it option, and attempt to think about a path forward regarding this problem that you are going to choose to be proud of yourself for having made. I am asking you to use this next ten minutes to engage in a very deliberate act of self-assertion.

There is a little art and a little science to engaging a dilemma like Barbara presented. Mike Austin, in an article in *Psychology Today*, said that in the modern world we tend to emphasize emotion over rationality when considering what a proper or ethical thing to do is. Austin says emotions are relevant, but approaching moral questions and dilemmas in a reasoned manner gives us the best chance to improve the world—and ourselves.

When I thought about engaging a dilemma with the angle of consequences, food came to mind. For example, I hold deep inside in the desire to be a spontaneous, adaptive person, and to be a diligent, organized, fit person. One specific example of this tension would be my desire to eat brownies, and to be a fit person trying to keep my triglycerides low.

And fairly recently for me, I quietly discovered a tool I didn't even label a tool, until I sat down to write this. When I think about food, good food, and I eat plenty of that, I don't have to think about it. I never judge myself for eating greens and other healthy things. What I feel like I need to focus on is the amount of fattening, heavy carb food I consume. And one of the images that keeps me from eating too much, chocolate in particular, is I think about all the fatty foods (it's more nuanced than that, and also, it's not) is to think of layering my internal organs—the one I most poignantly think of, with a permanent layer of fat proportional to the size of the item. And, as awful as that is, that image helps me discern when it's worth it to eat that thing, and how much of it.

These kinds of visualizations can be helpful for me.

A metaphoric translation for Barbara's challenge might be for her to imagine her political soul being a container, and the news she digests being a caffeinated liquid that, in the right doses, could be a focusing and even energizing fuel, but when over-consumed like coffee, can turn into a nerve fraying toxic that can be disabling. In this imagery designed to guide Barbara, perhaps the only way to empty this metaphoric vessel could be to perform political action and/or shut off the news.

Maybe, it might help to approach with other metaphors. Maybe it helps to imagine our task in life to remain upright and enjoy the creative skilled act of surfing on top of a sea filled with different priorities, churning and brought to life by the tension of our varying concerns and commitments.

Or perhaps this is better. We are most likely going to have to ride great oral dilemmas like a hundred and twenty pound jockey rides a twelve hundred pound horse.

Take a second to imaging yourself managing all tensions in your life in the way an athlete would.

Maybe it helps to imagine our lives as being lived inside a room where these tensions all must coexist on our shelves, and our task to keep them all from falling is to constantly attend to them, rearrange, them.

Come up with some visual physical image, or some metaphor that you can take home and play with while you watch yourself live out your unique challenges. However, that is hardly the only way to engage your moral challenges.

A few probing simple questions can perhaps help here.

What would a person of good character or virtue do in your shoes, in your particular situation? How much of your own pleasure, comfort, laziness should be involved in your response, and how much do you owe others in your response? And in light of our desire to avoid problems, is one of the values at work in your dilemma the value of not dealing with it? Your desire to avoid your problem.

I want you to very practically consider the time and energy that this dilemma, this behavior, this problem, has on you. Let's do a fast-paced squeeze into my fifteen minute approach to one of our problems. Let's take a tack I will encourage the teens to take in a graduation-themed sermon I just wrote, and that is, to write out our problems for clearer viewing.

Okay, write down a dilemma you face. Something has to be stirring in your head since I started this. If we come to accept that if for many situations there is no escape, still let's see if we can tease out some consequences for said dilemma.

Now let's write out the option of doing nothing, performing no intentional action other than noticing your dilemma when it arises. Write down this: "I'm going to make no intentional corrective action to change or challenge my dilemma. Essentially, I am intentionally going to ignore it until I feel it again, but take note of it."

Write out one serious option for proceeding forward. What is something you could do to deal with your problem. Now, write out another option for dealing with it. What else might you do? "Block myself from watching MSNBC, decide I get half a brownie's worth of chocolate a day, finally directly confront the family member who disturbs me."

Now, write out another option for doing nothing, but changing your perspective of the question itself. Write this: "I will not make an effort to change my behavior or act in any particular way, but I will change my attitude or internal response to this situation in this way."

(This is hard work, isn't it. You could quietly get up and get into that food line out in the patio for lunch early. Maybe they have brownies, you might be thinking. But no, get back to work.)

If you think only of the most likely consequences of your actions or decisions, or lack of them, what is likely to happen?

I want you to come up with an answer that you are going to try to live with for a while. And to attempt to do so, knowing that you have really thought about this.

See, I didn't, when Barbara and I sat down, know I had wisdom on this, but maybe I do. When it comes to moral problems, sit with them until you come up with a solution, which could be a choice. That choice could be a compromise, it could be a decision to laugh at yourself for being trapped in its place by your own devices. It could even be a decision to give up worrying about this.

As you work through your dilemma, I invite you to consider approaching the response that feels most prudent and appealing as right, as a covenant that you make with yourself, a commitment that you make between yourself, and your decision.

Perhaps you might think of this commitment between your decision, or even your decision to avoid a decision, as a commitment that has a timeline involved. A commitment for a set period of time that, like the way our chalice groups function, comes up for review after a set period of time. As said before, I think it is wise to trust that you are getting close to an answer when your decision feels more empowering and liberating than it feels depressing and indifferently nihilistic.

Most of us are constantly looking for the perfect system. The perfect system for being mindful, getting fit, losing weight, decluttering, and so on. Leo Babauta, in his book *Zen Habits: The Perfect System*, writes the following:

Notice when you are looking for certainty from a system, course, book, and so on.

Notice when you're procrastinating or running to distraction because of uncertainty.

Say to yourself, "Certainty is the enemy of awesome. Uncertainty is the fuel for an amazing life."

Resolve yourself to not run from uncertainty like a coward, but to face it like a warrior, like a goddess, like a Jedi Ninja Pirate Demigod.

Stay with the feeling of fear and uncertainty. It is uncomfortable. You laugh at the discomfort in derision, laugh at its pathetic attempts at making you flee.

Push further into uncertainty and fear by doing whatever you are afraid of. Feel the fear.

Feel the uncertainty. Feel it transforming you into a powerful being, trembling with the discomfort of being amazing and delicious.

Cry out from the pain of it all, the pain of being beautiful and alive, the pain of joining with the likes of Odysseus and Genghis Khan and Joan of Arc, the anguish of your divinity, the pangs and torment of becoming a celestial deity.

Repeat until whatever you're doing becomes comfortable. Then push into new uncertain territory, feeling the groundlessness of growth and learning and fearlessness. You no longer need to run. You can stay in courage and awesomeness. You no longer need to find certainty or answers or systems. You have all you need inside you, bursting with light and goodness, shining your powers into the vast and tremulous universe.

AMEN