



WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

May 14, 2017, Sixth Sunday of Easter, Mother's Day

Acts 7: 54-60; John 14:1-7

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Theme: Opportunities to do the right thing often seem incidental and come upon us suddenly.

Loving and gracious God, your presence is woven into the fabric of our days, as near to us as our own breath. Open us up to your word in Holy Scripture that we might again sense your great love for us and be transformed by it. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Last week our younger daughter Grace and her boyfriend were shopping in a clothing store in Charlotte, North Carolina where they live. They were poking around the racks of clothes when they noticed an awkward conversation unfolding between the store clerk and a customer who was wearing the traditional head turban marking him as a member of the Sikh faith. The clerk was refusing to serve the man. Loud enough for all to hear, he said something like “*We don’t have anything **you** would want here.*”

Those of you who know our younger daughter are perhaps aware that she is not a reticent young woman. She and her boyfriend observed this act of obvious hostility and discrimination... and got involved. They confronted the clerk, asking if he was refusing service to the man because of his religion. The clerk opined that the guy was a member of one of those “terrorist religions.” This got Grace and Matt’s dander up, God bless ‘em. They got their phones out and started filming – exactly what 20-somethings do these days. They also proceeded to argue with the clerk about the unfairness of his generalizations – refusing service to somebody wearing a symbol of their faith, and anyway they added for the clerk’s edification,



Sikhs aren't Muslims and there have even been Christian terrorists. My daughter and her boyfriend were not going to let the clerk get away with it unchallenged. It was getting hot in the mall.

Just as emotions peaked, several people – one of them with a large television camera perched on his shoulder – emerged from the rear of the store. They explained to Grace and Matt that the encounter was being filmed for an ABC reality television show called *“What Would You Do?”*

If you don't know the program, think of it as the “Candid Camera of ethics.” They secretly film people in public situations as actors posing as real people present them with some moral dilemma, a choice that invites them to do something... or do nothing. One show had a nanny yelling at the child in her care, calling the child “stupid.” You're just walking by. What would you do? Another had an atheist seated in a restaurant. He watches a Christian family say grace before their meal and begins to berate them about religion. You're at the next table. What would you do? Another program placed an actor in a wine shop. He drops a bottle of expensive wine on the floor. It breaks, but he denies responsibility. You saw him drop it. What would you do? A clerk in a clothing store denies service to a man wearing a Sikh turban. You watch it happening. What would you do?

Grace and Matt were reluctant to sign the legal waivers the ABC folks gave them, forms giving the network permission to broadcast the scene on national television. But they noticed that their waiver forms had the word “hero” written across the top. They did sign the forms. The show will air on ABC in June.

This very proud father will definitely tune in next month. But after busting my buttons about my daughter's courage, I had to ask myself this, *“Lindvall, what would you have done in that clothing store? Would you have said anything to the clerk?”* I'm not 100-percent sure I would have. I know myself; I know that I'm inclined to avoid confrontation. I really had to do some soul searching.

Two thousand years ago, if I had happened upon the event described in the first of the two passages from the Bible that Margarete just read, the story from Acts about



the stoning of Stephen, what would I have done? It was, of course, nothing less than a first-century lynching, an extra-judicial execution. But everybody knew this Stephen guy was a rabble-rouser. Everybody knew he was a heretic who'd gone over to this new sect, these Christ-followers. Everybody knew he refused to be quiet about it. This was heresy and it simply had to be stopped. No, there hadn't actually been a formal trial and stoning was extreme. But a respected and zealous leader, one Saul of Tarsus (later to be called Paul) was there at the stoning, guarding the coats of those doing it. It must be an unfortunate necessity. The question, then as now, was and always is, "What would you do?"

What I've come to understand is that moral choices that really matter often have a way of coming at you out of nowhere. They just sneak up on you. And they often seem to be small matters, at least at first blush.

Sometimes we do come face-to-face with the one big moral kahuna, but so often choices between right and wrong are deceptively small and beguilingly mundane. But know this: small and mundane as they are, they're pieces of the big choice, the great choice we're making all of our lives, the fork-in-the-road choice between right and wrong, between nothing less than good and evil.

For example: You know a piece of juicy but information about somebody, it's hurtful and gossipy, but it *is* true. Do you speak it, or do keep it to yourself? What would you do?

For example: A kind word is perched on your lips, just sitting there ready to be spoken. To let it go would be a gift and a blessing. But something – some reticence – holds the words in. Do you speak the kindness or not? What would you do?

For example: You have a business deal in front of you that's just this side of legal, but over the edge of what's fair. There's money to be made, business is business, and everybody's doing it. What would you do?



For example: Your child has a classmate who's not the most winsome kid in the world. He's difficult and doesn't get many invitations for play dates, but your child is more than willing to have him included. It will ask more of you and a parent's first obligation is your own child, right? Do you invite him or not? What would you do?

All these choices – little one and big ones, choices that just come out of nowhere – they add up. And added up, one on top of another, all these daily choices add up to a life. They add up to who you are.

A minister friend of mine named Bob Dunham serves University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill. A while back, he shared a story about a church member he was visiting in the hospital, a story that presses home the point I'm making about little choices being big choices.

“That day in his hospital room, George was every bit of eighty-three years old and dying after a long and valiant battle with cancer, but in the spirit that afternoon he had traveled back to an earlier, more carefree time.... Apparently he had been quite a practical joker in his day, and told me of tying the end of a rope to the rear bumper of his older brother's new automobile and the other to an old maple tree. He started laughing a deep laugh when he told of his brother's befuddlement at the car's inability to move, making a face to mimic his brother's puzzled look.

“We had talked for a good while,” Bob said, “...he was tiring, so I had a prayer with him and was preparing to leave. But he held on to my hand. ‘Can I be serious for a moment?’ he asked. ‘Preacher, I have lived a pretty good life, and have no real fear of dying,’ he said. ‘I’ve outlived all my family anyway. But if I have any regrets, it’s for the times I held back.’ He paused for a moment, as if to gather both breath and resolve, and then explained further. ‘There were some times in my life when I might have been able to make a difference and didn’t.’

He told of his work as a pipe fitter, and of the time when several of his co-



workers harassed and then assaulted a young black worker. 'I could have intervened,' he said, 'but I was scared, so I held back...' He told of the time when his daughter raised a question about his faith, particularly about his practice of tithing, and he sloughed it off with a little joke rather than treating the question with the care it warranted and giving witness to his faith. 'I missed that opportunity because I held back from saying what I really believed; she never asked me another question about me and my faith... He told of a time at a party when a friend made crude, anti-Semitic remarks about one of his Jewish friends. 'I was offended,' he said, 'but instead of saying anything, I held back, and even pretended to laugh. I've never forgiven myself for not saying anything.'

Bob finished the story of his visit that day like this: "He was still holding my hand. 'Preacher' the dying man went on, 'I never hurt anybody intentionally. But I have been guilty of holding back....' Squeezing my hand tightly, he said, 'Don't hold back. You hear? Holding back ain't never a good thing.'"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.