

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
"Children of God: God Followers"
Rev. Dr. John Judson
August 29, 2014

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Romans 12:9-21

This morning I want to begin with a question, when you were a child what did you want to be when you grew up? Second, how many of you have hopes and dreams for the children around you? What are those hopes and dreams? As I suspected two of the key answers that come through is that you want them to be happy and healthy.

In some ways your answers mirror the answers of humanity across the centuries and in this book (the Bible). People wanted their children to be blessed and filled with joy. But there was one hope and dream that towered above even these two. They wanted their children to be God followers. When I say God followers I don't just mean God believers I mean God followers; those who walk in the path that God has set before them. For the people of Israel this path was well marked. It was marked by the Torah; by the Law of God, meaning all 613 laws that had been given to Moses. Now many of us may think of this as being very legalistic, but I want to think of these laws as road signs that kept God's people on the path to a blessed and joy filled life. Everyone knew where the dangerous curves were. Everyone knew where the bumps in the road were. Everyone knew what the safe speed limit was. The laws guided them in being God followers.

We can sense the importance of these laws in the Shema, or our Old Testament lesson from this morning. "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul and with all of your might. Listen again. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the door posts of your house." The words referred to in the statement are the 613 laws of Moses which are the road signs that allowed the people to love and follow God. They were to always be in front of the people directing them into the life and blessing God offered.

Those were the laws which the Apostle Paul grew up with. He knew all 613 of them and strived to follow them every day of his life. Yet when he was encountered by Jesus on the road to Damascus, something happened. He understood that Jesus was the completion or fulfillment of all of these laws, so that a life of blessing and joy was no longer to be guided by the law but by something else. The question before him then was if those laws were not present as road signs guiding him in being a God follower; guiding him to a life of blessing and joy, how was he to know the way? Though Paul refers to being led by the Spirit, which at times can seem a bit vague, he also offers to us a more detailed look at the signs that are to guide us, as he does in the Romans passage that we read this morning. In fact he sums the road signs up in one verse. "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good."

Let love be genuine. Over my career as a pastor I have been asked numerous times how can I genuinely love those who whom I do not like; such as those who have harmed me? My answer has been that

the love Paul is describing is not about feeling but doing; not about liking but serving. Love, in the manner that Paul is using it here, means to be actively serving others, even when we don't feel "loving" towards them. Love then is a choice to act, and Paul calls upon us to choose to love by serving even our enemies. That love becomes genuine, again not by feeling better about it, but when it is true service in which the other is first and we are second. Genuine here means "the real thing", real service and sacrifice. We see Paul using this concept when he tells the Romans to love one another with mutual affection, contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers. This is the first mark of a God follower, loving genuinely.

Hate Evil. Before we look at this one we need to understand what Paul means by hate. There are two kinds of hate; the kind of hate that is filled with anger and rage, "I hate you!" The second kind of hate is one where we are repulsed by something, "I hate beets!" Though you may love beets, I want to stay as far away as I can from them. This is how Paul uses the term hate. He tells us that we are to be repulsed by evil, again evil being anything that diminishes the image of God in any person, or anything that diminishes the humanity of any person. This means evil can be as simple as gossiping about someone in a way that tears them down, to the horrors of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The reason that we are to be consciously repulsed by evil is that it masquerades as good. It pretends that it can make us better than others; that we are the center of the universe; that we deserve more than others. Thus we are to see evil for what it is, destructive and stay as far away from it as we can. This is the heart of Paul's warning that we are not to repay anyone evil for evil or be overcome by evil. Paul wants us to see evil clearly, be repulsed by it so that we can stay on the path of blessing and joy.

Hold fast to what is good. What is the good? The good is whatever builds up the image of God in another human being; it is whatever assists another person in becoming the human beings God designed them to be. For Paul the ultimate example of "the good" is the life and work of Jesus Christ. We are to bless those who persecute us, live in harmony with one another, associate with the lowly, live peaceably with all persons, feed our enemies and give them something to drink and overcome evil not with evil, but with good; meaning love and forgiveness. In a way we can see Jesus standing behind all of these road signs. They were the ones that Jesus gave his disciples. By so doing we stay on the road following the way of God and the way of blessing and joy.

How many of you have Jewish friends? When you have gone to their house have you seen a small scroll-like item tacked to the front door post? If you have, that is a mezuzah. Inside that case is a copy of the Shema. It is intended to be touched by everyone coming into and leaving the house as a reminder to love God and be obedient to God's words. With that in mind, I have a bit of a different challenge for you this morning...and this is something that the children can help with. I would challenge everyone here to create their own Christian mezuzah. You can do this by writing down these three road signs, let love be genuine, hate evil and hold fast to what is good, and posting them in a place where you can see and touch them, every day when you leave and return to your home. I do this because there is something powerful about touching what is important. By seeing and touching these words my hope is that they will affect how we live our lives on a daily basis. And when you do that, I would also like you to take a picture of the mezuzah and email it to me. I will create a page on our website to show people what we are up to; how we are allowing ourselves to be guided down the path as God-followers toward a life of blessing and joy.