

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 4 October

Children's Talk: Telling Right from Wrong

Last week Mr. Smith told you about Moses being born. He was born in a dangerous time, and so he was placed in a safe basket that could float in the river. He was found by a princess who raised him as her own son. In this story we looked at how people of all different ages contributed and took part in the story. It takes people of all ages to make things work.

This week we are going to talk about teenagers. For most of you, teenagers probably seem very old and mature. Others, who are a little older yourselves, are looking forward to being a teenager with excitement. It is true that teenagers are more mature than younger people. And there are many fun things about being a teenager too. But there are also some challenges that it is useful to think about. We see this with Moses when he was either a teenager or perhaps a young man. There are two things that Moses see happening. For the first one he knows exactly what to do. The second one is more complicated:

Now it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out to his brethren and looked at their burdens. And he saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew, one of his brethren. So he looked this way and that way, and when he saw no one, he struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. And when he went out the second day, behold, two Hebrew men were fighting, and he said to the one who did the wrong, "Why are you striking your companion?"

Then he said, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?"

So Moses feared and said, "Surely this thing is known!" When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well. (Exodus 2:11-15)

What's going on is that for Moses, it was easy to tell between the Egyptian and the Hebrew who was right and who was wrong. It was much harder to tell between the two Hebrew men. Think of it like these pictures. In the first one, some people are wearing red, some are wearing blue. If I told you Egyptians wear blue and Hebrews wear red, you could tell the difference right away! But if I show you this picture, and say, the good Hebrews wear bright red and the bad Hebrews wear dark red, it would be really hard to tell the difference. These are the kind of differences that teens really have to start facing. Not everything is easily seen as right or wrong.

So when Moses saw an Egyptian hitting a Hebrew man, he knew right away that it was wrong, and stepped in to stop it. This is one of the benefits of being older, like a teenager: they get much better at knowing right from wrong, and then being able to do something about it.

But when Moses saw two Hebrews fighting, it wasn't so obvious what he should do. Whose side he should be on, who was right or wrong, and how to step in were all confused. He also learned that they knew what he had done to the Egyptian, and so he ran away in fear. This is the harder side of being a teenager, one that you might not see as much. Not everything is black and white. There are a lot of complicated choices that people have to start making, and it is not always clear whose side you are supposed to be on, what's right, and how to do something about it.

Do you notice older brothers and sister acting differently? If your older and know grade 8, have you noticed they don't seem like the same people? This is part of it. Life is getting more complicated, and that makes it much harder. They are facing decisions that are more complicated than the ones you might face, and that makes them nervous or anxious. But that doesn't take away how much they are growing by having to go through those hard choices. So have compassion for older kids. Remember they make mistakes just like you, they don't know everything. But also get excited, if you're a preteen, for the chances you are going to be getting in just a couple years' time to mature and grow.

Stages of Life, Part 2: The Teenage Years

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

4 October, 2020

This week we continue to look at the stages of life. Last week, Malcolm talked about childhood, and how the innocence of that time becomes a foundation for everything that follows. This week we turn to look at the teenage years. As I was preparing this sermon my mind went to who am I talking to? There are of course a handful of teens watching this sermon, and I'm talking directly to your experience of life. Then there are the parents of teens who could use some help in understanding what their teen is going through and perhaps wondering why on Earth the Lord thought they could handle a teenage child. But for the majority of listeners, your main connection with teenagehood is your own: for some, only a few years back, for others left behind decades ago. Despite that, I hope this sermon can still help you: it can help you appreciate the experiences you had as a teen while also reminding you to be grateful that you've moved on. Whether you look back fondly as the teenage years as a more innocent time or cringe painfully when you think of the awkwardness, there is value in looking back on previous stages of life to gain a better understanding of ourselves in the present.

As we did last week, we'll follow the story of Moses in the Word to learn about this stage of life. Our story begins quite simply, with the words, "Now it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out to his brethren and looked at their burdens" (Exodus 2:11). In the literal sense, this speaks of Moses' awakening awareness that the people he had grown up with, the Egyptian royal family, were not his people, and that in fact his own people were oppressed. Spiritually these words represent the time in our lives when we begin to awaken to our own understanding of truth, and to realize that it needs defending. Teens are starting to realize that not everything their parents taught them seems to be right, and that what is right and just and fair is not always what ends up winning out.

With this realization comes a strong need to stand up for justice and to right the wrongs of the world. In the case of Moses, this is illustrated when he saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew man: rather than sit back, Moses jumped into action, striking the Egyptian to death. This is youthful idealism at its finest, jumping into action without questioning the consequences or getting bogged down in nuances. Yet the very next day Moses had a similar experience that highlights the downsides of this state: he saw one Hebrew man striking another Hebrew man. There was no longer the clarity of us against them, good against evil. One of the men even mocked Moses: "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" (Exodus 2:14). Instead of clarity, confusion reigned; instead of confidence, fear, suspicion, and uncertainty. Here we see the downside of the teenage state: not enough experience to understand the nuances of life, not enough sense of safety to commit one way or another. Fearing for his life, Moses fled Egypt.

These two incidents get to the crux of being a teenager: it is a time of transition and instability, when a person is no longer just a child but is also not yet an adult. A few months ago I was talking to the teens about family, and one of the things that came up was the absolute frustration of parents expecting them to act like adults but then treating them like children. On the flip side, I can imagine some parents getting frustrated with teens who demand to be treated like adults but then act like children. This dichotomy is why Moses could have the intense clarity to know to right

away defend the Hebrew man against the Egyptian, but fell apart completely when faced with the much more complex conflict between two fellow Hebrew men.

This dichotomy can also explain some of the frustration that adults have with teens, and by understanding this, I think we can have more compassion for the teenage state. One of the things that teens do is fight. They rebel. They insist on going against their parents' wishes. This is one of those funny stereotypes about teens. But because it is a stereotype, we can dismiss teens way too easily, not realizing what is going on spiritually. Spiritually, something really *good* is starting to happen. The rational part of their mind is starting to open up so they can think for themselves and understand right and wrong, good and evil, true and false. But at first, this is what that is like:

He is quick to find fault, makes no allowances, is against all, regards everyone as being in error, is instantly prepared to rebuke, to chasten, and to punish, shows no pity, does not apply himself and makes no effort to redirect people's thinking; for he views everything from the standpoint of truth, and nothing from the standpoint of good. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1949)

That can certainly be what a teenager is like: a black and white view of the world, resisting parental control, noticing errors and flaws (both their own and others'), and reducing everything to what is fair or not fair. But again, that they are doing all these things is a part of a really important process. The teens in your life are not bad for being this way.

This doesn't mean they should always be indulged: As we saw in the case of Moses, there are situations when their inability to be discerning leaves them vulnerable or leads them astray. But if you understand where they are coming from, you can be more compassionate even as you set boundaries. To put it in concrete terms: When your teenage daughter is screaming at you because you don't understand her, yes give an appropriate consequence; but don't blame her for being a teen. She doesn't have your perspective, but the fact that she is demanding to be understood and treated fairly indicates that she has a sense of right and wrong. Even if it is not yet nuanced enough. When your teenage son refuses to talk to you about anything and accuses you of prying, that doesn't mean you're a bad parent. It might just mean that in his eyes he has a right to privacy, and wants to exercise that right. Again, don't blame him for doing exactly what teens do as they learn to exercise their newfound sense of justice and fair play. They are growing the way the Lord created them to grow.

Underneath all the self-righteousness and bravado of the teenage years is a lot of uncertainty and doubt. Just as Moses faced doubt and fear around judging between two of his fellow Hebrews, teens can feel immense doubt around more subtle questions of right and wrong. How do you decide between friends who both seem to be in the right but are fighting? How do you judge when good people do bad things? When do you hold to an ideal and when do you bend? I think something similar is happening when teens start trying to figure out the specifics of who they are. They've been told since childhood that they were made for a purpose and have something of value to add to the world: but what is that purpose? How will they know? What if they fail at it? What if they make the wrong choices? What if they are not good enough? These are questions that adults struggle with too. How much more so teens who don't have the experiences to point them one way or another, or

give them confidence that they are indeed on the right path? In the absence of clarity, where can they turn for comfort?

The part of the story we didn't read in the children's talk explains where Moses fled to:

Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well.

Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. And they came and drew water, and they filled the troughs to water their father's flock. Then the shepherds came and drove them away; but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock.

When they came to Reuel their father, he said, "How is it that you have come so soon today?"

And they said, "An Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and he also drew enough water for us and watered the flock."

So he said to his daughters, "And where is he? Why is it that you have left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread."

Then Moses was content to live with the man, and he gave Zipporah his daughter to Moses. And she bore him a son. He called his name Gershom, for he said, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land." (Exodus 16:15-22)

This story might seem far removed from the life of a teenager, but the way the Teachings of the New Church explains it makes it relevant. They say that Midian stands for simple goodness. Moses marrying Zipporah means finding a connection with that simple goodness. I think this is what a lot of teens need to hear: the life of a teenager is complex. They are learning to do things they have never done, they have expectations of acting a way they've never acted before, they are being pulled both directions by childhood and adulthood, and it gets overwhelming. And just as Moses took refuge and settled down temporarily, I think we should encourage teens to take refuge in simple good and true ideas. You don't need to figure everything out. You don't need to make sense of everything in life. You don't need to understand yourself or other people perfectly. You have your whole life to work through those things. Take refuge in simple goodness and basic truth. God loves you. Love other people. Work hard. Be kind. Treat people well. Yes, life is much more complicated than that. But when you're a teen, figuring out this massive transition into adulthood, make sure you have a refuge in the basics.

I'm reminded of the rich young man who asked Jesus how he might inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to keep the commandments: not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to steal, not to bear false witness, not to defraud, and to honour his father and mother. The young man then answered:

"Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth."

Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me." (Mark 10:20-21)

When he answered that he had kept these things from his youth, Jesus looked on him with love. Now it is true that Jesus asked more of him: that he should sell all,

take up his cross, and follow Jesus. These steps stand, spiritually, for giving up our own desires, facing temptations, and committing fully to the Lord. But these are all the things of adulthood. In childhood, it is enough to be practicing keeping the commandments. In other words, if a teen is doing the right thing for the social prestige, to earn something from his parents, to stay out of trouble, or just because it's plain convenient, then that's ok. Teenage life is hard enough without us needing teens to be doing deep, painful, life-transforming growth. Again, take refuge in the simple acts of goodness, and in the basic truths about the Lord and life. For parents, provide that refuge as best you can.

I want to end on a note for the non-teens and those who don't have teens in your life. I hope you've stuck with this talk and haven't wondered off mentally. Even though you aren't a teen now, you once were. And as far off as that time might seem, it was really important in shaping you to be who you are now. Don't let age make you cynical: hold on to some of that shining clarity about ideals and standing up for justice. You now have the tools to make even more of a difference than you could when you first started adopting certain ideals as a teen. And also appreciate how far you have come: how much more discernment you have; the challenges you have mastered; the complexities of life that you can now see your way through. Being a teen is not easy. But it is a crucial step as we allow the Lord to shape us into the angelic people He intends for us to be.

Amen.