



First Parish in Brewster
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Do Good Anyway
September 23, 2007

Second Reading: The Paradoxical Commandments were written by Kent M. Keith in 1968, when he was 19, a sophomore at Harvard College. They were part of *The Silent Revolution: Dynamic Leadership in the Student Council*, his first booklet for high school student leaders. For more than thirty years, the Paradoxical Commandments have circled the globe. They have been put on walls and refrigerator doors, featured in speeches and articles, preached from pulpits, and shared extensively on the web. They have been used by business leaders, military commanders, government officials, religious leaders, university presidents, social workers, teachers, rock stars, parents, coaches, and students. Mother Teresa thought the Paradoxical Commandments were important enough to put up on the wall of her children's home in Calcutta.

People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.
Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.
Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.
Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.
Be honest and frank anyway.

The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds.
Think big anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.
Fight for a few underdogs anyway.



What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.
Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.
Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get

kicked in the teeth.
Give the world the best you have anyway.

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In August I preached a sermon titled, “Why I Love Original Sin.” In it I suggested that the teachings on original sin that most of us have encountered have actually been distorted versions of an original teaching that is, rather than depressing and guilt-producing, actually quite freeing. As I understand it, the Christian church’s teachings on sin originally intended to convey something like this: you’re not perfect; you are prone to making mistakes; failure is and will always be a familiar companion; and you do not nor could you ever deserve the tremendous blessings life bestows on you. But then neither does anyone else, so you can stop worrying about it. There are, as I said then, no Joneses to keep up with. And in the theistic language the Christian tradition(s) use, God loves you not if you get your act together and earn it but simply because you are who you are.

Think of God as a kind of cosmic puppy dog, slobbering all over you, licking your face, jumping up on you, eternally wanting to play. It doesn’t matter if you just shut the door on her tail; it doesn’t matter if you forgot to get dog food on your way home; it doesn’t matter if you’ve been away for hours—your dog always loves you and is ready to play with you just because you’re you. (This is one of my favorite images of the divine, and besides it lets me tell you about the agnostic dyslexic insomniac who stayed awake all night wondering if there really is a dog.)

So that was the thrust of my sermon back in August—you’re not perfect; you never will be; and that’s okay.

Afterwards, three people on their way out of church—and spread out through the line, not bunched up together, they were all independent of each other—said that they liked the sermon but that the only thing missing for them was an exploration of why, then, anyone should bother to do anything good. After all, if you’re okay as you are, with all your flaws and failings, then why try to improve? And why try to do any good in the world? If it isn’t about “earning” your place in heaven, then why strive for anything? Good questions, and I promised I would address them soon in a sermon of their own.

And here we are.

Now I can think of three answers to this question, “Why do good?”

The first is simple: call it *enlightened self-interest*. This was quite a buzz word a while back, and it still makes sense. In its basest form it says that we should do good because it’s good for us.

If I scratch your back it’s a pretty good bet that sometime you’ll scratch mine. “A rising tide floats all boats,” as we used to say, so any effort I make to help my fellows will ultimately help me, too. In the end, I do good because it’s ultimately good for me.

This may not be as mercenary, as selfish, as Machievellian as it might sound. And it's certainly not a product of our modern, secular, me-first age. Buddhist notions of creating "merit," Hindu notions of producing "good karma," even Christian notions of "salvation through works" can be seen as variations on this theme--doing good to others is good for me.

A second reason for doing good without the fear of hell hanging over us, is the idea of "the path with a heart." This might just be another variation of our first reason, I think it merits its own discussion. And although this phrase has become quite popular, becoming part of our common vocabulary, it has its modern origins in the writings of Carlos Castenada in which he describes studying with the Mexican *bruho* Don Juan Mateo. I believe it's in the book *Journey to Ixtlan* where Don Mateo says that there are two kinds of paths in life--those with a heart and those without a heart.

What I love about this teaching is that he asserts that neither path goes anywhere. As he says, both paths "go into the bush and out of the bush." So it really doesn't matter which path you choose.

Except that some paths "have a heart" and other paths don't. The only difference is that the paths with a heart, "make for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it." Those which don't, he says, "make you curse your life." "One makes you strong," he says. "The other weakens you."

So why do good? I could choose to do good because I know--consciously or at some intuitive level--that doing good is good for me, or I could do good because a life lived doing good is, "makes for a joyful journey." Conversely, a life lived without any kind of effort, any kind of striving, "weakens you."

A third reason for doing good is gratitude. This is actually one of the more common of the qtraditional answers the theistic traditions come up with. I know that a lot of people mistakenly think that religion's answer to everything has been, "because you'll go to hell if you don't," but some of the leading Christian thinkers (not to mention Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Druid, Wiccan, Bah'ai, and others) have said--this world is so incredible that when you really let it sink in just *how* incredible it is you are moved to do good out of gratitude. When I realize how miraculous my body is I'm moved to take care of it. When you realize what a phenomenal gift the land, the sea, and the sky are you're moved to try to preserve and nurture them. When you realize how marvelous other people are, and community is, you are moved to do what you can to be of help.

When I was twenty-one I inherited some money. Not enough that I have any of it left, thank you very much, but enough that I really didn't have to worry about paying my bills. I hadn't earned it; I didn't--in any usual senses of the word, at least--deserve it in any way; but there it was. And I was so tickled to have it that I gave a whole lot of it away. I helped an old friend pay off his growing pile of bills; I helped a new friend fly to Paris to see her sister; I brought someone who really couldn't have gone by any other means to Berlin when The Wall came down. And I didn't do this to receive any kind of merit or to

pay off any kind of karmic debt; I did it because I was so grateful to be so financially flush that I just wanted to share my good fortune.

So whether it's enlightened self-interest, preferring the path with a heart, or out gratitude for all I have, there are lots of reasons to do good even if we're okay just as we are.

But the reading we heard a little while ago reminds us that even if we find a reason to do good, we'll quickly encounter lots of reasons not to:

- People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.
- If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.
- If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.
- The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
- Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.
- The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds.
- People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.
- What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.
- People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.
- Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

And over and over again Kent Keith--who was nineteen when he wrote this!--tells us to "do good anyway."

"Do good anyway"--even though it's usually more convenient not to;

"Do good anyway"--even though it could well move you out of your comfort zone if you do;

"Do good anyway"--even though there will very likely be some kind of cost;

"Do good anyway"--even though it will usually be easier not to.

"Do good anyway." "Do good anyway." "Do good anyway." As John Wesley famously said, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

The photo on the cover of the Order of Service is a group of people who've decided--all reasons not to aside--to do all the good that they can. On his 89th birthday this summer, Nelson Mandela announced that our "global village" needed "global elders" who could act as village elders traditionally have the world over--as resource to the people in times of conflict.

To date twelve people have answered the call: Graça Machel of Mozambique, a renowned international advocate for women's and children's rights; Nobel Peace Prize

recipient Desmond Tutu of South Africa; past Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan of Ghana; Ela R. Bhatt of India, widely recognized as one of the world's most remarkable pioneers and entrepreneurial forces in grassroots development, founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA); Lakhdar Brahimi of Algeria, who has spent 40 years helping to keep the peace across the world; Fernando Henrique Cardoso who was Senator, Minister of Foreign Relations, Minister of Finance and for two terms President of Brazil; Jimmy Carter, Noble Peace Prize recipient and former President of the United States; Li Zhaoxing who became nationally renowned as spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry, while also serving as Deputy Director General and later Director General of the Information Department; Mary Robinson, the first woman President of Ireland (1990-1997) and more recently United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights; and Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh who founded the Grameen Bank Project which has been for thirty years a model of micro-economics. These twelve have pledged to do what they can to be of help.

No doubt the current "powers that be" will not take kindly to what will be--already has been--described as "interference." Slurs and opprobrium have already been slung their way. But these great women and men don't care. Their motivations will be questioned; their actions will be challenged; their characters will be smeared. They certainly don't have to do this--each of them individually has already achieved far more than most people, and collectively this is just one impressive bunch.

But they point to a fourth reason for doing good: because there's good needing to be done.