

The Devil Didn't Make You Do It
Scriptures – Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 17:11-19
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On September 13 NPR Morning News presented the amazing story of Mike May who was blinded at the age of three when a chemical canister exploded in his midst. Now at the age of 46 and after two surgeries using stem cells, he had a perfectly functioning eye....almost.

He could see the outline of his wife but couldn't make out any details. Upon further study it was determined that the difficulty was not located in the eye, but in the brain. When he lost his sight the cells that would have aided him with his vision turned to other uses such as listening for the tap of a cane and developing the ability to process Braille. The conclusion is that treating blindness may involve training the brain

Let me set that aside but I will return to it. Let's turn to the scripture lessons. The first is the word of God that comes through Jeremiah to the Israelites exiled in Babylon. One could expect the word from God would be, "Don't worry. I will deliver you." Instead God's message is "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

Instead of being encouraged to resist their oppressors the Israelites were called to pray for the place where they were confined and to do so would be important for their welfare.

The Gospel lesson is about the ten lepers who Jesus directed to go report to the priests and as they were doing so they were healed; however, only one returned to praise God and this was a foreigner, a Samaritan, and the common assumption of the time was that this is the last person you would expect to do that.

Now I want to connect these three scenes. What could these three scenarios have in common?

I would suggest it is the issue of environment and I am thinking of something broader than the planet and how we care for it. Environment is the context in which we live our lives, the family into which we were born and all that goes with that, where we grew up, where we went to school, who our friends were then and are now, the values we were first taught and those we currently claim. All these impact us and are part of our personal environment.

It was Dr. Bruce Lipton, author of the very significant book "The Biology of Belief", who made me aware of the importance of environment. Dr. Lipton has done cell research and tells how his mentor, Irv Koningsberg, told him "that when the cultured cells you are studying are ailing, you look first to the cell's environment, not to the cell, itself, for the cause." (p. 20)

Even Darwin spoke to the importance of environment when he wrote late in life, “In my opinion, the greatest error which I have committed has been not allowing sufficient weight to the direct action of the environment.” (Ibid, p 20)

Well, if environment is so important, what are we to do about it?

First, I would suggest that we need to guard against becoming victim to it. In essence that is what God was saying to the Israelites in their exile. They could bemoan their lot and bristle under their confinement, but God called them to extend their selves on behalf of the city where they were.

Some of us can recall the television show that featured comedian Flip Wilson who created the character, Geraldine, who was continually getting into difficulty. Her explanation of what happened was always, “The Devil made me do it.” That always brought a laugh, but if it becomes an explanation for our behavior we let ourselves become a victim.

Adopting the victim mentality, opens us to bitterness, unnecessary pain, and becoming a potential host to hate. On September 22, a promising young man, Tyler Clementi, jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge in to the Hudson River after being secretly videotaped in his dorm room in an alleged romantic situation with another man. When his parents, Joe and Jane Clementi learned about their son’s tragic death, they had every reason to be filled with rage and anger. Instead they issued a statement saying that they wanted their son’s death to serve as a call for compassion, empathy, and human dignity. That’s rising above being a victim!

The second thing we need to do in coping with environment is to resist giving in to fear. Last week Lin reminded us of how extensive fear is so I only want to add a couple things.

Remember that fear is the robber of hope. A friend told me once that “energy focused on the negative is robbery” and one of the most negative influences in our environment is fear.

Fear robs us of possibilities and causes us to ignore our potential. For years I was too afraid of the water to let anyone teach me how to swim. Finally in college I went to the pool and taught myself... The results were I have poor form, but I can handle myself in water and most of all fear lost out!

There are things we can do positively regarding our environment. I want to speak first from a personal experience on how environment profoundly impacted me. By now most of you know I was honored by Outreach, the local gay advocacy organization as their Man of the Year. It was generously reported in the Caravan and in the weekly bulletin.

What you may not know is that after a recent Session meeting, there was a discussion about it and the question was raised, “Shouldn’t the church do something to recognize it?” I got a phone call the next morning asking if I would be willing to have it announced

and maybe have some people attend the dinner at the Monona Terrace where the awards ceremony would take place.

I agreed, of course, but what I want you to know is that for days I was higher than a kite. My faith community was willing to be there for me. I know many gay folk for whom that would not be possible, but for me it was a reality and I am appreciative for the support and encouragement I have received as I have worshipped with you and become part of this community of faith. You have created an environment of safety and acceptance even despite differences of opinion and it makes a world of difference

If we are to respond creatively to our environment it is important that we use our minds to think clearly and thoroughly about the issues and needs around us and all that impacts us.

In the healing of the ten lepers one had picked up somewhere the idea that if good is done for you, you should show gratitude. The others received and went on their way. Maybe they just weren't thinking, but grateful thinking would have made a difference.

Jesus taught that we are to love the Lord our God with heart, mind, soul and will. We easily understand the importance of the heart that beats with passion, the will that is clear about intentions, and the soul that yearns for the love of the Creator, but the mind can not be overlooked as integral to the life of faith. In many religious quarters the realm of the mind takes second place to emotionalism and irrational perceptions and conclusions. Let that not be descriptive of us.

A family had settled down for dinner at a restaurant. The waitress first took the order of the adults, and then turned to the seven year old.

“What will you have? she asked.

The boy looked around the table timidly and said, “I would like to have a hot dog.”

Before the waitress could write down the order, the mother interrupted. “No hot dogs,” she said. “Get him a steak with mashed potatoes and carrots.”

The waitress ignored her. “Do you want ketchup or mustard on your hot dog?”

“Ketchup”

“Coming up in a minute,” she said as she went to the kitchen.

There was a stunned silence at the table. Finally the boy looked at everyone present and said, “Know what? She thinks I'm real!”

The waitress may not have received a good tip, but the boy got the point that he was real. That's the function of our mind.....to seek for and to search out what is real. Apply that to your life this week! Take responsibility and don't blame the devil. Live with courage taking charge of your situation shaping it for good by the grace and help of God.

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