

Matthew 8:5-13

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Morality Is Chosen Freely
Thanksgiving Day
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Text: *"Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."* (Matt. 8:10)

Normally, I don't begin a sermon with a large note of thanks, but I would be remiss if I did not thank Tom Rondeau, a member here at First Congregational Church, for leading me to three valuable illustrations which appear in this sermon; including this reflection written by Christina Hoff Sommers who is an Associate professor of Philosophy at Clark University. *"Not very long ago, I published an article called 'Ethics Without Virtue' in which I criticized the way ethics is being taught in American Colleges. I pointed out that there is an overemphasis on social policy questions, with little or no attention being paid to private morality....A colleague of mine did not like what I said. She told me that in her classroom she would continue to focus on issues of social injustice....She said to me, 'You are not going to have moral people until you have moral institutions. You will not have moral citizens until you have a moral government.' She made it clear to me I was wasting my time and even doing harm by promoting bourgeois virtues instead of awakening the social conscience of my students."*

I will get back to Professor Sommers' story in a minute, but first wish to elaborate upon the point. Unfortunately, I believe, all too many Americans care little for the personal effort and responsibility required to perform ethically and morally in our society today, though evidence shows many people desire such behavior in business, government, schools, etc. When it comes to our own private lives we generally would like to freely pursue happiness, as promised to us in the Declaration of Independence, without paying the price of freedom through our responsibilities to the Kingdom of God. This usually means we are given the freedom to choose God's will and thereby freely give of ourselves back to God's service and become obedient to the ways of the Lord. This concept generally does not appeal to human nature, at least through my experience of people, and, therefore, the struggle for moral justice continues each and every day.

One major solution which is cropping up more and more among interest groups and churches in our present times is the solution Professor Sommers' colleague proposed to her in that ethics and morals ought to come from the top down. Let us make the governments and businesses of this world morally proper and correct, they say, and the people will follow. Well, Christina Sommer's friend met a rude awakening and I continue with her story. *"At the end of the semester, [my colleague] came into my office carrying a stack of exams and looking very upset. 'What's wrong?' I asked.*

"They cheated on their social justice take-home finals. They plagiarized!" More than half the students in her ethics class had copied long passages from the secondary literature. "What are you going to do?" I asked her. She gave me a self-mocking smile and said, "I'd like to borrow a copy of that article you wrote on ethics without virtue."

We receive many newsletters and publications in our office from other churches and denominations. A common thread in this day-in-age running through many religious organizations is to become a special interest group which lobbies Madison or Washington for laws which promote their peculiar thinking. Most of the time, the philosophy behind the pressure they put on government comes from the synod office and/or the church hierarchy and not from the general membership. Therefore, a national denominational leader may be able to claim the backing of its millions of members in support of this legislation or that. Let's boil it down to what it really is. Other people are forcing their morals and ethics upon us. Other organizations, special interest groups, and churches believe they know more about moral responsibility than you or I do and are letting our representatives know this. Morality, in America, is being tossed out the window by individuals and being forced by all knowing corporate bodies and self righteous collective groups of people. Somewhere along the line we are losing our ownership of moral and ethical responsibility and passing it over to committee.

In 1941, Judge Learned Hand spoke to the graduating class of Yale University and here is part of what he had to say. *"I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. While it lies there it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save it."* One of the highest values of freedom, for me, is to remember the true giver of that freedom - God. God has willed us the perfect freedom to choose our own moral destinies and suffer the consequences of our choices. God has laid down the foundations of right and proper living and generations of people have freely woven their way in and out of the bounds provided. One thing I am certain God hopes for each one of us is that we freely choose to live in and personally own the kind of moral character which demonstrates the values of the Kingdom of Heaven. No government can force it upon us if we don't want it. No church or human institution can make us into right acting people. We may, if forced, act as we should out of social courtesy, but until we personally choose to belong to God's way of life we will not really be a part of it.

Our scripture lesson this morning speaks of a man, a gentile, a Roman Centurion who comes to Jesus to ask for healing for his slave. Jesus begins to accompany the man to his house. A Gentile asking a Jew for help could

not expect much more than a reaction of disgust. Never would a Jew be the house guest of a Gentile, because Gentiles were considered to be unclean. But here Jesus begins to break the stalemate of social and religious conventions and proceeds toward the Centurion's house to heal his slave. The Centurion stops him and says, *"Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed"* (Matt. 8:8). And then he proceeds to tell Jesus that he has the authority to tell people to go here and there and just about anywhere he wants them to, but not the authority nor the will to dictate the comings and goings and actions of God. The will of the Centurion was turning toward the will of God. The Centurion, through his faith, freely chose obedience to God over any other deity or circumstance in life. He stood against the tradition of Caesar as a god and the pagan influences prevalent in his day. He suffered the possibility of ridicule among his fellow Roman soldiers and citizens all because he freely chose to move with God's way. No outside force or institution was going to tell him how to live life rightly and correctly. And Jesus declares in front of his Jewish followers, *"Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith"* (Matt. 8:10).

One of the strongest aspects of our Pilgrim forbearers was their willingness to freely adhere their faith to God's will and the values of God's Kingdom. Neither the Church of England nor the Crown could dictate for them the religious way of life they so rightly objected to. Their understanding was that God created humanity to be free to choose the way and the truth and the life according to the acceptance of each individual conscience. The opening lines of the "Free-Will Doctrine of the Savoy Convention" written by early Congregationalists goes like this. *"God hath endued the Will of man with that natural liberty and power of acting upon choice, that it is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of Nature determined to do good or evil."* All in all, we are called to freely choose God's will, for the purposes of advancing the values of the Kingdom throughout this world. We cannot do this successfully, unless we own it ourselves.

What can the Roman Centurion and our Pilgrim heritage bring alive in us today as we face countless cries of dubious moral concern which sweeps our nation's legislation through the voices of special interest groups and other religious affiliations? I believe, through our freedom of choice that first we must be willing to choose. Are we for or against God's will? If for it, then will we become rational and responsible citizens of God's Kingdom and carry our concerns, our cares, and our ministry to others, or will we allow them to be carried for us through one of many governmental agencies? I hope not. Our pilgrim faith ought to have taught us at least one important lesson. We have been given the freedom to act responsibly and obediently to the will of God. In our obedience, we can be present to the world as a beacon of God's truth and a light of Christ's love. We gather together to worship and then go forward from this meeting place as

ministers of Christ. Only in this way, can the higher ethics and morals our society thirsts so much for be owned and empowered by the people. If not, we become like the father who upon learning his son had stolen several pencils from a department store, scolded him severely and said: *"You ought to know better than to steal. I can pick up all the pencils you need at the office."*

If choosing and owning God's will makes all the difference for our personal and, hopefully, our corporate living, then heed the magic of this legend shared with us, once again, by Christina Sommers. *"There was once a rabbi in a small Jewish village in Russia who vanished every Friday morning for several hours. The devoted villagers boasted that during these hours their rabbi ascended to heaven to talk with God. A skeptical newcomer arrived in town, determined to discover where the rabbi really was. One Friday morning the newcomer hid near the rabbi's house, watched him rise, say his prayers and put on the clothes of a peasant. He saw him take an axe and go into the forest, chop down a tree and gather a large bundle of wood. Next the rabbi proceeded to a shack in the poorest section of the village in which lived an old woman and her sick son. He left them the wood which was enough for the week. The rabbi then quietly returned to his own house. The story concludes that the newcomer stayed on in the village and became a disciple of the rabbi. And whenever he hears one of his fellow villagers say, 'On Friday morning our rabbi ascends all the way to Heaven,' the newcomer quietly adds, 'If not higher.'"* I identify with the newcomer in the story. Not that I am skeptical, but because I choose to change my life according to God's will in view of the fact I like what I see and am willing to follow.

Now it is our turn to carry unto the people of the world something they will like to see and follow; much like the Centurion of old and the Pilgrims of faith who struggled against so many worldly roadblocks. We have been doubly blessed with the ability to maneuver in a free society even though it is ridden with forces of evil. Let us each choose to press against those evils which prevail around us until all succumb to the glory of God's will. I leave you with this appropriate epitaph written by Daniel Bliss and found on the gravestone of John Jack, a native of Africa, who died March 1773, aged about 60 years.

"Tho' born in a land of slavery

He was born free.

God wills us free,

Man wills us slaves,

I will as God wills,

God's will be done."

Amen.