

Small Steps

As I was sitting in my office working on this sermon last week, a series of texts arrived on my cell phone. Of course I immediately interrupted what I was doing and answered them. On Sundays my phone is on mute, but occasionally I get a text during the service. At some point I will sneak a peek at my phone to see if it's something critical, but so far I haven't stopped to answer. Oh, wait, I just got one...

Our technological devices like cell phones and tablets are very habit-forming. The apps that they run are designed to be addictive so that you'll stay on them and want to return to them, especially social media like Facebook. So we spend a lot of time checking devices and interrupting ourselves. And that affects how we interact with one another. Studies have shown that simply having a cell phone on the table during a meal changes the nature of conversation. It's worse when someone has a watch connected to their phone. I've noticed that in that case, I come second and notifications come first.

Other studies show that device use can actually rewire our brains. It's not only children who are becoming more distracted; adult brains are changing, too. Device-checking may seem harmless, but over time the constant stimulation makes it harder and harder to sit in one place and focus on one thing for an extended period of time. That's not good news for preachers!

Over time, daily stimulation by devices can change our brains. It's also true that small choices in how we live, over time, can change our very lives. For the last several weeks we've been following the steps of one character in the Bible, King David, and watched how decisions he made over time ended up in disaster. He started out well, although even as a young man he seemed a bit cocky. As he went along, his self-confidence got the better of him. He decided he had to have the wife of one of his warriors, so he had the man killed. Things went further downhill from there. Today we heard the full flowering of David's sin with the death of his son Absalom.

Absalom himself was a piece of work. Perhaps he lost all respect for his father when he took someone else's wife. Perhaps Absalom inherited David's arrogance without inheriting his humility. Absalom killed his older brother and then rebelled against his father, the King. David managed to embed his own advisor in Absalom's court to thwart any advice that would work against David. In the end, without a seasoned army, Absalom himself was killed.

We heard that outcome this morning. The story is incredibly poignant. David shows more concern for his rebellious son, than for the people who fought for him. The original Hebrew text gives the full flavor of David's grief. It has fewer words and no punctuation, so the grief is very immediate: "B'ni Absalom b'ni b'ni" – "My son Absalom my son my son"! This is grief no one wants to bear, a depth of grief so well expressed in Psalm 130. If we were to follow David's story we'd hear that because of his grief, his army slinks in as though they had lost the battle. Joab had to take David aside and tell him that everyone would desert him if he cared more for the one who wanted to kill him than the ones who fought for him. Only then did David stop weeping. His life had come to this.

Small steps away from God brought David to his grief and Absalom to his destruction. We see that same choice of direction presented to the church in Ephesus. They were told to put away falsehood and speak the truth. (There's an entire sermon just in that verse about our culture and politics.) Be angry, the writer says, but don't let the sun set on your anger. Get over it. Then there's a whole list of what to give up: bitterness, wrath, wrangling, slander, and malice – again, that sounds like our current political climate. Instead of doing those things we are told to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving. Why? Because God has forgiven us. “Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” – a phrase I hope you recognize as one that we use each week before collecting the offering.

We have to be reminded again and again of these two directions in which we can walk. That's because in our humanity we resist walking toward God, walking toward the light. For some reason we prefer darkness rather than light. Darkness and light are favorite themes of John the Evangelist, and in his Gospel this morning we heard about resistance to the one who brings light, Jesus. The sixth chapter is an extended discourse in which Jesus repeatedly says, “I am the bread of life.” In today's section the people who knew Jesus as a boy can't get past seeing him that way, perhaps remembering how he crawled under the pews at the synagogue. To them, he's still little Jesus.

Not only can't they believe that he has grown up, they can't get past what they learned when *they* were little. They're still looking for the manna that decays, while Jesus is offering bread that will allow them to live forever. Like most people, they are resistant to change. The old is good enough. I have to admit that I'm the same way. I find myself unwilling to change. I resist the call of God to something new. And every time I resist, it does not go well. Like the Ephesians, I get angry and don't get over it. I get annoyed because I'm supposed to forgive. Fortunately, every time I say the Lord's Prayer I'm reminded that God has forgiven me first, and that's why I must also forgive.

I think it was C.S. Lewis who said that every day we make many small choices whether to follow God or not. Over time all of those small choices add up. It's like the rewiring of our brains through the use of devices. We change, whether we want to or not. We can either choose how we will change, or we can let the change happen unthinkingly. That's why I struggle to limit checking my phone or iPad, because I want to be more focused and present to people. That's why I keep choosing small steps toward God, because I want to be more Christ-like. It's a lifetime process yet it begins anew each day. Each day we have the choice to follow God and serve Christ. How will you choose to make those small steps today?

[Pentecost 12: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51.]