

Out of the Woods

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St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Albuquerque

Text: Luke 18:18-27 (Matt 19:16-22) Revelation 3:14-22

The first time he came to see me, he clearly wasn't happy about it. His wife had told him that if he didn't do something about his drinking, she was leaving him and taking the kids. He didn't think that he had a "problem" with alcohol, really. He had a good job, was healthy as a horse, physically fit, never been in trouble with the law. He was convinced that his wife was just being excessively sensitive about drinking. Now it was my third session with him. I had done a careful evaluation and told him some things that he didn't know. He was drinking enough most nights to still be legally intoxicated when driving his company truck the next morning, even though he felt fine. His blood tests indicated that his liver was beginning to cry "uncle," and he was showing some clear signs of alcohol-related cognitive impairment. What motivated him most, though, was the same thing that had brought him in in the first place: his family. He loved his wife and his children, and definitely didn't want the family to break up, so he was talking about quitting drinking. It sounded like he was reaching a decision. I gave him a textbook summation, going back through all of the good reasons he had given me for abstaining, and I led up to the key question to close the deal: "So is that what you want to do?"

"No," he replied. No? A variety of colorful phrases flashed through my mind at that moment, including, "How can you possibly sit there and tell me "No" after all we've been through?" But fortunately I just tilted my head to one side, like the old RCA dog, and said, "No?"

"No," he replied. "It's not what I *want* to do. It's what I'm *going* to do." Aha! He reminded me that in order to do the right thing, it is not necessary to *want* to do it.

This is a sermon about ambivalence, and by the time I'm through you may feel two ways about it. To be "ambivalent" is to want something and also not want it simultaneously. It makes you crazy, and it's also an absolutely normal part of human nature. It comes already installed in the hardware. Ambivalence is a very sticky place; one can remain mired there for months, years, even a lifetime. The normal experience of ambivalence is a repeating loop: You think of a reason to change, then think of a reason not to change, then stop thinking about it. There is also good news about ambivalence: It is a normal step on the road to change. If you are feeling ambivalent about doing something, you're already part way there. I worry more about the person with no qualms. Ambivalence is a virtue that Adam and Eve apparently had not yet developed. It requires the knowledge of good and evil. Someone who is ambivalent about sinning doesn't have as far to go as one who is not. Sometimes my task as a therapist has been to *create* ambivalence as a first step. So if you're sinning and ambivalent about it, rejoice and be exceedingly glad because you're on the road to redemption.

Of course it takes more than that, and another good thing about ambivalence is that it is escapable. One need not *remain* stuck there. In fact, it's not a particularly stable or pleasant place to be. It's like a corn maze from which you must find the exit. Something in us wants out of ambivalence, and the way out is not even all that complicated. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

In choosing this morning's text, I discovered that ambivalence is actually a common theme in scripture, as it is in human nature. "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Beyond the impulsive action of the garden of Eden, there is Esau, who knowingly sells his later birthright for an immediate bowl of hot soup, a classic failure of delay of gratification. Moses and Jonah really didn't want to go where God wanted to send them. In fact, Jonah sailed off in the opposite direction. When Saul was selected at a great assembly to be the first king of Israel, they couldn't find him. He had hidden himself among the luggage. In Jesus' parable of the banquet, those who are invited also have other priorities to attend to, as no doubt did the two men who preceded the Good Samaritan on the road. Jesus himself is torn between alternatives in the garden of Gethsemane and the apostle Paul laments in Romans 7, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." In Revelation, the problem of the church at Laodicea is that they were lukewarm - neither hot nor cold, implicitly because of their financial comfort. Even God is sometimes ambivalent about what to do, and Moses seems to have had a gift for talking God out of impulsive intentions.

The gospel lesson is a particularly good example of how we get stuck in ambivalence. The rich young man has been highly successful by worldly standards. He is wealthy and holds a position of authority. He also knows that something is still

missing for him, and so he comes to Jesus seeking it. Jesus' first answer is to the basics of spiritual happiness, and is thoroughly Presbyterian – to lead a disciplined life in accord with God's book of order. "I already do that," he replies, and wants to take the next step. "What do I still lack?" Jesus gives him an extraordinary prescription and invitation: "If you want to be complete (Matt 19:21), sell all that you own and give the money to the poor, and come follow me." The man was then sorely distressed, because he had accumulated great riches, and Jesus comments on this ambivalence: "How hard it is when you have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" We don't know the ending of the story. We do know that he was torn up inside. Matthew (19:22) says that he went away "grieving," Jesus, seeing that he was ready for a next step, gave him the gift of ambivalence.

Ambivalence is about both wanting and not wanting at the same time. Said another way, it is about simultaneously wanting mutually exclusive things. You cannot serve both God and money, Jesus warned. Writing to Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Carl Jung observed that alcohol and spirituality drive each other out. Ambivalence is all about competing motivations.

We live in a time and society that glorify wants. Advertising is all about convincing us that we want things, need them, should have them, ought to and deserve to and are entitled to have them. Marketing and politics are about the science of wanting. We have made wanting a religion, shopping a sacrament, greed a virtue. We have had so much more than we need, and still want more. In one random survey of the United States, people were asked, "Do you have enough money for what you need?" More than half of those in the highest income bracket answered, "No."

Wanting is serious business. A radical aspect of Jesus' teaching is that wants in and of themselves can constitute sin. "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust," he said, "has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matt 5:28) Holding hatred in the heart – hatred, the want for and rejoicing in harm to another – is something that must be resolved before you bring your gift to the altar.

The good and liberating news in Jesus's teaching is that we do not have to be *ruled* by our wants. A central theme in the life of Jesus, all the way from his pre-ministry temptations in the desert to the garden of Gethsemane and his trial before Pilate, is that it is humanly possible, with God's help, to willfully say no to the most urgent and seductive of temptations. We do not have to repeat Esau's error. We are not doomed to have, or even to want our wants.

To be sure, this takes some discipline, some practice. The social psychologist Roy Baumeister has made a career of studying self-control, and concludes that it works like a muscle. For one thing, it is subject to fatigue. A person who has just had to exercise restraint is somewhat more vulnerable to self-control slippage. You can also build it up over time, strengthening it with exercise. This is one reason for the longstanding spiritual discipline of fasting, which is so lost in modern American Christianity. To fast - be it from food or some other regular want - is to become aware of how much it owns and occupies you. When I have fasted from food I have been amazed at how much extra time I have, time that would ordinarily be taken up by thinking about, planning, preparing, eating, putting away and cleaning up after food. Obviously fasting does not remove our need for food, but it does break our attachment to it. We relearn that it is not necessary to gratify each and every want that we experience. Nothing terrible happens in saying no to want.

Perhaps the fear is that if I do not satisfy a desire or need, the craving will just continue to grow and grow until it becomes unbearable. In fact, wants are a lot like waves. They swell and fall. There is a reason why sales people make "limited time offers." Psychologist Alan Marlatt teaches what he calls "urge surfing" - to just ride it out, and by not giving in, to experience that the wave subsides. This is akin to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness meditation - to simply observe thoughts and desires floating by like clouds, without needing to react to them. It teaches that wants are not real, and like ducks and pigeons they quickly move on if we don't feed them.

That's another important point, actually. You don't get rid of pigeons or stray dogs by feeding them. Sometimes people decide that they will indulge their wants until they are satisfied, to wait until the want is fully sated and goes away. It never happens. The voice of want is insatiable.

Some years ago I invited my late colleague, Frank Logan, to give the opening address to a conference of addiction professionals. Frank was a distinguished learning theorist and also, he openly shared, a recovering alcoholic. He offered a masterful review of the research literature on alcohol, including one study that involved getting elephants intoxicated (which, he observed, didn't seem like a particularly good idea). He concluded from the research that one requires nothing more than animal learning models in order to understand how it is that people become trapped in addictions. The lower animal brain does it for us. He also observed that he could think of no animal model for the kind of recovery that one sees with people in treatment or

Alcoholics Anonymous. Animals don't just decide to quit drinking or self-administering methamphetamine. That is an act of will, and requires the use of these big frontal lobes that God gave us.

The way out of the woods, out of the wanting trap, out of ambivalence, out of sin, is indeed one small right choice at a time. In scouting we teach boys how to keep from wandering in a circle in the forest if you don't have a compass. You site three trees in a row - one close to you, one farther away, and a third one beyond the second in a straight line. Then you walk to the second tree while watching the third, and do it again. The second tree becomes the first, the third tree the second, and you site a third tree past it in the same straight line. The way out of the woods is to keep moving in a straight line toward the light.

Ambivalence is a common place to pass through on life's journeys, but it's no place to live. Being pulled in two different directions is perfectly normal, and doesn't have to paralyze us. We do not have to be ruled or owned by our conflicting desires. We are not condemned to have or even want our wants. It is humanly possible, with God's help, to move past even the most urgent and seductive of wants, and with practice it gets easier. We get through, most of the time, putting one foot in front of the other, chosen step by chosen step, in a steady if meandering line toward the light.