

FEEDING DRAGONS

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Deuteronomy 30:11-20 ; Galatians 5:16-25

In his book, *STUMBLING TOWARD ENLIGHTENMENT*, Geri Larkin, a Buddhist priest, tells the following story:

There once was a young monk who went to his teacher in tears. He blurted out that he was having a terrible experience with his meditation practice. Every time he settled down, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes, all he could see were two dragons fighting each other. One dragon was a deep blue and it was filled with anger and greed and lust. Even its fire was terrifying. It was ferocious, this dragon. The other dragon was just as ferocious. Only the other dragon, pale white, was filled with love, wisdom, and compassion. Its fire was a deep, deep yellow. The young man was terrified of what would happen. Which dragon would win? He couldn't tell and was afraid to watch them fight, which made him afraid to sit. Could the teacher please give him some advice?

The teacher smiled. He looked at his student, his eyes filled with compassion. "Do you want to know which dragon will win?" The young monk nodded. "Why the one filled with love and compassion and wisdom, of course." But how did he know, asked the young monk. "Because that's the one you'll feed." [Celestial Arts, 1997]

The dragon that will win is the one that you will feed!

Over the course of our lives, we encounter many fighting dragons. Within our own minds and hearts and souls we daily face this struggle. And it is never as if we can simply banish the anger, or the greed, or the lust. It is never as if we can simply rid ourselves of all the negative feelings and emotions and attitudes that have a grip upon us, that threaten sometimes to consume us, replacing them with love, wisdom, and compassion. Can any one of you promise yourself today that you will never again become angry, and keep that promise? No, not really. You do not have much of a choice about whether you will ever become angry. You do have a choice, however, about whether you will feed that anger, or feed something else in its place.

In our New Testament text this morning, the apostle Paul begins with a theological interpretation of this internal struggle that goes on within us all. He contrasts the desire of the Spirit with the desires of the flesh. He writes of the opposition of what he calls the "fruit of the Spirit" to the "works of the flesh." Elsewhere, in his letter to the Romans, he says that "to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" [8:6].

For Paul there is a choice, a choice that—like the choice with which Moses confronts the Israelites in our Old Testament text—is ultimately between life and death. Death is the result of living according to the flesh, that is, living without the aid or benefit of the Spirit. Perhaps we might say

today that death is the result of trying to make it on our own, by our own creaturely powers, merely subject to the material conditions of our existence. Life, on the other hand, is also possible, but only by the power of the Spirit of God. In order to live, one must admit the presence of this power in us that is able to overcome the law of sin and death. One must be host to the dragon of the Spirit in order not to be devoured by the dragon of the flesh.

A word of caution about taking Paul at his word: Paul tends to associate most of the baser human instincts, or passions, with bodily desires. So his list of the works of the flesh starts with fornication, and includes impurity, drunkenness, and carousing. Personally, I think Paul was much too negative in his view of the body. But when he speaks of the works of the flesh, he is not thinking simply of bodily desires. The basic contrast that Paul is making is not between a this-worldly bodily existence and an other-worldly spiritual existence. The basic contrast is between a self-centered self-indulgence, and a life in this world that is empowered by the Divine Spirit animating us from within. It is the difference between a life that is “all about me – my lust, my anger, my greed” – and a life that is governed by the larger law of love. In a passage just before the one I read, Paul writes, “for the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Gal. 5:14) And the evidence of that love is what he calls the “fruit of the Spirit” – not only love, but “joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (5:22) Easier said than done!

When Bart Giamatti became President of Yale University, on his first day in office he issued the following memorandum: "To the Members of the University Community: In order to repair what Milton called the ruin of our grandparents, I wish to announce that henceforth, as a matter of University policy, evil is abolished and paradise restored. I trust all of us will do whatever possible to achieve this policy objective." [cited by Henry Copeland, WOOSTER Alumni Magazine, Fall 1994, p. 4.]

Giamatti wrote, of course, with tongue in cheek. But sometimes we forget that our ambition must not be the restoration of paradise. Paul did not promise the Galatian Christians a new Eden, nor did he claim that the struggle of life can be eliminated by vanquishing all resistance and opposition. Rather, his claim is that life and peace are possible despite the realities of sin and death, even in the midst of a world that is profoundly and pervasively subject to corruption and decay.

One of the basic challenges of life, of course, is that it is not a bed of roses. Or if it is, there are also lots of thorns. Sometimes it is terribly difficult to do the right thing, often we lose control, and seldom is it clear that the good will prevail. Always there is the question of which dragon will win: the dragon of anger or the dragon of compassion, the dragon of fear or the dragon of faith, the dragon of cowardice or the dragon of courage, the dragon of cruelty or the dragon of kindness, the dragon of pride or the dragon of humility, the dragon of greed or the dragon of justice, the dragon of selfishness or the dragon of generosity, the dragon of prejudice or the dragon of wisdom, the dragon of hatred or the dragon of love, the dragon of death or the dragon of life. Which of these dragons will you feed?

The question is first of all a personal question: Which of the dragons will you feed in your own soul? To which will you offer accommodation and hospitality in the struggles of life? Harry Emerson Fosdick once told the story of how his father would deal with him when he was in a bad temper:

"Where's Harry?" he would say, and I would answer, "Why, here he is." And he would say to me, "No! You are not Harry. Harry is lost. Go find him. I want Harry!" So, catching his meaning, I would wander off through the house, getting myself under control until, returning, I could face him again, saying, "I've found him. Here he is." Thus my father said to me, as a child, what modern psychology is saying now--that we are not just one self, but varied selves, high and low, good and bad, and that the art of life is to identify oneself with one's best self, and believe and be what that best self affirms [ON BEING FIT TO LIVE WITH, 145].

In another sermon Fosdick reflects on those circumstances of life that can severely test this ability to identify with one's best self. Noting the difference between those who give out in the face of crisis and struggle and those who find deeper spiritual resources to carry on, he comments:

Even in ordinary life this difference constitutes one of the most crucial contrasts between persons. Starting, as we all do, with familiar and comparatively easy demands, we run soon or late into some situation--difficult, tragic, perilous--that asks of us more power than life ever asked of us before, and so forces on us the question: Have we no more available resources than our familiar days have called for, or are there deeper levels of power to be drawn on, so that whatever life faces us with, by God's grace we can match it, the need calling out the power? [A GREAT TIME TO BE ALIVE, 57]

When we choose to be ourselves at our best, it is not a choice to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. It is a choice not to feed the dragons that threaten to diminish us and our existence. It is also a choice to allow that fierce Spirit that is at work within us to accomplish what we, by our own powers, must feel too weak to accomplish on our own. It is a choice to pursue, with God's help, what we know to be the better and the higher possibilities of our existence. To those who are most practiced at being their better selves, it may not appear to be such a challenge. This is how character is shaped and formed and strengthened in the face of difficulty and trial. But for each of us there is a point at which it continues to be a struggle to become yet better than we are, and we need to call upon the deeper spiritual resources of the Divine Spirit.

This is not just a personal struggle, however, and it is not only our own well-being that is at stake. The way in which we regard ourselves is closely related to the way we regard one another. When we chose to be ourselves at our best, when we choose to nurture such dragons as kindness and compassion and love, we are also choosing how we treat those around us. And we are making choices about what life will be like for them.

Most of you have probably heard the familiar set of sayings that begins, "If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn."
If a child lives with hostility, he learns to fight.

If a child lives with ridicule, she learns to be shy.
If a child lives with shame, she learns to feel guilty.
If a child lives with tolerance, he learns to be patient.
If a child lives with encouragement, she learns confidence.
If a child lives with praise, he learns to appreciate.
If a child lives with fairness, she learns justice.
If a child lives with security, he learns to have faith.
If a child lives with approval, she learns to like herself.
If a child lives with acceptance and friendship, he--or she--learns to find love in the world.
[attributed to G. Nolte]

The same, of course, can be true for adults. Some years ago a woman wrote Ann Landers about the struggle she had faced in dealing with her powerfully negative feelings toward her husband:

I had reached the point where I could barely tolerate being around him. I'm quite certain he felt the same about me because I never failed to tell him what I thought--and it was never complimentary. I considered divorce long and hard but knew I had really loved him once, and we did have children together. I decided a 30-day experiment was worth the effort.

For the next month, I did not utter a single negative word to my husband. I thought at times that I would explode from holding it in, but I survived. I repeated that experiment for a second month, and it was a little easier. I lost my temper only once. At the end of the third month, I actually was looking forward to my husband coming home from work.

Six months after I began the experiment, our relationship had turned around completely. By biting my tongue, I gave him the freedom to grow. Delivering advice in a disgusted tone was tearing him down, not helping him. Today, when he needs a piece of my mind, I let him have it, but because I have quit giving him ALL of my mind when I get angry, he really listens and shapes up. I would have missed out on the incredible life I now have with my husband if I hadn't tried that 30-day experiment. -- Mad ABOUT Him, Not AT Him, in Missouri [8-7-96]

Clearly, our choices have consequences. They shape who we are and become. They shape our relationships with others. They shape the lives of others and the world in which we live. This is not to say that every child who is loved will turn out to be loving. It is not to say that every spouse who is treated with positive regard will respond in kind. It would be an entirely naive and romantic notion to think that we have the power to make every person and every relationship turn out happy and good. But neither should we underestimate what our words of kindness, and our acts of positive regard, might accomplish for those who do not know which dragon in their own lives to feed.

Fred Craddock, a well-known professor of preaching, tells the poignant story of the time he and his wife slipped away to the mountains of Tennessee for a few days of relaxation:

As they sat in a little restaurant, they saw a man going from table to table greeting diners.

Eventually he made his way to the Craddock's table and, learning that Fred was a minister, he insisted on telling them his story.

The man said he had been born just a few miles from that spot, across the mountain. His mother had not been married when he was born, and the criticism directed at her also hit him. His schoolmates learned from their parents how to ridicule, and the boy learned to stay to himself at lunch and recess, lest their insults strike too hard. Even more difficult were trips to town with his mother when he could feel the looks and the shaking of heads, and he heard the question, "I wonder who his father is?"

When he was about twelve, a new pastor came to the little community church. People talked about his skill as a preacher, and the boy began to go hear for himself. He was fascinated by the preacher, but he was always careful to slip in late, sit in the back and leave early, lest someone catch him and ask, "What's a boy like you doing here?"

One Sunday, though, he was so caught up in the service that he forgot to slip out before it was over. Suddenly he felt a big hand on his shoulder, and as he turned around he saw the face of that preacher. The preacher said, "Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?" His young heart sank at the question, but then the preacher went on: "Wait a minute. I know who you are. The family resemblance is unmistakable. You are a child of God!" And with that he patted the boy on the back and added, "Boy, that's quite an inheritance. Go and claim it."

As the boy changed to manhood in the restaurant, the old man said to Fred and his wife, "That one statement literally changed my whole life." He explained that his name was Ben Hooper and he had twice been elected governor of the state of Tennessee. His had been a successful and respected life, made possible by a small-town minister who cared enough to encourage a little boy. [quoted in PREACHING, March/April, 1995]

This story, moving as it is, may leave some of us wishing, if only there were more Ben Hoopers in this world! If only there were more people for whom our words and acts of kindness would make a significant difference! Far too often we find that our efforts to lift people up, or to heal broken relationships, or to rectify some injustice of our world, go unrewarded. The fact remains that when we extend ourselves in kindness to others we make ourselves vulnerable to all kinds of disappointment. Not everybody is ready or able to accept and appreciate what we may be able to offer. There is no promise that everyone will gladly receive our offerings of heart and mind and soul.

It is perhaps this fact of resistance and rejection and hostility on the part of others, more than anything else, that calls into question all I have been saying in this sermon thus far. It is one thing to try to gain some self-control in our individual lives. It is hard enough to struggle to become the sorts of person we would hope to be. But what if, becoming so, we find that much of the rest of the world still seems to be feeding the dragons of anger and hatred and lust and greed? What if we continue to put our best selves on the line, only to get pushed aside, beaten down, run over? Might the day come when we would no longer be willing to cast our lot with the dragons of compassion and wisdom and love?

To do so would be to deny the best that is in us and in our world. It would be to deny the power of the Spirit of God at work in all things. To care, to love, to seek and hope for a world transformed, is to leave ourselves vulnerable to disappointment and suffering, grief and pain. That is a part of what it means to be alive. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann offers this meditation on the choice that we face:

The person . . . who no longer loves becomes apathetic and no longer even suffers. Life and death are for him a matter of indifference. The more one loves, however, the more vulnerable one becomes. The more one becomes capable of suffering, the more one becomes capable of happiness. The reverse is also true. The more one is capable of joy, the greater one's capacity for sorrow. This could be called the dialectic of human life. Love gives vitality to living, but it also makes [us] mortal. The vitality of life and the deadlines of death are experienced at one and the same time through that interest in life we call love. [THE EXPERIMENT HOPE, tr. M. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 81-82]

To be truly alive is to remain vulnerable, willing to take our chances with wisdom and compassion and love, and not to give in to anger and lust and greed. To be truly alive is to remain hopeful that God, who is working in all things, can and will accomplish in us and in our world what we--by our own powers--can never hope to achieve. To be truly alive is to keep faith with the best that we know, in ourselves and in all those about us.

To recall the words of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore we are saved by love." [from JUSTICE AND MERCY] AMEN.

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