

DEFENSE AGAINST SHOULD
Sermon for Pentecost 7B, Proper 11: 2Sam 7:1-14
LPC, 7/19/09 (Read by Lay Reader)

Each age has its particular challenges for a person trying to lead a godly life. In *this* particular day and age, one of the most crippling barriers to a fulfilling relationship with God is “The Shoulds.”

The Shoulds only afflict people who are trying to do the right thing. There are of course people who are immune from The Shoulds, on account of exempting themselves from any kind of moral self-reflection. You have to have a conscience to be susceptible to Shoulds. If you have a conscience, chances are you’ve met The Shoulds.

If a person finds himself or herself thinking or saying something like the following, an infestation of Shoulds is suspected:

- “I should go to church more often, but that bed feels so good on Sunday morning.”
- “That person has made me so angry. I know I shouldn’t let it bother me, but it does.”
- “I should forgive so-and-so, but I’m still hurt.”
- “I’m supposed to be a person of faith. I shouldn’t be experiencing anxiety, or depression, or addiction.”
- “I should spend more time in prayer, or read my Bible more, but there never seems to be enough time.”
- “I should tithe my money to the church. Maybe next year.”
- “I shouldn’t feel this way, but...”
- “I really should take care of myself better.”

More often than not, there’s something legitimate in an attack of The Shoulds. People in most cases would benefit by going to church, praying, tithing, taking care of themselves, forgiving, and letting anger slide off their backs. It’s the harboring of Shoulds in the back of the consciousness that is counter-productive. Many people carry around a vague, constant, nagging awareness of falling short, because they know they’re not doing everything they Should be doing.

Obviously the best thing to do is just to do the things you Should do. Clearly it is better to maintain a prayer discipline than to keep harping on how you should be praying but not doing it. In the *Star Wars* movie, the great warrior Yoda tells his apprentice Luke, “Do, or do not do. There is no ‘try.’” Our corollary when talking about The Shoulds is, “Do, or do not do. There is no ‘should.’”

But people hold onto their Shoulds as if they are something precious. In reality Shoulds, even when they are related to the idea of getting closer to God, actually impede relationship with God.

Suppose the thought of God passes through a person's mind. If that person's first association with God is how he has neglected his relationship with God, he can do one of two things. He can immediately repent and confess his neglect, and then get on with the relationship. Or, he can feel so bad about not doing what he should be doing that he will push the thought away. If a person's association with God is to feel bad, he may very well train himself not to think about God, to protect himself from bad feelings. This is exactly what many people do.

God does not want people Shoulding themselves. God does not want people to feel lousy about all the things they should be doing. God wants people to accept his unconditional love and his blessings and his forgiveness and live in joy and peace and freedom and gratitude. To receive God's unconditional love, what Should a person do?

Nothing. God's love is unearned and unearnable. It is pointless to Should yourself. God's love is simply available.

We have in today's lesson from 2 Samuel the story of King David Shoulding himself. "I should build a great temple for God," David thinks. God replies, "I don't need you to build me a house. I am going to shower all kinds of blessings on you. Your descendents will rule the world forever. You don't have to earn my love any more than a son earns the love of his father."

This is the cure for The Shoulds. To know that God's promises are eternal and that God's love is as constant as that of a doting father.

That doesn't mean that a person has carte blanche. God did set up the world so that actions have consequences. God does take a stand against the doing evil. But like a loving father, even his children's wrongdoing does not break the bond of love. As today's Psalm reads, "If [David's] children forsake my law, I will punish their transgressions ...But I will not take my love from him...I will not break my covenant."

As Christians, we believe that God's covenant with David for an everlasting kingdom has become real for us in David's descendent Jesus and his promise of eternal life. This promise remains constant.

It's interesting to look at David as an example of a person whom God especially favors, a person "after God's own heart." If we look at the whole story of David's life, it's clear that God's favor does not depend on David doing what he Should do. David is not just the defeater of Goliath, the unifier of Israel, Beloved King. He is also the seducer of Bathsheba, the murderer of Uriah, the father unable to control the warring factions within his own family. God's promise to David remains constant even when David does what he quite clearly Should not do.

Furthermore, God's favor does not mean David has clear sailing. He spends his entire life having to defend his kingdom: from his predecessor and erstwhile benefactor

Saul, from the Philistines and the Amalekites, and finally from his own son Absalom. His wives and children are a soap opera of incest, rape and fratricide.