

THE FLOW CHART OF CHRISTIAN BEHAVIOR
Sermon for Pentecost 11B—1Kgs 2:10-12,3:3-14; Ps 111; Eph 5:15-20
LPC, 8/16/09

I think I may already have mentioned Bernard Madoff in a recent sermon. If so, I apologize for bringing him up again. He was in a new news story this week and so came to mind when I was trying to think of a person who makes you wonder about how people can go so badly wrong.

Bernie Madoff, as you know, is the crooked financier whose shady and selfish dealings resulted in thousands of people being defrauded of their life savings. I'm relatively confident that ol' Bernie did not start out his career with a life plan like "I think I'll defraud thousands of people of their life savings." Rather his path probably resembled a flow chart.

If you've worked with computers or know anything about corporate organization, you know what a flow chart is. A flow chart is a series of successive decision points which can lead farther and farther to a point of no return.

It is entirely possible that the first concept to be articulated on the Bernie Madoff flow chart was an axiom as positive as "God has given me great talents." Suppose branching off from this, in the manner of a classic flow chart, were two options. The first option might have been, "Along with great talents, God has given me great responsibilities. I need to approach my job with humility." The second option might then be "I am the best person to manage the money under my control."

Do you see how each of these secondary conclusions flows naturally from the first? But they can lead to widely divergent options. The first choice has the greater possibility of leading to greater humility while the second choice tends more toward increasing arrogance.

Early decisions like this make possible later decisions that may be inconceivable at the outset of any given endeavor. The first stepping stones are not far off course, but they can lead a person, eventually, wildly off course.

Almost always the first off-course step involves arrogance. The person assumes that he or she knows best. This has been true in human history at least since the Garden of Eden, where the very first humans, according to the Bible, defied God and brought disaster on themselves. Adam and Eve were like children who accept the first few lessons about, say, how to drive the power boat, and then assume they know everything. Then, instead of receiving further instruction, they take the boat out alone, in defiance of clear directions to the contrary, and run the boat aground. People do this all the time.

Standing against this headstrong self-direction (which so often leads to disaster) is the biblical virtue of wisdom. What is wisdom, according to the Bible?

King Solomon is the quintessential emblem of biblical wisdom. We hear part of his story today. In this story, God is offering Solomon anything Solomon wants. God is doing

this out of regard for Solomon's recently deceased father David, and the special relationship David maintained with God.

Solomon looks at the huge extent of the gifts God has already given him. And unlike Bernie Madoff, he also looks at the enormity of the responsibility that goes with those gifts. Solomon asks for discernment of good and evil. As reported by the Bible, Solomon does not do this to make himself greater (as Bernie Madoff did), but so that he can better serve God's people. God is pleased with this.

At first blush it would appear that this discernment of good and evil for which Solomon asks is the same knowledge which was punished in Adam and Eve. But there is a difference. Adam and Eve snatched something they believed would gratify their appetites, in defiance of God. Solomon asked for discernment so that he could align himself more closely with God.

True wisdom, according to the Bible, lies in aligning oneself with the will of God. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, the key thing is to understand what the will of God is. And God does make clear where God's will is so that we may know where to line up.

Psalm 111 speaks of the works of the Lord with the following words: righteousness, the giving of food, faithfulness, justice, truth, equity. When the Christian faces a choice in life, one of those branching options on the flow chart, he or she is clearly called to align with the virtues described in Psalm 111, and elsewhere. Those virtues reveal the will of God.

Very often human beings assume, like Adam and Eve, that the responsibility of defining good and evil in a given situation lies with them.. So they define good and evil in terms of what represents evil to them personally and act accordingly. This tends to start people down the flow chart in Bernie Madoff ways rather than Solomon ways. Whereas, if we humbly receive the notions of good and evil already defined by God, we are off to a much better start. The earlier in the flow chart we do this the easier this is.

I'm making all decisions sound clear and easy, whereas I know in reality the way of justice and truth in any given situation may be as clear as mud to even the most faithful and humble servant of God. Paul's letter to the Ephesians offers a way forward in an impasse situation like this. When all else fails, Paul says, praise God. "Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

A person in an impasse could do worse than to pray Psalm 111, or any of dozens of psalms or hymns like it. From here a person could move on to remembering God's personalized blessings and gifts to him or her.

Praising God is one way to align with God. But the alignment with God is critical. Aligning with God keeps the flow chart flowing – in paths of righteousness and truth.