

On Character¹

I'm guessing that when the evaluation of our times is recorded in history, it'll go down as an unusually consequential era or awesome change. I'm wondering if Western Civilization itself is teetering on the brink of either collapse or total renewal. Take the national election. Clearly, our nation is lurching to the political left and calling for deep change. Take what just happened an hour ago in this building. A large combined Sunday school of adults from both this and the Methodist churches just got together to discuss—what? The environment. Consider gasoline prices, world population growth, the migration into cities, the rise of China, the world crisis of clean water, the surge of radical Islam, the specter of climate change. You are launching into an exciting and shifting world.

Let me talk about another mega-shift that has as much impact on your daily life as gas prices or the economy or the weather. The world is more and more postmodern. Now, don't check out on me. Trust me, very few people can actually say what postmodern exactly means. Let me try to define it with the most simplistic definition I can come up with: Postmodernism means that what people have always thought to be true might not be true.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on May 18, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, GA.

Political Correctness is a postmodern thing. Political correctness challenges old ideas that some people—say handicapped people—ought to be pitied or ostracized. Political correctness tries to rehabilitate our language. We say “challenged” instead of crippled. That normalizes people who are different. The effect is that people who were pushed to the edges in your parent’s time are now more included in the mainstream of life. What is normal is changing. That’s postmodern.

Postmodernism bears on behavior. Take a simple example that I heard just last week. About 10 years ago around here if someone was just too exhausted to go to church and stayed in bed they would have been gently called into account on the next Sunday. “Missed you in church,” someone would say. Can you feel the subtle pressure? The church skipper would likely lie about missing. “I really wanted to come but the baby was sick again and I didn’t want the kids in the nursery to catch this cold.” Nowadays people would be less likely to pressure by saying “Missed you...” And church skippers are unashamed: “I slept in.”

I’m trying to describe a titanic shift in which the whole Western Christian tradition of values has moved from self-

evident truth for everybody to privatized personal preference. We're living in a great experiment of values deregulation.

So when Jay Leno does his jay-walking man-on-the-street interviews we laugh at what people simply don't know. He sticks a microphone in someone's face and says complete this sentence "Let he who is without sin..." The response comes, "have a good time?" Or who, according to the Bible was eaten by a whale. Answer: "Pinocchio." If there are no universal values, why memorize this stuff.

This brings me to a first point. Give yourself credit for having to navigate in a confusing, complicated, pressure-filled world.

It's like the child who goes to kindergarten when he probably should stay home another year and do some growing up. If the child isn't ready everything in kindergarten proves overwhelming. Remembering the milk money, managing the bathroom stops, finding the class, sharing and not crying. Hey, it's tough to get your act together in kindergarten if you were still in diapers a year and a half before.

Transfer this scene to our situation. We all may be in over our heads in the big kindergarten of life. We've got a lot less supervision and guidance. There is a lot of stuff coming at us that previous generations didn't deal with. The internet

and media confronts us with all kinds of racy, disturbing, vile material. Most Americans are taking pharmaceuticals and too many are into illegal drugs. More and more adults aren't getting married but living in different arrangements. There's scads of money out there. I could go on.

Give yourself credit for needing to navigate in a very challenging time. And then dare to be your best self. This is where I'm going with all of this. Dare to be your best self. Or better, dare to be different.

Let me expand. I'm assuming you've noticed that the quality of your behavior really changes depending on the situation you're in. You have certain friends who bring out certain behaviors in you. If you're on a sports team or in a youth group you behave in a way that conforms to that group. And, let's be honest, there may be another group that, with time and opportunity, might bring forth some behavior in you that you could go to jail for if you got caught.

I'll tell you a secret. I and your parents are pretty much the same. In some contexts we behave one way. In others, we adjust our behavior.

Now, if you combine this principle with the insight that our world in general is not as certain about truth as we used to be, then you can see more deeply into the challenge you face.

There are simply not as many holding environments that will do your thinking for you and guide you and insure that you turn out okay.

What I'm wrestling with is similar to the distinction between a reptile and a mammal. Reptiles—snakes and lizards—do fine as long as they are warm. They're quite dependent on the external temperature. Once the sun goes down or a cold snap hits, reptiles need to retreat into their holes and sleep.

Mammals self-regulate their body temperatures. Your temperature is generally 98.6 degrees F. Your dog is a tad warmer at 101 degrees F. With their temperature self-controlled, mammals can function day and night, winter and summer. Deer will eat your flowers in August or January. Temperature doesn't bother them.

Mammals are more advanced from an evolutionary point of view. The great dinosaurs died off while primitive squirrels and ground hogs were just getting started.

What I'm inviting myself and you and all of us into is the evolutionary move from being environmentally regulated to being self-regulated. It's a developmental step. You're not going to get reliable guidance on what is really important in life from pop music, or celebrities, or video games, or YouTube, or maybe even school, and in our post modern environment even church.

Simply knowing this is a huge step. Because to realize that the world less and less is able to guide you into a virtuous generous existence, you can take responsibility for your character yourself. You can decide! Dare to be your best self. And that means daring to be different.

Actually, most great people have managed to transcend their environment. I was reading Florence Nightingale's life story last week and I find in her a perfect embodiment of what I'm proposing this morning. Florence was reared in a proper Victorian family in England in the 1800's. Even as a kid she dared to be her own person. She was forever sewing up dolls her sister had torn up. She put splints on the dog's paw. Florence wanted to be a nurse—a job most families today would approve of. But nursing back then was a filthy job and more like prostitution than medical care in our sense of the word. It took Florence four years to persuade her family to let her become an administrator in a women's hospital in London. She later went to school and is famous for improving sanitary conditions for wounded British soldiers in the Crimean War. Florence Nightingale's story is, like all life-tales, complicated. Suffice it to say Florence was her own person. She held on to one grand truth: Cleanly conditions in hospitals

save lives. She's arguable the founder of modern nursing and maybe public health as well.

In a wild and consequential time for a confused world on the brink, we need people who will be different. We need your vision for what needs to be done. We need your moral example. We don't need blend-into-the-wallpaper personalities taking life cues from People Magazine. Reptiles. We need people of character—mammals—that will transcend their environment, transcend their culture, and lead us. We need you to be...you!

I speak for a proud congregation in congratulating you on your graduation. Now, dare to be as good and as brilliant as you are.