

“Belonging to Others: Creatures of Habit”

Philippians 4:4-9

January 12, 2020

One of the most helpful books I’ve read in the last few years was written by the Pulitzer-winning business reporter Charles Duhigg. The title of the book is *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. Among many compelling insights, Duhigg offers this gem, “Habits are powerful, but delicate. They can emerge outside our consciousness, or can be deliberately designed...They shape our lives far more than we realize—they are so strong, in fact, that they cause our brains to cling to them at the exclusion of all else, including common sense.”

I found myself captivated by the book and particularly the broad range of real-world examples of the powerful role that habits play in our lives. This emphasis on habit also took me back to a classroom at Duke, where professor Stanley Hauerwas was teaching his introduction to Christian ethics course. As an undergraduate, I had pleaded with the faculty in the religion department for permission to take this Divinity School course as a part of my preparation for seminary. The experience was well worth the effort. Hauerwas is interested in *virtue ethics* and borrows from the Greek philosopher Aristotle to craft a particular vision of Christianity. This vision of Christianity centers on the communal formation of a unique identity through spiritual practices. That is, Christian faith is formed by the repeated practice of spiritual virtues in community. ***Habit plus community equals Christian formation.*** It is a profound but not original thought which combines Aristotle’s philosophy and Paul’s theology in a compelling way. As we at Second explore what it means to belong to others, we might all benefit from a review of these central aspects of our faith. This week, habits. Next week, community.

In his seminal work, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote, “virtues are formed in man by the doing of

actions.” Thousands of years later, the author Will Durant offered this summary, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an (isolated) act, but a habit.”ⁱ

We are what we repeatedly do. It’s an almost excruciatingly obvious statement when we stop to consider it; and yet, its truth often escapes our awareness. Character is not an individual choice. Virtue does not come through occasional decisions. Our character, like our faith, is formed through repeated acts of kindness, generosity, love, and gratitude. In his book, *The Road to Character*, the columnist David Brooks writes, “Occasionally, even today, you come across certain people who seem to possess an impressive inner cohesion. They are calm, settled, and rooted. They don’t crumble in adversity. Their virtues are not the blooming virtues you see in smart college students; they are the ripening virtues you see in people who have lived a little and have learned from joy and pain...they possess the self-effacing virtues of people who are inclined to be useful but don’t need to prove anything to the world: humility, restraint, reticence, temperance, respect, and soft self-discipline. They radiate a sort of moral joy...”ⁱⁱ

Do you know someone who radiates moral joy? If you do, I can you promise this: those individuals’ lives have not been free from worry, conflict, or failure. They are not without sin. Their character is admirable not because their lives have been flawless, but because they have made a conscious choice to persevere and develop the virtues you observe in them. They have cultivated this character over time.

The Apostle Paul had something to say about this kind of radiated joy. In his brief letter to the Philippians, Paul uses forms of the word “joy” sixteen times. Commentators observe how surprising it is that

Paul writes a joyful letter from such a dismal place as Paul finds himself imprisoned and perhaps awaiting execution in Rome. It seems to me that this is precisely the point. Philippians is probably the last letter Paul ever wrote. He is no longer a young man and he knows he is approaching the end of his life. And so, he dispenses the wisdom of one who has come a long way since the Damascus road. He urges the Philippians to take up habits that will make for a meaningful life: to be joyful, gentle, patient, prayerful, hopeful, and faithful. And then, Paul writes, the God of peace will be with you. It is not that the frustrations of life will disappear, that people will cease to disappoint you, or that life will become easier. But, if you commit to cultivating virtue, your response to the inevitable challenges of life will change. As your habits change your perspective changes and your character is strengthened.

With his signature confidence Professor Hauerwas used to put it this way, “If you want to be an honest person...start telling the truth. Keep telling the truth. Surround yourself with honest people.” It works with any of the virtues we aim to cultivate. Do you want to be a person of forgiveness? Start forgiving. Keep forgiving. Do you want to cultivate excellence? Make it a habit. We are the summary of our repeated thoughts and actions. Now, we can’t do this all by ourselves—thus, next week’s emphasis on community. But, we do choose the words we speak, the actions we take, the ways we react, and the habits that come to form our character.

When I was growing up, I would complain about the number of rules and expectations that governed our family. With four children spanning across nine years, I now realize that these rules were in part a means of survival for my parents as they sought to keep the chaos at bay. But as a teenager, I felt unreasonably oppressed. There were rules about curfew, friend choices, and language use. Rules about where I was allowed to go, when I was allowed to go, and with whom. One summer morning, I was sixteen years old and I loaded some friends (too many friends) from the neighborhood into my parents’ minivan. We headed for the baseball fields a few miles away. I *might* have forgotten to mention this to my parents. I *might* have been showing

off for my passengers. I *might* have overestimated the acceleration of a 1996 Dodge Caravan. I *might* have pressed the accelerator to the floor just in front of an oncoming car. Everyone was okay, but we were all shaken up and scared. The other driver had a cell phone. I remember how my finger shook as I dialed the number. All I could say was, “Mom.” I remember her voice on the other end of the line. How do mothers *always* know? “Is everyone okay? Where are you? I’ll be right there.” She did not say, “How could you be so dumb? I keep telling you to be more careful! Do you have any idea how this will impact your insurance?”

What I mean to say is this: the purpose of those rules and regulations in our home was not to punish or to judge. The purpose was to form our character. My parents cared about when I came home, how I drove, what I ate, or who I ran with because they loved me. And because they loved me, how I lived mattered to them. How we live matters to God because God loves us. Knowing that we are creatures of habit, my parents took seriously their role in guiding the habits that would form our character.

Like going to church or learning to play an instrument, the impact of any habit is cumulative—it grows and develops over time. And so, we have to commit to it. We have to overcome those initial anxieties and sometimes we have to put our heads down and plow through a barrier. Practice does not make perfect. Practice makes permanent. Simple, repeated actions become habits. Habits form our character.

In 1920, the Menninger Clinic was founded in a farmhouse in Topeka, Kansas with thirteen beds. Local citizens sued to stop what they called the opening of a maniac ward in their backyard. But the clinic expanded under the great psychiatrist Karl Menninger’s leadership, and became a center for care and compassion to those often cast aside. Once, when someone asked him what to do if a person feels he is about to have a nervous breakdown, Menninger replied, “Lock up your house, go across the railroad tracks, find someone in need, and do something for them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Do you want to radiate joy? Do you want to belong

to others? Do you want to resist a culture obsessed with the self? You can start right now.

Whatever is true, honorable, just pure, pleasing, and commendable—think about these things. Rejoice in these things. Do these things. Make them the habits that shape your life and the virtues that form your character. And, the God of peace will be with you. Amen.

ⁱ This quote is often attributed to Aristotle himself; but, it is actually a summary of his thought.

See <http://blogs.umb.edu/quoteunquote/2012/05/08/its-a-much-more-effective-quotation-to-attribute-it-to-aristotle-rather-than-to-will-durant/>

ⁱⁱ David Brooks, *The Road to Character*. Random House, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ From Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac*. July 22, 2008.

<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2008/07/22>