

Sermon 110115 Morality
Scripture Mark 10: 17-31
Sermon Title Doing The Right Thing

Last month, Meg and I attended a very cool thing at Fanuel Hall in Boston. It was part of what is called Hub Week, a celebration of the arts, science, technology, and medicine in Boston. The thing we attended was a lecture called ‘Doing the right thing.’ It actually wasn’t a lecture. It was interactive. The professor is a famous philosopher at Harvard. There was a panel of luminaries, which included Arianna Huffington and Yo Yo Ma, the great cellist.

It was a fun and completely fascinating time. The audience had big cards that were blue on one side and red on the other side. We expressed our views by holding up one side of the card or the other. The topic was the moral issues brought on by technology.

The professor asked us questions, we gave our view then the panel discussed it. For example, he said that this is happening in San Francisco. Let me start by explaining what an app is. App is short for application. There are thousands of apps that you can get for free or have to pay for. An app can be a computer game or something that provides a service for you. For example, you can get an app that will tell you where the nearest Italian restaurant is.

So one of the biggest problems when driving in a big city is finding open parking spaces. People drive around all the time

looking for a parking space. So in San Fran, they developed an app that you can use if you are holding a parking spot and are ready to give it up, you can let people know where you are and sell the spot to the highest bidder.

The prof had us hold up the red side if we thought that was okay or the blue side if we have a problem with it. Then he threw it to the panel to discuss it. One panelist thought it was a good idea because it was a creative use of a market economy. Another panelist brought up the moral issue of selling something that isn't yours. The city owns the parking spot, not you.

You see what I'm saying when I say the program was about what happens when morality meets technology. Well, the questions got progressively more complex and challenging.

There were a few questions about Uber. Uber is an app you can get on your phone that will tell you where the nearest available Uber car is to you. Uber cars are like taxi cabs but usually cheaper and easier to get. There was a hostage situation in Sydney Australia. People were panicked and needed to get out of the area quickly. The Uber drivers read the situation and cranked up the price for a ride. Was this simply the law of supply and demand or were the Uber drivers taking advantage of people in a time of crisis? We spent about an hour and a half wrestling with these sorts of questions.

One question was this. Technology is reaching a point where folks will be able to pick the gender of their child. The prof said that technology is heading in the direction so that you can decide gender but height, color, attractiveness, and intelligence. We were asked if we are good with that or not. Personally, on that one, I'd like God to have a say in the matter.

The professor said that his class at Harvard called "Justice" has 180 students in it. By the way, it's so popular; people need to enter into a lottery in order to be one of the 180. He said that the nature of the class is that the final is an essay. It's a test of time and resources to grade all the papers on time. He said, you guessed it; someone has developed an app that can grade papers. The prof can plug in what he looks for in terms of developing an argument, supporting data, how well you make your point, spelling and grammar and so forth. Do you want to mortgage your house to pay for your kid to go to Harvard only to have his or her paper be graded by a machine? But remember, machines don't get tired and aggravated which can cloud judgment.

A lot of these issues don't seem to be moral issues on the surface. It took a philosopher to dig deeper to find the moral dilemma. I came to the conclusion that there is a moral component to most decisions we make.

It was a session that was thought provoking and we laughed a lot. But I got to thinking. As a Christian, I use Jesus as my moral compass. He teaches me that love is better than hate, compassion is better than indifference, forgiveness is better than resentment, and to help the needy. But Jesus can bring me only so far. I checked. He did not address issues like machines grading college papers.

In some sense, we are on our own in 2015 America. The world that we live in is a different world than 200 years ago, let alone 2000 years ago.

One of the things the professor pointed out is that we humans have an impulse to master the world and we've done a good job of doing just that. What he also said was that we also have an impulse to wonder. The more we master, the less we get to wonder on.

Along with the panel, they had TV monitors set up. He had prerecorded interviews to see. He asked Conan O'Brian some of the same questions he was asking us. His responses were hilarious. He also asked Pedro Martinez. Now I freely admit that I have a man crush for Pedro. I love the guy.

He asked Pedro what he would think if his kids got absorbed by technology. Pedro said that he would consider himself a failure as a parent. He said that if his kids had their faces in a phone and

they missed a bolt of lightening or the rainbow to follow. It would grieve him. He still has the sense of wonder at a shooting star or a beautiful sunset. He said that he doesn't want to miss anything and he certainly wants the same for his kids. He said that we have bodies, minds, emotions, and souls. We need to nurture all of them. Pedro has true wisdom along with being the greatest right-handed pitcher of all time.

The professor pointed out that machines cannot tell us how to use them. We decide how and how much we use them. We need to be careful that we don't get lost in them. Pedro is right. We can never lose the sense of wonder, the need for love, the experience of desire, of curiosity, compassion, and generosity. In short, we cannot lose our humanity in the pervasiveness of technology.

I said earlier that the Jesus teachings could only bring us so far when it comes to making moral choices brought on by technology. What we can get from him is crucial, however. Jesus teaches us principles or values, if you will, to see the world through and to live by. If we are people who are guided by principles, we've got the tools to make good choices. It's important, I think, to look for the moral component, though. It's easy to stumble along in this life without thinking that we are making moral and ethical choices all the time.

The professor's course is available on line at Harvard. The course is called 'Justice.' I'm thinking of signing up for it. It might be fun if a group from our church takes it together. Trust me, they'll be plenty to talk about. If it is anything like the afternoon at Fanuel Hall, it will be eye opening and fun. AMEN