

Responsibilities

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32 9-28-08

I just spent nine days in the San Francisco Bay area with no responsibilities. I would wake up at 6 a.m. and know it was 9 a.m. here and relish the thought that I did not have to be at my desk, in the study, with the light on, at that very moment.

I had gone to visit my middle daughter, Jennifer, and her husband, Geoffrey, whom I had not seen since their wedding over a year ago. The only responsibilities I had while there were to find the Super Shuttle at the airport, empty and load the dishwasher, sit in the sun under the grape vines in their small, but wonderful, courtyard, find a recipe online, try to learn how to spin wool into yarn—something I did not accomplish—and get back to the airport in time for my return flight. Yes, I did think about you and Colebrook while away but I did so because I wanted to, not because it was a line item on my agenda. There was no agenda.

We all know that drifting through life with no responsibilities is a dream world for most and we would not like it after a while. Life becomes boring with no challenges and with no new things to do. As we grow up and mature, we learn that the greatest responsibility we have is in the way we live and move and have our being.

Ezekiel reminds us of this in a few lines. He tells us that we are responsible for our own lives. We have not come to the places we have come to because of anyone else. Our parents did not lead us down the pathway we have followed, our friends have not, our significant others have not. There must be no fingers of blame pointed at others if we find our lives less than we would want them to be. We have chosen the path we will follow, sometimes well, sometimes not so well. In instances in which life has been thrust upon us, and sometimes unfairly, it is up to us to decide just how we will sally forth, remaining bitter and unhappy or letting go of the past and making our own present. If we choose to remain bitter and unhappy we contaminate relationships and our view on life. We wake up one day to find ourselves surrounded by people who cannot abide us. Then we understand that, as Lord Byron wrote:

The thorns which I have reap'd are of the tree
I planted; they have torn me, and I bleed.
I should have known what fruit would spring from such a seed.
(George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*)

The words from Philippians prod us forward reminding us that we are not to live life only for our selves and our own ego needs, but for others. We are required to learn to see beyond our own noses and to consider a broader view. We are told that we must not judge others. That is not our job—it is not our responsibility. Learning to be humble, to have some humility, takes time and patience. But if we do not want to remain children, and demanding, self-centered little beings, we will learn that we are not the only game in town and that others have ideas as valid as ours, and their own areas of responsibility. We will learn that there are boundaries and that we do not have to constantly intrude in the lives of others to help them conform to our narrow view of what is right and wrong.

Jesus in the reading from Matthew, restates once again, in case we have not quite gotten the message, that we are responsible for leading our lives the way God would have us

lead them. We know what it is we must do but too often we fail. There are also those other times when we refuse to do what is asked of us but upon further reflection we decide we will respond in a more positive fashion. We act, like the first son in the parable. We always have the chance to review what is going on in our lives and to turn them around. Once again it is our decision and our responsibility.

When is it all right to decide not to take on further responsibilities? When they belong to others. When we want to try to control everything and everyone. When we do this we stunt the growth of others and create ill will. We keep people from growing up if we are always present to offer guidance and opinions and narrow judgment on everything. Others need to understand that they must step into responsibilities of their own. There are lines that should be drawn and respected.

I learned this a long time ago when my oldest daughter was in college. She was struggling with a problem and I offered some unsolicited advice. She was kind enough to listen but reminded me that she needed “to make her own mistakes.” My solution was not the same that hers would be. I never forgot her words and remembered that I do not need to protect my children from life. They need to learn how to deal with the life tasks they face. I might have had to face them, too, but my way is not the only way of handling things. My children need to discover their own special talents in working with the world and its challenges. They need to build and own their own lives. The only thing we can try to control is our own life and we never have complete control over that—things simply happen in our random universe.

We are always responsible to God. As practicing Christians who do not want to simply pay “lip service” to our religion, we must always remember to treat other people as we would like to be treated. We are responsible for our own lives—we cannot blame others for making us act the way we do. We have the opportunity to change if we discover we are going down the wrong pathway. This doorway is always open to us. We are not the be all and end all in life; everyone is as much a beloved child of God as we are. If we cannot allow ourselves to see this, we are doomed. Our scriptures all remind us of these points. It is a good time to listen and apply those teachings to our daily lives.

-- Amen