

Second Guess to Faithfulness

Exodus 14: 5-18 Matthew 25: 14-30

One of the great inventions of the digital age is the Undo button. Make a mistake – click the Undo button and it's like it never happened.

Remember *before* the Undo button. Of course, you do (don't lie!) – you're as old or older than me. It was typing on corrugated (sp?) paper – a paper that you could actually erase your typing mistakes with a pencil eraser. It was the deft art of painting with White Out. Or the ease of having a correction ribbon that had the White Out built in. But an Undo button revolutionized communications with the ability to fix the stupid thing that you might be prone to accomplishing, indeed, wreaking havoc on the page time and again. And there it was, the gift of the gods of technology; the Undo button. .

Improved to become the multiple Undo button, it could take the miscreant keyboarder backward into time to the very beginning of the whole mess that began at the first keystroke.

But the gods of technology are a nasty and wicked bunch. You can Undo with your word processor document, and your spreadsheet, and your database, and your desktop publisher. But the gods of technology have decided in their willful and capricious way that you cannot Undo a mistake in your email. If you work with a blog or website content, the online editors have cursed the wretched souls who toil in the digital wasteland by denying them an Undo button.

What is this like? It is like writing a complete blog post for the church's website, which you know 3 people are actually going to read – if you're lucky! – but still you have toiled for half an hour on a five or six paragraph beauty summarizing a 20 minute sermon and leaving the reader with some interest in listening to whole thing on video.

As you do every time, you know the default font size is quite small and you want to increase the size. Expertly using one hand, you hold down CTRL-A, highlighting all of the precious text that you have written in the last half hour. Then for some reason your finger sticks, or slips, or decides to be arthritically unresponsive, or locks up at the knuckle. Instead of removing the fingers from CTRL-A, you somehow manage to tap Q. The blue highlighted text disappears in an instant to be replaced by the lone and mocking letter Q. All of the work of the last half hour has vanished into digital oblivion, into the great black hole of literary disintegration, into the gaping, voracious maw of verbal apocalypse.

Having done this more than once, let me describe what always happens next. Like the roar of a lion who has lost its mate, a deep primal utterance comes forth – NOOOOO! It is followed by the most expansive use of the English language you have ever heard while jumping up and down like a four year old. That is the agony of being deprived of an Undo button. Perhaps you have had the experience in composing an

email which also cruelly omits Undo button functionality. The taunting gods of technology giveth, and they spitefully taketh away.

[Doogie reminded me after worship of the old single action “undo” which works in any application: CTRL-Z. In the example above, after hitting “q” by mistake, if you then press CTRL-Z, it will undo the “q” and return your highlighted text. Tap any other key after “q,” then you’re toast – CTRL-Z will only undo your last action/keystroke.]

Being able to Undo, to correct a mistake, is something we attempt when we second guess our prior decisions. After a bit of reflection, we may have second thoughts about whatever.

Car dealers love those tent sales, or used to – I think the law has changed now. The tent sales being temporary off site locations evaded the law that gave car buyers a three day right of recision, the right to cancel a deal within 3 days of signing a sales contract. With a tent sale, there was no second guessing; you were stuck. That’s simply sneaky and aggravating, but the second guessing goes on in the mind nonetheless.

Listen to the second guessing in the Exodus passage. It starts right away as Pharaoh realizes that, in his grief over the death of Egyptian children at the Passover, he let all of the Hebrew slaves go. As he emerges from the shock of his loss, he looks around and realizes that the available staff has suddenly shrunk. Why is this? Because, he – Pharaoh, the greatest leader in the Western world – had issued an order that let these Hebrew people go. *What have we done?*

To correct the problem, he masses his army from its barracks, readies the chariots, and takes off in pursuit of these Hebrew slaves.

This is where a bit more reflection could have been beneficial. That original decision was based on a reality which Pharaoh seems to have neglected to consider. Keeping the Hebrews as slaves caused a vicious death among his own people. It wasn’t an idle promise; it happened. This small bit of reflection would have helped him realize that trying to keep the Hebrews as slaves was going to cause *more* vicious death. But he doesn’t think this through, and simply reacts negatively to his own initial decision.

But don’t think the Hebrews are doing anything different. They’ve escaped as far as the Red Sea, and they can tell that going forward is drowning and death, and going backward is Pharaoh’s army and death. The flight from Egypt that may have begun with elation and celebration is looking very different at this point. The second guessing begins. They come before their man by the sea, Moses, and start whining.

Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, “Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians”? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.

There is no doubt whatsoever that these Jews were whining, sarcastic, caustic, nasty, and poor Moses has to hear it all. God's chosen leader tries to rally the people, reminding these second guessers just how it was that they got to this point, free from the Egyptians, the mightiest empire and army in the Western world. They should be expecting the next act in God's triumph over Pharaoh, if they took a moment to reflect on things. Instead, they're ready to go back to slavery.

God hears Moses and diverts him right away - *Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.* You do the thing with the staff, I'll take care of the water and the chariots. Fortunately God has everything under control since God's people, the Hebrews, were ready to second guess everything, walk away from Moses, and walk back to Pharaoh for a few more generations of slavery.

If we have taken the time to understand the nature of our first decision, our original impulse and reasoning, we could save ourselves a lot of grief in second guessing. Clearly the Exodus story reveals that God helps those who remain faithful and trust in the promise of God.

The parable of the talents that appears near the end of Matthew should be familiar. The master is going off on a journey and entrusts a tidy sum to each of his three servants. The one with the greatest sum made that much again. The one with the second greatest sum made that much again. Both servants at the accounting when the master returns are hailed for their faithfulness in stewardship, doubling the money which had been entrusted to them. The one who received the least decided in his first thought that he must be very, very careful with his master's money, ensuring that nothing gets risked so that he can return it all intact. He buried it in a hole.

When the master comes to the last servant for an accounting, the servant shares his reasoning: *"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."* He admits that he was motivated by fear of loss. Even though he knew that his master was an opportunist and one who sought to gain at every opportunity from the resources he had at hand, the servant missed the obvious. It's likely that even if the servant had tried and failed, the master would have been happier than discovering the servant's fear of even trying to make something happen with the funds.

If you flip back again to the Exodus story, we find the same fear of loss motivating the second-guessing of both the Egyptians and the Hebrews. For the Hebrews, the dilemma was resolved when Moses braced them with a call to faithfulness, to trust in the God who had brought them so far, something he'd have to do repeatedly. No one tries to get Pharaoh to face up to the power of God for his people, and the result is a disaster.

The two servants who multiplied their master trust acted on a faithful assurance that it would please the master to use the resources in the way the master intended, the way the master had practiced. Remember, the master gave none of them any instructions. Each one had to figure out the best way to handle this trust.

Fear can be at the root of much second-guessing. We become convinced that our original decision was too hasty, that it didn't measure up, that somehow we're losing something that we never should have lost.

Faithfulness is what corrects fear, overcoming it and subduing it. Faithfulness opens our eyes to the purposes of God, knowing that God wants us to reach beyond security and sameness, to get off the treadmill and run with it, run for freedom and new life. God will meet us in that faithfulness, the good news is the promise of new life. If we've been faithful, we have no need to second guess which draws us back into that fear of loss. Even if there is loss, God redeems it with new life and purpose.

May we see faithfulness turn back any fear, doubt, or loss. May we embrace the promise of God who points us forward in mission, equipped with the good news promise of life wrapped in the Spirit of power, freedom, and wisdom.