

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

Sunday, February 25, 2024

Unity Church Unitarian, Saint Paul, MN

What would you do if someone told you that to save your life and your children, you had to abandon your spouse? What would you do if your spouse told you “in order for our family to live, you must leave me?” What if you were a family of six, living in Gaza? This is the story of Youmna and Sillah and their four children. At the beginning of Hamas’ attack on Israel and the Israeli government’s war on Gaza, the El Sayed family was worried, but they still had water, food and their home. But as the bombings increased, as more and more of their neighborhood was destroyed, they realized they had to leave. During the next sixty-one days, the family relocated six times. With each move, Youman tried to respond to her children’s increasingly disturbing questions. After the first move, Ju-Ju, their youngest, was worried about the cat they left behind. “Will someone feed it?” That was easy. “Yes”, Youmna assured her. After the second move, “Mamma - I tried to call my friend and no one is answering.” After the third attempt to find safety, the children asked her “If we die, will we die together?” Youmna didn’t know how to answer that question, so she said: “You will always be safe in mommy’s arms.” Her children kept asking “when we die, can we die together?” “Yes, we will all six die together.” And strangely enough, that brought comfort to their four children.

Just when it appeared the El Sayed family had run out of options, they received word that their names were on a list of those who could cross the border from Gaza into Egypt, because Youmna had an Egyptian passport. Everyone was eligible, except for Youmna's husband and their children's father, Sillah. They could stay in Gaza and likely die; or flee to Egypt and leave Sillah behind. The El Sayed family had a choice to make.

Today's sermon is the second part of a sermon I offered two weeks ago, entitled "It's Always Something." In that sermon I looked at the concept of determinism – that is the belief that we do not really have free will but our lives are pre-ordained. I wondered with you is that true? And if not if we do have free choices about the ultimate outcome of our lives – what framework guides our choices? These are both secular questions and ethical, moral and spiritual ones.

Every day, we are faced with choices large and small, usually with minor consequences. But sometimes we are faced with difficult choices which seemingly have no obvious best outcome. And sometimes, we don't have time to weigh all the options. What guides our ability to make choices then? Who do we look to for inspiration, advice or support? What do we do with the guilt we may carry over after making what seems in retrospect like it was the wrong choice? These are the spiritual challenges we face.

Although we all hope we may never be faced with the same dilemma as the El Sayed family, there are going to be times in our lives when we will be faced with choices that will make a big difference in how I want to live - and how I want to die –and everything that happens in between.

Youmna and Sillah discussed their dilemma late at night, when they thought their children were asleep. “You must leave me,” said Sillah, Youmna’s husband. “You must take the children out of here. It’s their only chance of surviving this.” Youmna argued, “No, you are my heart. We can’t leave you.” Their eldest daughter, Elene, who was listening to their argument from the other room, came to their bedroom doorway and yelled at her father: “Dad, we’re not going without you.” Do they stay together and possibly die together in Gaza? Should Youmna and their four children leave for Egypt the next morning?

The origins of the phrase “between a rock and a hard place” is not quite known. One etymology traces its beginnings to miners from Bisbee, Arizona, who in 1912 had to choose between facing the hard conditions in the mines or the equally difficult conditions outside of them. Regardless of the origins, we understand it to mean having to make a choice between two equally difficult situations. Being caught between a rock and a hard place shows up in any number of ways for our neighbors who struggle with poverty. Do I pay my back rent or do I buy food? Do I get my prescription filled or do I pay the utility bill?

The extreme polarization of our politics has forced many of us to feel that we are in between a rock and a hard place. Consider for example, the very real dilemma that families with trans and gender non-binary or gender expansive children are facing. The recent death of Nex Benedict has brought to the foreground the fears that many families of non-binary children live with. The climate of fear created by oppressive anti-trans laws in some red states has caused some families to ask: Do I stay in my home state – the place where my family is – where my job is – where I raised my kids? Or, do I move to a state where I hope and pray my child will be accepted and safe for who they are?

Or what about the situation that Kate Cox found herself in? Kate very much wanted her baby but was told that her fetus had a lethal fetal anomaly. She was advised and sorrowfully accepted that she needed an abortion. She wanted to end her pregnancy with dignity and local support, but the Texas Supreme Court rejected her appeal and she had to travel out of state to seek an abortion. Kate Cox and her family found themselves in between several rocks and hard places; the decision to terminate; the desire to stay in Texas and the ruling of the Texas Supreme Court that denied this life and fertility saving procedure in favor of an ideological position. We hear such terrible stories on the news and perhaps wonder “what would I do? How would I make such difficult decision, when there is seemingly no good outcome for these choices?”

Youmna and Sillah decided to give up their place on the list of refugees who could be admitted to Egypt, and to stay in Gaza together as a family with their four children. But after another relocation, they ran out of food and water. The children were constantly hungry. Their cell phones didn't work. They had no internet to stay in touch with other families or friends. They realized that if they continued to stay in Gaza, they could face extermination from bombs or could die from hunger and disease. They began to wonder if they had made the wrong choice.

When you are between a rock and a hard place, you are probably not going to remember the details of that course in ethics you might have taken in college. We rarely analyze our decisions according to different theories of ethics. However, ethics is a discipline that describes the reasons real people use to make difficult decisions. You may think you made an emotional decision, that it was your gut that told you what to choose, but even without that you can dig a little deeper and understand what the ethical philosophy was that framed your decision. Let's step back from the deep emotions that the El Sayed family were feeling for a minute and take a short excursion into three different approaches to ethical decision making. Maybe you will recognize which one – or ones – if any – you might have used when you are stuck between a rock and a hard place.

The first is known as consequentialist ethics. Stated most simply, that means: *“Of all the things a person might do at any given moment, the morally right action is the one with the best overall consequences.”* An important version of consequentialist ethics is utilitarianism, which means that the best moral choice is the one *that maximizes the greatest good for the greatest number of people.* Consequentialism can send us down some deep rabbit holes., however. How can we know which choice will have the best overall consequences? Which choice contributes to the greatest good for which people? My family? My country? All people. For the El Sayed family, taking the choice which meant that every member of their family, except the father Sillah, could leave Gaza for the safety of Egypt seems like a logical consequentialist choice, the greatest good for the greatest number of family members, but it was a choice they could not make.

In politics, we often see battles being fought over principles or values that different political parties represent. If and when they are able to compromise on a piece of legislation, it will often look like nobody won. What did win was a consequentialist approach to ethical decision-making. The bill that could get the most votes was ultimately a bill that contained the greatest good that could be negotiated for the greatest number.

In our story today we heard about the difficult struggle about whether the political movement to obtain full suffrage, that is, voting rights, for both African Americans and all women had to be linked. The suffragists split apart into two groups, not because they disagreed about the intrinsic value of black people or women as citizens entitled to vote, but because they disagreed strategically on which approach would result in the greatest good for both over time.

We see more of this kind of division in our political life and very little compromise because of the power of values-based ethics. To state it once again very simply, people who make decisions rooted in values ethics believe that certain doctrines, virtues, or values are what always creates the greatest good for everyone. What they want is for everyone to embrace those doctrines, virtues and values. At its most extreme this is the battle being fought in our culture right now with the Christian nationalist movement. The Supreme Court Justice in Alabama who quote Christian doctrine to justify the designation of embryos as persons is using values ethics. In Oklahoma this past August, Governor Stitt signed a “Women’s Bill of Rights,” which among many prohibitions required public school students to use bathrooms that matched the sex listed on their birth certificates. Those who advocate for their values *believe* they are protecting the greater good within their cultural and ideological framework.

And yet the consequences of this directive have created an environment in which a young, gender expansive teen was bullied and dies after a fight in a high school restroom in Oklahoma.

When faced with tough choices, many Unitarian Universalists instinctively turn away from either consequentialist or values ethics to a third approach that seeks to consider both these but looks also at the particular circumstances of the moment. That third approach is situational ethics. Situational ethics evaluates actions based on their situational context, and rejects both moral absolutes or rational calculations about the greatest good. It teaches that certain types of action don't have an inherent moral value – whether good or bad depends on the result. Situation ethics is sensitive to variety and complexity. It uses principles to illuminate the situation, but not to direct the action. The emphasis is on moral action because you cannot know before the situation arises what you are going to do. All you can do is to make an individual assessment. When faced with a moral dilemma, situation ethicists might ask “What is the most loving thing I can do in this circumstance right now?”

Ultimately, I think that's what guided the El Sayed family in the choice they made to stay. The parents with their children chose their family's love at the risk of death. But then, they got a second chance. When Youmna's father in Egypt realized how dire his family's situation had become, he was able to arrange for them to get on the list to get across the border into Egypt a second time. There would be no third time however. The family had less than twenty-four hours to decide again whether they would stay in Gaza or travel to the border with the hopes of crossing as a family.

But this time, Youmna convinced her husband Sillah to travel with them to the Egyptian border and plead their case. When they arrived, the Palestinian guards told them that the Youmna and her children could cross because they had Egyptian passports, but Sillah could not. "Even if I let you through" one of the guards told her, "Egypt would just send him right back." "Well then," Youmna argued, "let Egypt be responsible for him, not you. He is their children's father. They need him. I need him." The guard was persuaded and let them cross into Egypt. The family waited and wondered: would they all be allowed to stay in Egypt or would Silla be forced to return to Gaza?

How can we know what the most loving thing I can do in any situation? It's not a perfect question, as sometimes our understanding of what is loving may be skewed by our own biases and projections. In some of the most difficult ethical life or death decisions, that question becomes so very hard. *Do I request that my loved one be removed from the ventilator, or do I continue to hope for a recovery? Do I continue to stay in a marriage for the sake of the children or would a divorce liberate all of us from this harmful home life?* Don't leave this service today believing that trying to live a life with situational ethics is easy.

Last week, Rev. Lara's sermon highlighted the proposed changes to a foundational affirmation of the Unitarian Universalist Association – the Principles and Sources of our faith. This June, delegates to the General Assembly will vote on whether they want to accept a revised group principles that place love at the center. That is not unlike asking ourselves "What is the most loving thing I can do." Or, as our UUA President Betancourt was quoted in Rev. Lara's sermon last week " *This is a love that surpasses the confines of simple definition; a love that will live into its own fullness long after we are gone – a love that sets us free...[by this] we are choosing to live one's life guided by what love asks of us...*"

The El Sayed family had made a choice to stay together, no matter what. Their decision can't be interpreted as the right choice or the only choice – but it was one based on the question “what's the most loving thing can we do right now?” So many stories from Gaza do not have a happy ending, but this one does. After waiting for eight hours on the Egyptian side of the border, the family was inexplicably waved through the holding area together. They all made it to Youmna's family's home. They were, for now, safe, and fed and most importantly, together; Youmna, Sillah and their four children.

There are so many hard places in our world. Even if we live in comfort and security; even if we have clothes to wear, food to eat, cars to drive or bikes to ride; even if we don't fear the bombing of our homes or the starvation of our children, there will be times between a rock and a hard place in all our lives. But I have more good news about that. Consequentialist ethics, Values Ethics, and Situational Ethics are not political parties that you join. Like Unitarian Universalism, ethical decision making is non-creedal!! Sometimes your decision will be firmly made rooted in one or the other of these approaches, and other times you will draw on all of them before the best choice for you becomes apparent. Heart and mind join together are joined together when we center ourselves in love. Rocks can be thrown or they can build walls or bridges.

They can create cairns and temples; they can be skipped across water and when water flows over them, they make music for us to hear. The river stones are listening because we have something to say and when we feel ourselves in between a rock and a hard place, we may also say “mercy, oh mercy, please rock me and hold me. Split this rock and let me find the softer places in between.” May it be so.