

**SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

**Lake Worth, Florida**

**Eve of the Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost (September 27, 2008)**

**Canon Richard T. Nolan**

***"OUR GENES, CHEMICALS, PROGRAMS, AND CHOICES"***

[revision of a sermon delivered at Christ Church Cathedral, Hartford, on Sept. 26, 1993]

**There are times I would prefer to be more like a computer! I would be programmed with whatever I need to function *correctly*. I would be delivered from my imperfect human mind that makes mistakes; I want to do what is correct. Programmed, I would be spared from the range of human emotions; I don't like to feel angry, disappointed, frightened, unhappy, irritated, regretful, or guilty. Ah, but I am a human being created by God to think with mortal limitations. I am a person designed by our Creator to feel moments of heaven, of hell, and much in between. I'm an individual fashioned by the Almighty to make choices about my loyalties and my priorities, all of which have consequences – some positive and some negative.**

**Committed cynics endure this freedom as a pathetic situation in which we are all condemned to unclear choices and uncertain results. Fatalists assume that "it's all in the cards" and that we do not make significant choices; we are indeed programmed – perhaps by God! In contrast, biblical Christians experience the human condition as a gift, as an opportunity to create (within our individual settings) an evolving process toward faithful fellowship with each other and God.**

**In the Parable read moments ago we heard of one son who initially chose not to work and then reconsidered; he had been disrespectful to his father, but had a change of heart and went into the vineyard to do his chores. The other son at first chose to work but never got around to it; he probably meant well, had good intentions, but failed to do what he'd promised. Clearly the first son's behavior, including his choice to change, was preferred in the Parable. After refusing to go into the vineyard, he changed his mind, repented, and did what he was supposed to do; there is no indication that his work was free from problems. He shows us that as Christians we hear God's Word, we often make wrong choices, but that we can choose yet again to make rightful decisions; however, the right decision does not imply that everything afterwards will be smooth and easy!**

**It is interesting that the story does not try to gloss over both sons' behaviors with excuses. Jesus didn't rationalize their negligence by appeals to their genetic make-up, their bodily chemicals, their psychological conditioning, the quality of their early family life, economic hard times, and the like. We can imagine that Jesus would have exempted a young child from responsibility, due to one or more of these influences; but the sons were not children; they were able-bodied, young adults capable of making their own decisions.**

**Some of you might recall this scene in the great musical "West Side Story" - after a fight between two rival gangs, the Sharks and the Jets, two Jets are apprehended and then released. The gang's mocking song is their answer to the police. "Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke, you've got to understand, It's just our brigin' upky That gets us out of hand. Our mothers are all junkies, Our fathers are all drunks, Golly Moses! Naturally we're punks." That 1957 musical is decades old, and many of us still have not caught on to the mocking tone of the excuses, young adults blaming others for all their failings.**

**Years ago, among my father's restaurant employees were two teenage brothers working part-time. They came from the same terrible home conditions, including economic deprivation. It is remarkable that one brother excelled; he studied hard, completed high school, then Harvard on a well-deserved scholarship, and finally Boston College Law School. His adult life personally and professionally has been responsible and**

admirable. His brother, on the other hand, coming from the same circumstances put forth little effort and has barely survived personally and occupationally. I wonder if he ever grew up to face the simple reality that regardless of our circumstances, as adults we are usually responsible for our choices and our efforts, which in turn lead to particular consequences.

Our current national, economic fiasco was not inevitable. It has occurred because of human greed and willful negligence. To be sure, our accepted cultural values led and nurtured this irresponsibility - especially by those in corporate and legislative power. Nonetheless, the citizenry has (for the most part) chosen (by passive approval) a compatible attitude of "greed is good" and "I want what I want NOW."

You and I are not programmed computers! We are not controlled puppets! The worst personal circumstances do not automatically propel most persons into excusable irresponsibility. Regardless of our upbringing, unless we become utterly psychotic, we *can* distinguish between a human being and a cabbage, between basic right and wrong! We are not forced to run with the pack; just because "most others seem to be doing it" does not excuse us from gutlessly joining in. We can sort out the more honorable options, no matter how limited they are, and expect some resulting difficulties, too. By the time of our teenage years, our genes, body chemicals, and environments do not coerce the vast majority of us into mindless, preset actions; like the two sons in the Parable, we are responsible for our choices.

Although not included in the story, I wonder whether both sons eventually regretted their actions, the first son for his initial refusal, the second for, we'll assume, his continual negligence. The Parable brought to my mind that I certainly regret my poor choices, especially those which have hurt others. I have not completely forgiven myself for some cruel remarks I made as a youth to my parents; I knew what I was saying and that my words were designed to wound. I realize now that as parents they could accommodate and forgive the adolescent tongue; they were merciful. I also regret some things said over the years to a few students, words designed to punish. I regret other insensitivities, usually with words, to some close to me. In most cases, it is too late to apologize! In addition, I know that I would find it difficult in some cases to *feel* forgiven. I cringe whenever those occasions pop into my memory; I sure wish I had kept my mouth shut at times! Probably like the two sons, even the one who changed and did what he was supposed to do, *we learn to live with our regrets*. I don't mean by wallowing in our mistakes, by creating new Good Friday guilt every time we get a chance. But for those of us who claim responsibility for our choices, for those of us who reject blaming nature or nurture for our transgressions, for those of us without a switch that can erase our memories and neutralize our feelings, our individual histories can feel tainted; we haven't accepted mercy and forgiveness from others, or from God. Carrying unrealistic guilt, we have not quite reached the absolution and pure joy of Easter; perhaps many of us live somewhere on the Saturday before!

In the "Parable of the Two Sons" Jesus strikes a note sounded throughout Scripture. We hear the challenge to us to set aside our stubborn resistance, to hear God's Word truly for every aspect of our lives, to change our hearts and minds when we have chosen wrongfully, to "turn, then, and live." Lest we dismiss this invitation by saying, "easier said than done," we pray in today's Collect that we "may become partakers of your heavenly treasure" that is, for the fullness of God's merciful grace to strengthen us on our journeys toward full forgiveness and righteousness. Responsibility for our choices, yes; mistakes, yes; regrets, yes; some continuing predicaments, most likely. Nonetheless, underlying all challenges from Christ is the Good News that we do not have to rely on ourselves alone. We are assured that as we choose rightly, as we live more fully (sometimes with lingering regrets and or unexpected burdens), the strengthening grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, *will* be with us, sustaining us evermore. *Amen.*