



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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On Being in Charge

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:1-6).

Father's Day is, among other things, a time to stop and reflect on the big people in our lives—fathers especially today, but also mothers, teachers, mentors, and anybody else who has been some kind of model for us and helped to shape the way we live. This morning I'll invite you to look back to the people who influenced you the most, and then look in the opposite direction, to the kind of influence you and I will have on others in the future.

When we start out in life, each of us is quite small, of course—a few pounds and some ounces, nineteen or twenty inches long, more or less. That's all people typically say in birth announcements: girl or boy, weight and length, apparently healthy or facing some sort of challenge. That's pretty much all you *can* say about a baby, because they haven't done anything yet. They're still mostly potential, a bundle of possibilities to be shaped by their genetic makeup, the influences of other people, the circumstances they face, and the choices they make along the way.

Babies and young children are small, and one of the first things they learn is how much they depend on the big people around them. Newborns can't do anything for themselves, so if something bothers them they just cry to get attention and hope a big person will show up and know what to do. That's important to remember, because the impulse to want some big person to come and solve all our problems lingers long after childhood, and sometimes it gets us into trouble, even as adults.

We'll come back to that later, but the point for the moment is that from the time we're born we depend on other people to be in charge—to know what to do, and to care enough about us to go ahead and do it. Typically, the first big people in our lives are our mothers and fathers, then grandparents and anyone else they trust to help look after us.

Much of the time we take these people for granted. One reason it makes sense to think of God as a heavenly parent is that sooner or later we realize how our parents cared for us in all sorts of ways long before we had any idea, and so does God, though infinitely more. Lots of people aren't very good about expressing appreciation, even to the most important people in their lives—which is an odd thing about human nature, isn't it? We have whole companies devoted to helping people say things in cards that they can't bring themselves to say in person. Cards are good as far as they go, but spoken words are better.

When we're little we look up to big people, literally and figuratively, and if they're good to us we tend to idolize them, at least for a while. "I want to be just like you when I

grow up” is one of the sweetest things a parent hears from a child, and it’s all the sweeter because you know that the feeling is unlikely to last. Children turn into teenagers, and then their assessments change. Parents who were perfect a few years ago suddenly don’t seem to know much at all, and whatever faults they have are pointed out in agonizing detail. At this point many parents wonder who kidnapped the children they adored, and whether they’ll ever get them back.

Young people go around the dark side of the moon for a while, and we lose radio contact. Sooner or later they usually come back, though, and connections are made again, but now in more mature and deeper ways. In the meantime, parents console themselves with the observation attributed to Mark Twain, how when he was 14 his father was so ignorant he couldn’t stand to be around him, but by the time he turned 21 he was amazed how much the old man had learned in just seven years.

All three stages, from childlike adoration to teenage rebellion to new appreciation, are what most of us go through on the road from infancy to adulthood. Little children need to know that big people love them and want to keep them safe. Teenagers need to figure out who they are if they’re not just extensions of their parents. And young adults finally open up to talking with their parents again as adulthood washes over them in waves: finding a job and maybe a spouse; taking on car payments and a mortgage; and then, God willing, having babies of their own who look up to them as the big people in their lives.

Something like this same cycle plays out in our generational experience as well. When I was young the big people told us that George Washington cut down a cherry tree when he was a boy, and when somebody asked whether he did it, he came clean right away. “I cannot tell a lie,” he said. “I cut down that cherry tree,” and so we were all to be like George Washington. Abraham Lincoln walked miles to return a few pennies that did not belong to him, and later on he grew up to save the nation and free the slaves, and we should all be like Abraham Lincoln too. Presidents were heroes to be admired and emulated. Meanwhile, our parents had just stopped Germany and Japan from taking over the world, and all the wars our country ever fought, from the Revolution to the Civil War to World War II, were won for good and honorable causes.

That’s the story the big people told us Baby Boomers when we were children, but by the time we were teenagers the story seemed to change quite a lot. My parents were both in World War II, my father in the Army and my mother in the Marines, and they helped to win what Studs Terkel later called The Good War in less than four years. But our war was Vietnam, and by the time I came up for the draft we still weren’t winning after twice as many years, and Americans were deeply divided over whether we should even be fighting that war. While we were in school President Kennedy was killed, then Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. Our country still had unfinished business with regard to race, a century after the Civil War, and women were just starting to break through all sorts of glass ceilings. And while all this was going on the president himself had to resign for activities that sounded nothing at all like the presidents we learned about in school.

So we Boomers went through, as a generation, something like what most people go through individually: from admiring the big people as children, to seeing all too clearly as teenagers their faults and limitations, to waking up one day and discovering that we ourselves were among the big people now, sharing responsibilities with all the other grownups in charge of the way things work in the world.

There's a lot of talk these days about what Tom Brokaw famously called The Greatest Generation. That was my parents' generation, and of course we should all admire and be grateful for the good things they did, some of which were really quite heroic. But we need to be cautious, I think, about lifting up one generation alone, as if, through some fluke of genetics, they were born superior to the generations that came before and after them. Most of them would never claim that, and we need to be careful, lest we imagine that we ourselves don't have it in us to do what needs to be done in our own time. The truth is, *every* generation is responsible for facing the challenges and using the opportunities before it to make the world a better place.

In a democratic republic all of us adults are in charge together. We're all responsible for the course we set as a nation, the role we play in the world, and the legacy we leave for the little ones who look up to us as the big people in their lives. And truth be told, in some respects we're not doing very well.

The level of incivility in our society is worse by most accounts than it's been since before World War II. That's nobody's fault but our own, and it's up to us to change it. If we try to blame the media, they will say that they only put out

what people are willing to watch and read and listen to, and they're largely right about that. If the market for media was more elevated, the media themselves would rise to meet the demand. And if we try to blame politicians, we're the ones who elect them after all. We vote for people who tell us that solutions are simpler than they really are, that we can have whatever we want and still cut our taxes; and then we complain about the mounting debt we're passing on to the children who look up to us and expect us to do what's right.

Then there's the planet itself. Who are the stewards of God's creation, and who is responsible to future generations for the condition of the world they will inherit, if not we who are the big people now? We can tell ourselves whatever we want to believe about the climate and the environment, but our grandchildren will know the truth, and they will suffer the consequences if it turns out that we failed to act responsibly.

We are accountable, first to God, then to one another and to those who come after us. None of us can change everything by ourselves, but each of us has a responsibility to do our part in whatever roles we play.

Sometimes I get frustrated that the Christian church is not as engaged or committed in all the ways we ought to be, according to what we know of God's will for us. "Why aren't people seeing these things?" I ask myself. And then a little voice in my head replies, "Well, you're the preacher. It's your responsibility to preach the word and tell the truth, even when the truth is hard to hear, and some people would just as soon not hear it."

I know the temptation to avoid hard things. But the Bible tells us what God expects from us: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, as Micah says; to love God, and love our neighbors as ourselves, as we hear from Jesus again and again. The book of Proverbs says that all these words are for “gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity.” Righteousness, justice, and equity are what God wants from us, and Proverbs goes on to say, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” Remembering that we will answer to God one day is the first step toward taking our responsibilities seriously.

So the Letter to the Ephesians says, “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” We are the big people now, the ones who promise every time we baptize a baby here that these little ones can count on us. That’s part of our calling. In the Genesis story, God puts Adam and Eve in charge of the Garden of Eden, and so symbolically God puts every man and woman in charge of caring for creation and everyone within it.

That’s a lot of responsibility, so it’s no wonder we’re quick to look for loopholes and come up with rationalizations for why there’s not much we can do, and how the troubles of the world are somebody else’s fault and it’s their responsibility to fix them, not ours. But a wonderful thing about God is that God not only holds us accountable but also gives us the grace and wisdom and courage to do what we’re called to do, if only we turn to God and ask for help.

Mature Christians should be able to grow beyond the childish idolization of big people, and the adolescent fixation

on their faults, to realize that the people in charge are always imperfect, because that's the only kind of people there are in this world. This should come as no surprise to us, since the second thing we do every Sunday in worship, after we sing God's praise, is to confess our own sins and shortcomings.

For Christians, the perfect is never the enemy of the good. God always uses imperfect people to do good things. So let's try, shall we? Let's all try to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we've been called. Because if we do that, God will be pleased, and so will our children, and our children's children for generations to come.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org