

We took the boys to Florida last week for spring vacation. **Our previous spring breaks were spent in the cold in Indiana cleaning the house, so the boys would look forward to returning to school.** But this year we set aside our traditional Hoosier conventions and drove our pale Quaker bodies south to the beach. **The condo we stayed in faced the beach and had recently been renovated after a storm and tidal waves had filled it with water and sand.** The ocean has many wonderful attributes, but self-regulation and restraint are not among them, so you could never quite tell what the waves would do. **I watched people walk along the beach trying not to get wet, but then a big wave would lap in, and the people would skitter away like little Groucho Marx birds.**

I know a man who when he speaks to me always put his face just a few inches from mine. I step back and he steps with me. No sense of boundary. No sense of self-regulation. **He not only has a problem with physical boundaries, he has little grasp of verbal boundaries.** He says whatever comes into his mind, does whatever he wishes, with little sense of appropriateness. He's like the ocean. **You can tell him, "Don't cross that line."** But it never works.

* I am indebted to the late Jewish rabbi and psychologist, Edwin Friedman, for this understanding of self-regulation.

In the Sermon on the Mount, after talking with his disciples about the high and sometimes difficult standards of love, Jesus said to them, “Be ye perfect, even as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) **Perfection is a daunting criterion and not often attained.** But something was lost in the translation. Jesus spoke in Aramaic, which was translated into Greek, then Latin, and from that into English. The original meaning wasn’t *perfect*, but *mature*. “You be mature, as God is mature. You be grown up, as God is grown up.”

I want to talk these next few weeks about *maturity*. What does it mean to be mature? **I’ve been thinking about that this week and it seems to me mature people possess certain qualities.** These are the virtues I wish to highlight. There are, no doubt, others. They are:

Self-regulation: the ability to live within appropriate boundaries and control yourself without others having to do that for you.

Delayed gratification: the ability to postpone immediate pleasure for some future good.

Empathy: the ability to care for others.

Perspective: the ability to give situations and circumstances their appropriate weight.

And finally, mature people are those who enhance life, not diminish it.

This morning, I want to speak about the first quality of maturity, self-regulation. Joan and I have a friend who has leukemia. He's been in and out of the hospital. They beat the cancer back with bone marrow transplants and chemotherapy, then it comes roaring back. **Unlike regular cells which stay in place, doing what they were created to do, cancer cells don't self-regulate.** They invade. They cross boundaries. They metastasize. They start in the breast, then move to the lymph glands. Or begin in the colon and move to the lungs. **They do this with such stamina, with such determination, that the good cells often can't muster the energy or strength to hold them back and are eventually overwhelmed.**

Viruses act the same way. Lacking both a nucleus and a surrounding membrane, they have no center, no sense of self, and no ability to contain themselves. They invade a cell, take it over, and replicate themselves. That's an infection. **This concept also holds true with some people.** We've all had experience with viral people, who negatively affect, and infect, the people around them.

I remember when I was about twelve. I was in junior high. Had three brothers and a sister and I just loved agitating them. **Everything would be going along fine and I'd come along and get something going.** It made me feel powerful, that I could get people so worked up.

I'd get sent to my room for an hour or so. Then get out, behave for a day or two, then I'd do it all over again. After all, I knew my parents couldn't throw me out. **How do you say to someone in your family, "You're not family."?** I know some families do. I know some churches do. But I knew mine wouldn't. So I just kept stirring things up. My little brother had spent a day building a house out of playing cards and was really proud of it. I'd held back all day watching him doing it, then ran by and knocked it over after all his hard work. **Everything got all upset and tense, my mother sent to my bedroom, then came in, sat down beside me and said, "I'm losing my respect for you."** That's all she said. She said it very quietly, very tenderly. But I knew she meant it. It just about killed me. I loved my mother and I wanted her respect. **It was one of those pivotal moments we have in our lives.** "I'm losing the respect of the people I love," I thought to myself, "I need to change." And I did.

But first I had to want to change, because maturity can only happen when our immaturity begins to cause us pain. **This is true of all change for the better.** I was speaking with an addictions counselor last month and asked him, "When do alcoholics change?" He said, "When staying an alcoholic becomes too painful." Some alcoholics never get there and die estranged, alone, and broken. **The same can be true for viral people.**

The difficulty in transforming immature people is that they are unable to learn from their experiences. **They lack insight or introspection.** You can talk with them about inappropriate behavior and they'll say, "I know exactly what you mean. I have a brother-in-law just like that." **It is always someone else who needs to grow, someone else who needs to change, someone else who needs to straighten up.** Nothing is ever their fault. The average prison is full of people who never did anything wrong.

Mature people self-regulate. They honor the space and opinions of others. They understand boundaries. They aren't infectious. They aren't driven by external forces, like the waves of the ocean, but have a strong sense of self and live out of that self, carefully and thoughtfully deciding what they should and shouldn't do. **This maturity is incremental, and we never completely arrive.** We're always working toward a fuller, deeper maturity. When my sons were little, I had to remind them to look both ways before crossing a street, now I don't. Nor do I have to remind them not to interrupt when someone else is speaking. They've learned that. Well, for the most part. **Now that they're teenagers we talk about what maturity means in that context.** We discuss appropriate sexual behavior, what it means to drive responsibly, the temptations of alcohol and drugs. Those are all matters of self-regulation, of recognizing and living within certain boundaries.

This training for self-regulation continues all our lives. **Mature people are always asking themselves, “What is the appropriate way for me to be in this situation? What is the most life-enhancing thing I can do in this moment?”** Immature people seldom do that. The winds hit them, some external event pushes against them, and they respond like waves, blowing through the boundaries, knocking down everyone and everything in their way.

It embarrasses me to think of all the times I’ve acted immaturely, charging off in some direction with little regard for the feelings of others, reacting angrily when I should have stopped and listened carefully. Maybe you’ve done that, too. This is why maturity is the work of a lifetime, requiring our regular and steady commitment.

The recovering alcoholic wakes up each morning and says, “Today is a new day. I have decided not to drink today.”

The person working toward maturity wakes up each morning and says, “Today is a new day. I will conduct myself responsibly, making appropriate choices which enhance my life and the lives of others.”

And every day they grow and develop a little more, until finally they are mature as their Heavenly Father is mature.