

My friends, there has been a heart-tugging story playing out in Philadelphia over the distribution eligibility for donated organs. I've been following it in the *Inquirer*, but I do not know if it made the national news or not. At first it involved a ten year old girl, and now a boy a little older than the first girl. It is not my sermon topic for tonight; I mention it as one of many examples, this one being Jewish bioethics, that will eventually be covered in our ambitious undertaking of reading and discussing *The Observant Life* cover to cover.

So what about tonight? Some studying I was doing earlier in the week gave me the idea to send out a potential sermon topic and see what people thought. The response was quite good. The topic I suggested was "The Most Important Battle You Can Fight?," and I asked people for their thoughts on what that might be. I received many answers and I won't list them all, but here are some of the highlights:

- Anti-semitism. That is a huge one, but fortunately not one we face on a daily basis in the United States. If we lived in Europe or the Middle East, we might not be so lucky.
- Faith and how to find it. If I may paraphrase this one, I think my friend who contributed it means how to continue to believe in the goodness of God and life when confronted with the unfairness of life. All too true, for some of us less so, for others, overwhelmingly so.
- From friend I knew in elementary school and high school but have really not heard from since: living a meaningful life. Wow, did she get close to my own thought, and I certainly agree that she hit on a huge one.
- From a deeply spiritual friend in Florida: First, she wrote "Trust in God?" with a question mark. That question mark has a dual meaning, and yes, life can make trusting in God difficult. Then she wrote, "The battle between self will and God's will." Like my school years friend, she got really close to my own idea.

Now before the big reveal, let me say two things. The first is that just because this is what I am calling the most important battle you can fight does not make it more true than the preceding examples by any objective standard, although I am absolutely certain that if I say it is so, my mother is certain that it is so by any standard in the heavens above and on the earth below. The second is that this talk is

about to become extremely self-revealing, painfully so, and therefore I want to acknowledge it is one of the most difficult talks I have ever given.

So what is my answer to the most important battle you can fight? The battle between your values and your desires.

That makes it seem like your values and your desires are in conflict, does it not? I believe that almost by definition, at times they are. Here is what I like to teach young people about values: *a value is something you believe is more important than your own feelings*. The conflict is built into the definition.

That's a pretty big statement to make to a generation that has been raised to think that virtually nothing is more important than how they feel. And I have been staggered over the years by the number of teenagers we would all consider to be good kids who have said in group discussions that they would be willing to be the lookout for a friend who wanted to steal something small like a CD from a megastore like Wal-Mart, because they would not want to hurt a friend's feelings by saying no. Fewer, but still more than I expected, would be willing to be the thief in a scenario that promised they could not be caught and arrested. Happily, after being reminded that not only was stealing illegal but the Ten Commandments said not to steal, many understood my point about values and changed their minds.

It was during the studying I mentioned earlier that I had an epiphany, and a rather personal one at that. It does not take anything but a look at me to know that I have struggled with food all of my life. In fact, I have had one lasting victory over food in my entire life. Do you know what that victory was (and continues to be)? Kashrut. Keeping kosher. With regard to food, it is the only time that I held to a value—I believe Jews should keep kosher—over my feelings—I like shellfish. However, I simply cut non-kosher food out, and continued to eat kosher food pretty much as much as I wanted. Sure, there were some short-term dietetic wins, but for the most part, I've remained pretty much the same size for a long time.

So what was the epiphany? That I have been ignoring a Jewish value, and I draw my values from Judaism. What value is it? *Shmirat ha-guf*—taking good care of one's body. Can I honestly say that I have done my very best to observe this Jewish value? I cannot. I have broken *shmirat ha-guf* in eating and in the irregularity of my exercise schedule. And so I decided to share this fact with people for whom I care, and whom I believe care about me, my Friday night congregation. I have done so in the hope that a public statement will help me to be even more motivated. But I have not only done it for me, or for the sake of this particular

Jewish value. I've done it to encourage everyone who has heard me speak tonight or read this sermon online to contrast your own feelings and desires with your values and identify where you are not living up to your own values. For I believe this to be true, and with this I will conclude: the finest, best, nicest people you know are the ones that fight the battle between their feelings and their values the hardest. I urge you to become one of them.