

Who's the Boss?

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
October 22, 2017 ~~ Stewardship Season Second Sunday
Text: Exodus 1:8-21

Who's the Boss? was a very popular television show running for most of the 1980's into the early '90's. Anybody remember it? This sitcom was groundbreaking in its day for several reasons. First, and the reason for the show's name, was that the two main characters – Tony Micelli and Angela Bower, played by Tony Danza and Judith Light, -- had an unusual, role reversing relationship which was the main storyline of the show. Tony was a retired professional baseball player who ended up as Angela's live-in housekeeper and nanny. Tony was forced to retire from professional baseball because of a shoulder injury and he wanted to make a fresh start with his daughter. Angela was a driven, high powered advertising executive who needed someone to take over running her home in Fairfield, CT and caring for her son.

This show was ground-breaking in its time. In the early 1980's women were still finding their way into the workplace in leadership functions rather than just supportive roles. Men still ruled the white-collar professional world and the homes they returned to at the end of a long day. The idea of men changing diapers and doing laundry while women pursued full-time careers even after their children were born was just coming into its own.

Times were changing for sure but even so, *Who's the Boss* offered a weekly glimpse into a world that was just beginning to take shape. The “head of the household” was a strong, assertive, powerful woman who earned a lot of money by facing down a difficult and challenging corporate world. The support person, the “mom figure”, was a vibrant, sensitive young man content with running the house and chasing after the kids. In 1982 when this show first ran, this was radical stuff. For some people, it apparently still is. But that’s a sermon for another day.

What I want us to consider this morning in the light of this show and its message of a new kind of equality between the sexes and the generations, is the way in which emerging new realities can often blur lines of accountability. “Who’s the boss?” becomes a real question as roles change and realities shift. Who do I listen to when so many voices are trying to tell me who I am and what I should do? How do I know who has my best interests at heart and who just wants to win me over to their side because of some invisible tally being kept somewhere by someone? Who will be the boss of me as I grow up into adulthood? How do I know the decisions I make are the best ones, the right ones? What am I supposed to do and who is going to tell me? Who IS the boss of me and does it really matter?

Enter *Scuffy the Tugboat*. I have loved this story since I was little and I don’t know why. It was one of several stories my

mother read for me regularly at bedtime so I knew it by heart, almost. I also felt a special kinship to it when I learned that one of my friends in elementary school actually had a connection to a tugboat – one of the river tugs in Pittsburgh where we both lived. Her dad was a tugboat captain!! I couldn't believe it when I found out and immediately asked her all kinds of questions. She thought I was crazy because to her it was just her dad's job. She actually didn't like it because he wasn't around very much. Thus was my first hint that perhaps storybooks did not portray the world as it really was. But I digress.

Scuffy, as we heard in the story a few minutes ago, got into a jam because he decided that he was meant for bigger things than just floating in a bathtub. When the little boy took him to the stream to play, Scuffy managed to escape down the river. For awhile everything was fine and he had all sorts of pleasant adventures. But then, the river he was in became bigger and bigger and the ships and boats around him got bigger and bigger too. He realized he wasn't strong enough to escape the currents and get to the shore so he was being swept along by the river, his destiny completely beyond his control. Just when he thought all was lost and he would be swept out to sea, the little boy's father reaches out and grabs him. The little boat was so happy to be safe that he never complained about the bathtub again. He knew who he was and where he belonged.

I always loved the ending of that story with the boy's father making that impossible reach off the dock to grab the little toy boat before it disappeared forever into the ocean. It always seemed miraculous to me, and I think that was the author's point. Scuffy had figured out that being his own boss, being left all on his own, wasn't leading him to the "bigger things" he had decided were his destiny. Instead, his stubborn insistence on his own way just got him into trouble he couldn't handle. Scuffy didn't want to accept that he was a toy tugboat and not a real one. And because he didn't accept his own reality, he was unable to see that the bigger things he saw as his destiny were something he already had – the love the little boy felt for him and the love the little boy's father felt for the boy. This love was so strong it extended to the toy boat too. Scuffy was saved because the Father's love for the son carried over to Scuffy. How's that for a biblical parallel???

But, there's another parallel I see which is excellent food for thought too. This whole notion of knowing who we are and where we belong is at the core of Scuffy's story. It's also the key element in a story from the Old Testament in Exodus, the story we read just a bit ago about the midwives Shiphrah and Puah. This is an extraordinary story, and an important part of the larger story of Moses whose birth follows immediately after it. The story of Shiphrah and Puah comes at the end of an explanation of how it was that the Israelites came to be persecuted in Egypt. As Genesis

ends, Joseph and his brothers and their families are happily settled in Egypt and the Egyptians are happy to have them there. Then, several generations later, the Egyptians have changed their attitude toward the Israelites from friendship and acceptance to fear and distrust. The new Egyptian Pharaoh is afraid of the Israelites who have now become so numerous in Egypt that Pharaoh decides they are a threat. So, he comes up with a devious plan to try and decrease the numbers of Israelites and he needs the help of two midwives to do it. Enter Shiphrah and Puah.

There is some debate among scholars as to whether Shiphrah and Puah are Egyptian midwives to the Hebrews or Hebrews themselves who were midwives to their own people. In a way, it hardly matters since Pharaoh's monstrous directions to them to kill the infant boys at birth would carry the same weight of law regardless of their nationality. Perhaps you could argue that they must have been Hebrew themselves because they cared enough to disregard Pharaoh's instructions and risk the consequences. They would not hurt their own people in this horrible way. I think that's true but I also believe that any midwife would have done the same. No trained, professional midwife would ever take the life she had just worked so hard to bring into the world. The sacredness of that little life mattered more to these midwives than any gruesome instructions from a paranoid ruler. But, they were smart enough to use Pharaoh's own ignorance against him and

protect themselves from his wrath at the same time. They used his own racism against the Hebrews and ignorance of the “ways of women” to convince him that the Hebrew women were “vigorous” and delivered their babies before the midwives could get to them. What they are really telling him is that Hebrew women deliver babies like animals do. Animals don’t need help delivering their babies and neither do the Hebrews, they told Pharaoh. He believed them, of course, because they told him what he already thought was true. They used his own prejudice against him to save lives, and one of those lives saved was Moses. The text is clear that God knew what Shiphrah and Puah had done. God knew they had risked their own lives to save the Hebrew babies so God rewarded them with families of their own.

And so Shiphrah and Puah slide into history, anonymous once more. But their story has much to tell us about knowing who you are and where you belong. It is a dramatic and direct answer to that contemporary question, who’s the boss. For Shiphrah and Puah, there was only one possible answer to that question – God was in charge. God was the boss. God was the only one they had to worry about being accountable to. They knew who they were in the scheme of life in those long ago days – midwives entrusted with bringing new life into the world. They knew this was a God-given role and responsibility and they would not, could not betray

it or God by doing as Pharaoh asked. So they outsmarted Pharaoh and made God, and a whole bunch of Israelite mothers, happy.

Scuffy, Shiphrah and Puah – they each had to come to terms with who they were, really. They had to articulate for themselves what they could do, what they couldn't do and why it mattered. They had to face their fears and decide what really mattered. To do this they had to figure out where they belonged. Scuffy ultimately decided a bathtub with a little boy who loved him was his destiny and that was fine with him. Shiphrah and Puah ultimately decided that they were midwives, a God given gift and sacred responsibility that mattered more than anything else, including incurring Pharaoh's wrath. This is not easy stuff to do, this coming to terms with ourselves, gifts and shortcomings, warts and beauty marks, and all. But we must know ourselves if we are to ever have any chance of figuring out how we fit into God's plans for the world in which we live. We must be able to look unflinchingly at ourselves in the mirror as we ask the question "who's the boss" in whatever situation we find ourselves facing. Because only then can we hope to be able to answer, "I am, with God's help and guidance." I am the boss of myself, of my life, of my future – with God's help and guidance. Dear friends, we are indeed meant for bigger things, and with determination, courage and God's help, we'll find them. Amen.