

“Life and Death”

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20, Matthew 5: 21-37

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Do our choices matter? The easy answer is yes, of course they do. Whenever we have the choice, God calls, urges, even instructs us to choose life, life in abundance. This morning's passage from Deuteronomy is one of my favorite in the Hebrew Scripture. The book of Deuteronomy was written as Moses' farewell discourse to the people of Israel, ending with his death. Moses has been their leader and spiritual guide on their journey toward liberation. As they prepare to enter this much anticipated future, Moses tells the people they have a choice, choose wisely and they will be blessed, choose foolishly and they will be cursed. There are always choices; life versus death, blessing versus curse, abundance versus scarcity. Yes, our choices matter. They matter not just for the present but for the future. They matter not only to us but for our children. Moses admonishes them to choose wisely, not based on their own needs and desires, but the will of God.

Our lives are filled with choices. Some of them seem harmless. What will I wear today? What will I have for breakfast? Other choices have deeper impact on our lives and others. Will I choose to drive home after that Super Bowl party even though I have been drinking with my friends? Will I order that scrumptious dessert even though my doctor has just put me on a diet to get my diabetes under control? Will I send that angry email to the coworker with whom I have just had a disagreement? Our days are filled with choices. What I hear this morning from Moses and Jesus are guidelines in facing the tough choices.

It would be easy if our discipleship were defined by a clear list of dos and don'ts. Do this and you will have eternal life. Don't do that and you will have eternal life. Jesus came to transform the checklist mentality. Our spiritual lives are not so much about *not* doing the things Jesus talks about, divorce, adultery or murder for example, but finding ways to treat all people with dignity and respect. This is what he is trying to teach these fledgling disciples. Becoming a disciple is more complicated than following a set of rules. That is why Jesus says to the people, “you have heard it said this, but I say....” If you follow the rules but hate your neighbor God is not pleased. Jesus is laying the foundation for a new way of being. It is not pleasing to God when we follow the letter of the law but still harbor greed or resentment or jealousy in our hearts.

This is the third week in which we have heard instruction from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In it Jesus continues to lay an impenetrable foundation for kingdom living. He began with the blessings or the beatitudes as we know them. Last week he told us to unabashedly be salt and light to the world. In this way people will know we are followers of Christ. Today Jesus teaches us how to create life giving community. He longs for us to live authentic lives. What we do should match what we say. He tells the disciples if they wish to bring their gifts to God but have yet to reconcile with their neighbor or family member, they are not living authentically. We can not choose life if we harbor anger in our heart for anyone.

Our choices matter. What we say matters. It sets the tone for building life affirming relationships and tells the world who we are. Recently there has been much talk about civility. In the wake of the shootings in Arizona that killed 6 people and left Rep. Gabby Giffords fighting for her life, people were quick to blame the enflamed political rhetoric that seems to flow so freely and easily in our society. Even before this tragedy happened, the Social Action Committee has been wondering how to invite the church into a conversation about civil discourse. While no one particular conversation or website may have instructed that young man to get a gun and fire into the crowd on that Saturday morning, there is no denying that much of what we hear and say to each other is far from life giving. That is the point Jesus is trying to make. The methods of communication we have today are different and more complicated, but the principle is still the same. If you would not say it to someone in person, then it is not okay to say it in a voice message or in an email or text message. Talk radio and 24/7 “news” programming seem to give us permission to treat other people disrespectfully. It becomes easy to dismiss people who think differently than we do. Jesus calls us to be in relationship with all God’s people, those with whom we agree and also disagree. Is it possible to speak passionately about what we believe, politically or theologically, without demeaning others? Jesus teaches us how.

I believe we grow in our faith at those “time stopping moments”. Try to recall a moment when something happened that made you stop in your tracks and take stock of yourself. It could be a seemingly small event or one that touched a nation. I believe the recent shootings were a time stopping moment. In light of such an event we pause, face the choices we could make in the wake of such an event then seek God’s wisdom and courage to act. In the aftermath of such a tragedy the larger tragedy would be to behave as if nothing happened. It is easy to try to find blame for such an event. It is easy to be angry at the people who did not respond in a way that would have kept Jared Loughner from acting violently. Moving forward, such frustrated responses will not make a difference. Our calling is to choose life, in everything we say and everything we do. Whenever we pause before we speak to another person in anger, we choose life. When we work to tighten the gun laws so that it becomes more difficult for someone to purchase automatic weapons, we choose life. When we pray for the victims of this tragedy and celebrate the victories that Rep. Giffords continues to make every day, we choose life.

I read a story this week about a man named Michael. “Michael was the kind of guy who had such a positive outlook that you either loved him or hated him. When someone would ask him how he was doing, he would reply, "If I were any better, I would be twins!" He was a natural motivator. If a co-worker was having a bad day, Michael would encourage them and help them to see the positive side of the situation.

A friend asked how he could be so positive all the time. After all, it seemed so unnatural compared to the rest of the world. Michael replied, "Each morning I wake up and say to myself, 'You have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or ... you can choose to be in a bad mood.' I choose to be in a good mood. Each time something bad

happens, I can choose to be a victim or ... I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it. Every time someone comes to me complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or ... I can point out the positive side of life. I choose the positive side of life."

The friend protested that even though it sounded great in theory it would be hard to live out. Michael responded, "Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk, every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people affect your mood. You choose to be in a good mood or bad mood. The bottom line: It's your choice how you live your life."

Several years later, Michael was involved in a serious accident as he fell sixty feet from a communications tower. As he lay on the ground, the first thing he thought of was the well-being of his soon-to-be-born daughter. Then, he remembered that he had two choices: He could choose to live or ... he could choose to die. He chose to live.

The paramedics arrived and went to work. They kept telling Michael that he was going to be fine. But when they wheeled him into the ER, he saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses. He began to feel fear overcoming his body because he could read their eyes: "He's a dead man." He knew he needed to take action.

A big burly nurse was shouting questions. She asked Michael if he was allergic to anything. He replied, "Yes." The doctors and nurses stopped working as they waited for Michael to fill in the missing blank of his allergy. He took a deep breath and yelled, "Gravity." Over their laughter, he said, "I am choosing to live. Operate on me with that understanding."

After eighteen hours of surgery and weeks of intensive care, Michael was released from the hospital with rods placed in his back. Michael lived, thanks to the skill of his doctors, and also because of his amazing attitude. When asked about his health, Michael would respond, "If I were any better, I'd be twins. Want to see my scars?"¹

Every day we make a choice between life and death. Someone very wise once told me, it is our scars that qualify us for ministry. Perhaps you have been the recipient of this life giving wisdom too! He did not only mean the ministry to which I have been called, but the ministry that we are all called to at some point in our lives. What we have overcome in our lives can defeat us or empower us. We can choose to be embittered by our challenges or see them as a gift that strengthens us for the journey. We can wallow in the pain of a failed relationship or a set back in our sobriety or recurrence of disease or we can trust that even in these struggles God is ever present. We can choose to speak the truth in a way that diminishes another person's humanity or we can speak in a way that honors the truth and the dignity of the other person. Life is full of choices. God invites us every day to choose life. amen

¹ From the book *Lectionary Tales For The Pulpit, Series IV, Cycle A*, by Gregory L. Tolle.