

“Choose Life - 2”

using Russell Hoban’s book “The Little Brute Family”

Deuteronomy 30: 15 – 20

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At some point during the week I thought to myself, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could all just sit down together and read children’s books? ‘We’ as a congregation, yes, but that ‘we’ at THAT moment extended out to our world. I wanted to shout, “Hey world, can we just take a collective deep breath, find a shady tree to sit under and read children’s books?” Let’s all go back to those days of early childhood when books for the most part contain messages of getting along, of how we’re the same, of our great wonderful world, of how to be nice. I know, I know, there are flaws in my ‘sit under a tree and read children’s books’ fantasy. Not all children’s books have a message of inclusion. Not all people can read, or have books, or want to read if they have books. It’s a pretty naïve thought. At the same time, it reminded me of a scripture from long ago, that scripture about how ‘a little child shall lead them’.

Our story today, like most children’s books, is a seemingly simple story with a seemingly simple yet profound message. We are introduced to a little family of Brutes; Papa Brute, Mama Brute, Brother and Sister Brute and baby Brute. Theirs was a life of sand and gravel porridge, snarls and grimaces, sticks and stones, kicks and name calling, pushing and shoving, punching and pinching. They never laughed and said, “Delightful!” They never smiled and said “How lovely!” Theirs was a world of meanness, of narrowness of vision that kept focus on the meanness that they knew and seemed to perpetuate in each other.

Until one day, *one* day, Baby Brute ‘found a little wandering lost good feeling in a field of daisies. He caught it, put it in his tiny pocket and felt so good that he laughed and said, “How lovely.” That little wandering lost good feeling opened up a crack in his heart, he felt good all afternoon and at supper when his bowl was filled with stew he said, “Thank you.” And that little good feeling flew out of his pocket, hovered over the table, then spread through the Brute family replacing the snarls with ‘How lovely!’, ‘delightful!’ ‘how delicious!’ ‘please’ and ‘thank you’. And right before their eyes their world changed, filled with wonder and beauty and pleasantness and when springtime came, they changed their name to ‘nice’.

Did this change from brute to nice happen suddenly? It seems to me that there were some choices along the way. The choice for little brute to catch that wandering lost good feeling and keep it with him or just let it go. The choice to bring it home and share it with his family. And around the table that night, all of the other brutes pleaded with papa, ‘let’s keep it, can it stay, please?’ (with the it referring to the little good feeling), Papa could have chosen to throw it out the window and go back to his gathering of sticks and stones, but he smiled and said, ‘All right.’

From Brute to Nice, from a life of sticks and stones to the stuff that sustains, from snarls and gripes to please and thank you. There are choices along the way. Choose life!

That was the message of Moses that came from another sermon, the farewell address of Moses to his people; the people that he led and loved, as he spoke to the people to remain faithful, to 'choose life', to choose ways that were life giving.

What does that mean? Last February I preached a sermon on this scripture with the same sermon title, 'choose life'. And I said then that we know that the opposite of life – death, being dead – has so much more meaning than physical death of the body. We can live our days feeling dead inside, maybe weighted down, not feeling connected with anything much that brings us meaning or joy, or being like the brute family, filled with meanness. That same sermon last February referenced the scripture in Matthew when Jesus is in preaching mode, saying 'you have heard it said ____, but I say to you ____, "You have heard it said, this rule and that rule are important' as indeed they are, but I say to you, "Your relationships are important, the way you relate to your brother and your sister, the way you treat them in public and private, that is important. Both scriptures, said last February, are about choices.

Choose life, not choose 'living it up', that very popular and seductive way of finding pleasure in every moment, just doing the fun stuff, making all of my time 'me' time. No, choosing life has something to do with walking in a way that helps one to grow in wisdom and compassion for self and others. Sometimes 'choosing life' is choosing the harder road to take, the road of reconciliation, of bridge building, of being the first to make amends instead of waiting for the other to step forward.

Our little brute family reminded me of that scripture and those words from six months ago. And they are words that continue to ring true today, perhaps even more so.

Choose life. So many choices are around us in these days in which we live. Choices to be the family brute or, as one social media post reminded this week, to "Be nice."

Another post read, "Speak words

Choose life. Choose ways that are life giving not only to yourself but to others and the world. What choices do we have to make in these days? This past week I've sat in meetings with members of our Jewish and our African American communities present. The anxiety and fear in the rooms in which we sat was very high, visible in the strained faces, the lack of sleep. We sat together discussing how we want to continue to build community between us and also, unfortunately, how we want to choose to react if and when hate, that is already here in small pockets, comes to town from the national arena and rears it's ugly head.

We have agreed as faith leaders to begin to spread the message among our communities and to implore our communities to spread the message, to blanket Lexington with the choice of not to engage if any ugly groups come to town. That choice may quite literally be choosing life, no one wants to put people in harms way so as tempting as it may be, stay away, ignore the groups, do not give them the attention and engagement that they want. Instead, find ways to spread good feelings that are wandering around lost these days. Always, always, speak, post, send messages of the goodness that is inside you, the love that is of God that surrounds us, and the hope in the possibility of reconciliation.

There was an article this week written by former white supremacists on what made them give up that message that they were spreading. When we think about it, this isn't surprising but needs to be said as a reminder none the less. It wasn't the ugly words hurled or posted online at them from counter protesters. It wasn't the fist fights or other physical threats or acts. It was the kindness that they saw in the faces of so many, the signs not of hate or insults but the ones with larger messages of love and inclusion and beauty. Almost like a little wandering good feeling that every once in a while one of them was able to catch and hold and have it change their hearts.

Moses stands before his people looking at the promised land and he says to them, "Choose life, loving God and walking in God's way of love and peace and goodness and grace (my paraphrase). Choose life.

You know, those random acts of kindness. Smiling at a stranger. Walking around and thanking our vendor artists for being here and creating such works of beauty for our world. When there is a common gathering to celebrate diversity – and such a common gathering is being planned – show up, show the love and goodwill of this community. Write a note to the temple or the synagogue or one of the many black churches in town expressing your love and support and solidarity.

Another social media post that I read had to do with choices we can make, choosing life, choosing to enrich, to deepen our lives and the world. It reads: Become friends with people who aren't your age. Hang out with people whose first language isn't the same as yours. Get to know someone who doesn't come from your social class. And....I add, encourage your kids (or your parents) to do the same.

We live in such a big, wide beautiful world filled with richness and diversity that is there to feed us and so very often our focus narrows to only see and gather, as Papa Brute did, the sticks and the stones. We as the body of Christ have an amazing gift, an amazing message of an even more amazing God who wants not only for us but for all children, life – abundant life of goodness and wholeness and justice and love. We are called not to live in fear, for God's love casts out fear. We are called to share that love with others, and I do believe that it is only in that sharing that we can live. Choose life.

That little wandering lost good feeling? Look for it. It's around. Catch it and share it with others.

Amen

