

“Choose Life!”

Deuteronomy 30: 15 – 20

Matthew 5: 21 – 37

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What does it mean to you to ‘choose life’? We’ll get back to that question in just a minute.

Today is the third Sunday of sitting with the ‘The Sermon on the Mount’ scriptures. If you were here two weeks ago, you may remember me saying that many times when we hear ‘Sermon on the Mount’ we think of the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and so on. But it’s a sermon covers 3 chapters in the gospel of Matthew. We began with the introduction, the well known ‘Blessed are the’, then moved last week to Jesus’ calling disciples salt and light, a reminder not only of discipleship but of covenant relationship with our God. Two weeks of identity and affirmation and maybe you’ve come in and gotten settled in the pew for more of the same when, all of sudden, our ears prick up as we hear instructions from Jesus on anger, adultery, divorce, swearing. We sit up in attention with thoughts of, “OK, Preacher Jesus, now you’re meddling.”

Jesus, that one who, as theologian Marc Borg writes, is “our window through which we get a glimpse of God”, climbs a mountain, sits down, surrounded by his disciples and others and he begins to preach. “Blessed are you.” “You are salt and light.” And then, “You have heard it said, but I say this.” Four different times in today’s scripture; “You have heard it said, but I say this.” Now it may be easy for us to hear those words and jump to a conclusion that the words and way of Jesus have replaced the scriptures of old, the Old/Hebrew/First Testament scriptures. But let’s remember the words from last week’s reading, words of the gospel writer Matthew right before these ‘meddling words’, that Jesus, the Jew who knew and followed Torah has come to fulfill the scriptures of old, not to replace them. Not to throw them out, but to expand, to give them substance, to bring the reign of God here on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus begins with “You have heard it say, ‘thou shalt not murder’. But I say, if you are angry with a brother or sister, you are liable to judgment.” I don’t think any of us here have committed murder. But being angry with a brother or sister? How many of us have NOT been there? And to not come to the table to receive communion until reconciliation happens? But isn’t the act of coming to the table, receiving bread and cup and God’s grace, isn’t that often the beginning of hearts and eyes being opened to THEN go to one’s brother or sister to try to make amends? Jesus, this isn’t very practical and in fact, it’s downright impossible!

And yet, when we really sit with this passage, the truth begins to unfold. “You have heard it say, thou shalt not murder” but I say, ‘don’t let your anger consume you’. If you are angry, go, speak to your brother or sister, don’t let it get to insults, then to accusing and accused and the courts.” How often does the escalation of anger lead to the death of a relationship? How often does pride take over, and the crack that an angry word caused turn into a chasm that seems impossible to cross?

I'm not sure that these words are meant to read that we are not ever to become angry with one another. That is impossible. But I do think that they are instruction to us after angry words, that we are to offer attempts at reconciliation; not to be ruled by pride and ego but to take a deep breath, pause and find common or higher ground. And the sad thing is, that sometimes that isn't possible, that as much as one reaches out to mend angry words or actions, the other is not accepting. A hard lesson to learn, that we cannot control the response or actions of others.

If we take a long, hard look at each of these added commandments in today's reading, we begin to see a similarity; that they are about relationships. 'You have heard it say, thou shalt not commit adultery' but I say to you, whoever so much as looks at another with lust is in the wrong'. Can we hear this as a way to look at each other, as a way to really see the other, not as an object of sexual gratification but as a person with thoughts and talents and ideas and dreams and abilities, much more than one's outward appearance? That people are not to be treated or even thought of as sex objects but as children of God?

Then Jesus goes on to speak about divorce, a difficult topic if we compare the cultural context of that day to ours. Men had the right to divorce their wives but not the other way around. And reasons did not have to be given. Were the words of Jesus reminding the people not only of the injustice of the system but also to a deepening look at relationship? Perhaps. At the same time, it would be good to remember that this is kingdom talk, that Jesus is calling us into healthy relationship with one another and the reality is that sometimes two people can only be healthy individually if they are no longer in relationship with each other.

Finally, Jesus' words on swearing; not only are we to not swear in public but we are to keep our private life free from swearing. This goes much deeper than the loosely thrown out cuss word of exclamation when we slam our fingers in the door. In our text it relates more to promises; as in 'I swear to you that I will do such and such'. One is to keep one's promises made in private and as much as in public life. There is something about integrity here, that the way we live our public life and private life have to have the same moral code of conduct, the way we treat each other at work and behind closed doors is important.

Ah, Preacher Jesus, you've crossed over into meddling! And the crowds began to grumble, fidget back and forth, reaching in their pockets to take out their cell phones and check the weather forecast.

This is hard stuff! Can we just take a step back and admit that this is hard? But then again, no one said this faith journeying is easy. Freeing? Yes. Grounding? Yes. But easy? Not so much!

So now it might be time to return to that question that has been hanging in the corners of the sanctuary and the corners of our mind. It's a question 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. Let's go back to that question, pull it from the corners of the sanctuary and the corners of our mind out into the forefront, "What does it mean to choose life and how do you do 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. We spend our days just going about routine. Or making choices of instant gratification either in our personal or collective life that may bring about relief for the time being but what about down the road?

What does it mean to choose life?

I put that question to our Wednesday night Dinner church. Some of the answers: Coming here tonight to surround myself with community. Sticking with a project on a bucket list, finally finishing it up. For one person, it is the work that he chooses to do that doesn't pay but helps others and therefore gives him life. And another answered, "Choosing to get up this morning." Sometimes that act of just deciding that yes, even though grief may weigh us down or fear or anxiety, of just deciding to get up and put one foot in front of the other, that is a way of choosing life. To hang on to hope is a way of choosing life.

From Moses's sermon to the sermon clip of Jesus today, are they not both about choosing life? Can we hear the words of Jesus not as rules to be punished by but as guidelines so that we may live lives of deep love and deep joy as God so desires for us? Jesus sits down, turns to the people and says, "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 think of them, treat them in public and in private', that is important as well.

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.

In this anxious and fearful time in our nation, when words of insult and accusation fly easily around social media, if we can just hear these words of Jesus and live them in our daily lives, then perhaps there could be a ripple effect out into the world.

May it be so.