

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“Our Choice: Blessings or Curses”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, February 9, 2020

Matthew 5:21-37

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.” But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open ourselves to the working of your spirit, and I pray that you would take all the words that fill this room, that fill our heads and our hearts and our souls. I pray that you would take the words that we've offered in prayer, in song, the words that we've heard read from the gospel, and from the book of Deuteronomy, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Take all these words, and by the power and mystery of your spirit, speak the word of hope and peace in each of us. Speak the word of grace and redemption. Speak the word of Christ, as each of us have need. May we hear, by the power of your spirit, that word which you have chosen to say to us. In Christ name we pray, Amen.

In the lexicon of great passages and scripture I would place Deuteronomy 30 versus 15 through 20. In it, Moses is speaking at the end of his ministry to the people of Israel just as they stand on the threshold of going through the River of Jordan and entering The Promised Land. The land that they have heard about for so long, since their ancestor Abraham, and then Isaac and Jacob and those that followed have heard God say to them again and again that they will live in a land full of blessing and goodness and peace and harmony. And Moses has led them out of bondage in Egypt, across the water, or through the water, into the desert,

where for 40 years they wondered, wondering if God would be with them. They had the law given to them. They heard about The Commandments. They also were tempted by the golden calf, and they had some issues that came up, and still, God led them all the way to that place where they could look across the river and see God's promise before them. And Moses, their leader through thick and thin, knew that he could not go with them. And so as the final statement, he sort of sets the table for them and invites them to choose life. That before them, as they stand there looking at the land of promise, wondering what's going to be? What's going to happen to us when we finally get there and live there? Moses says, "You've got a choice. You can either embrace and choose life and the blessings that will come from God by obeying God and trusting God and holding fast to God, or you can ignore God. And by doing so, you can choose death and curses, where nothing good will happen. And the blessing that you had hoped God would provide to you would be taken from you. Life or death. Choose life," Moses says. And I think about all the times in my ministry, as people have come and shared whatever the situation is, the joyful opportunities that they faced, the challenges or diagnoses that they face, and I hear the voice of my very first spiritual director speak to me when he said, "David, always choose that which gives you life." I didn't know at the time that it was the voice of Moses. But he was echoing Moses' call. Choose life. And what we hear or what we're taught, is that no matter what situation it is, we can find some goodness in it if we just choose life. But what Moses says, "That if you choose life, you will be blessed." Cut and dry. Black and white. If I just believe, everything will be okay.

But, too many of us know that that's not how life works. We don't just choose God, and then everything works out perfectly just as we had hoped for. The amount of heartache that is in this room is overwhelming. If we were each to list those things that we have confronted or struggled with, or those things that we're ashamed of and that we continue to hide, we know that having faith doesn't guarantee God's blessing, and that everything will work out great. And, so as I spent this week thinking about that good news message of Moses, of choosing life and knowing that things will be good and blessed, as I brought that in conversation with the reality that all of us have situations that make us question our faith, or overwhelm us, or lead us into dark times or times of struggle, what do we do with that power to choose? What's the meaning of our lives when we enter those dark periods, or what the Psalms call the valley of the shadow of death? And I was led to an article that was in The Atlantic magazine from around 2015. The author, Julie Beck, is talking about-- the article is about how every life has a narrative arch. That basically, our lives have meaning because we tell a story about what we face, the situations that we've either struggled with or the blessings that we receive. We're the ones who create a story, and that story has meaning, and it empowers us. It sort of makes us who we are. And in the article, she quotes a professor from Northwestern, who says, "Evolving from the puritans to Ralph Waldo Emerson to Oprah Winfrey, Americans have sought to author their lives as redemptive tales of atonement, emancipation recovery, self-fulfillment, and upward social mobility. The stories speak of heroic individual protagonist, the chosen people like Israel, whose manifest destiny is to make a positive difference in a dangerous world, even when the world does not wish to be redeemed. The redemption story, Beck says, is American optimism. Things will get better. Or as the Israelites here God will bless us. This is also American exceptionalism. I can make things better. It's in the water, in the air, in our heads. This is actually a good thing most of the time.

Studies have said that a positive outlook on life creates a feeling of greater fulfillment for us. We are imbued as Americans with this sense of we can change things and make things better and we're in charge. Another professor says that what happens when that doesn't work. Trouble comes when the redemption story isn't possible. It can be hard to share a story when the story amounts to this happened, it was terrible, the end. As this professor says listeners don't like to hear that kind of story. And we all know this to be true. We all have friends who when the phone rings and we hear who it is, we know what's coming and silently or quietly within us, we kind of groan. Oh, here it comes again. I wish I could say I was immune to that reaction. But every now and then Paula will say to me over the phone, "Hey, so and so's on the phone." And between the time that she says that and she pushes the button to transfer the call, I think to myself, "Oh, no." It's none of you, of course [laughter]. Or it might be, "Oh, no," because the situation that I'm aware you're experiencing is just so hard. But what do we do when the story that we've created seems to not be working anymore--when we choose life but all that comes is curses and destruction and the end of things?

Jonathan Adler, yet another professor, says that in his research, he's noticed that there are two things in everyone's story that correlate to a better sense of well-being. Agency or the feeling like we're in charge or in control of our life - so we have a significant part in it - and communion, that we have a sense that we're not in things alone. So that in the power of the stories that we create about ourselves, if we feel that we have a significant part in what's happening and we feel like we're not alone, we have a deeper and more robust sense of well-being. And then to me, the most important thing that he provides us the insight that a life story is written in chalk, not in ink. And life stories can be changed. You're both the narrator and the main character of your story. And that sometimes can be a revelation. Oh, I'm not just living out this story that God or someone else mandated for me. I'm actually in charge of the story. And as an example, there is a story about a young woman who had made it to med school. She'd

finished her first year, did really well, was looking forward to continuing on to the second year and they said stop and imagine how she would depict her story if someone asked her kind of how did you get here? She may say something like, "Oh, in junior high, I had a wonderful science teacher that introduced me to science and the positive things that could come about it. In high school. I was a part of the biology club and I was with a group of friends and we really loved figuring out how bodies functioned and learning about cells and processes of life. In college, things were great. I had a good group and I majored in chemistry. And then, I got to med school and I did great the first year, and everything's wonderful. And then it says, imagine that in her second year of med school, she realized that she hated medicine, and she dropped out. Would she keep that story and then just add at the end, "Oh, I'm a failure"? No. She'd edit her story. She'd go back and change her history, what she told herself. She'd go back and say, "You know, in biology class in junior high, it was fun. But I realized I did it more to be part of that group. And then, in high school, there was a group of students who got together, and when I think about it, I really was the one in the room who enjoyed the camaraderie more than the biology. And then, in college, I loved my class in French literature, but I knew my parents wouldn't want me to be a literature major, and so I stuck with science. And then, I went to med school and I realized that wasn't for me. And so, courageously, I dropped out and began a new trajectory in my life." Same person, same facts, completely different meaning.

We have the power to choose, to edit, to be creative, to rewrite our own histories. So in a sense, Moses is right. We can choose life. And sometimes that process is by changing our understanding of the facts and what they mean to us. As I was holding all this, I found in my computer a reflection that's probably 20 years old by now. It was written by a young woman who I knew in one of the churches that I served who was at the end of her first marriage. Things were not working out with her husband. She was convinced that she needed to get a divorce. She wasn't sure what the future would hold. She was really in a dark place and hopeless, and this is what she wrote, "A few weeks, I found myself sitting at the chapel in the woods at a conference center. This particular morning, my heart felt empty, heavy, and alone. And it seemed my only companion was the simple wooden cross in front of me. As I sat to pray, it was not long before my soul felt nourished by the shafts of light that poured through the branches, by birds tending to the rhythm of life, and tiny gnats dancing in the sunlight. Peace began to replace the emptiness I felt. And as I looked around, I was invited to see my natural surroundings differently. For some reason, I found myself unexpectedly taken by a dead log that lay in front of me, and I stared deeply into it for a very long time. I noticed it's darkness, it's color and shadows, it's slippery dampness, and I wondered what it might have looked like when it towered in the woods. I'm certain that someone had placed this log intentionally as a place to rest and pray, but it did not serve that purpose for me. Instead, I noticed the presence of fragile new life in the midst of what was undeniably dead on the outside. There was moss growing in bright green clumps, soft and damp, and as I looked deeper, I realized that the log was absolutely filled with fresh, tender shoots of new life. They were everywhere. I just needed to gaze into what appeared to be dead long enough to see. In this moment of grace, I was gently reminded of the essential truth of our faith. Death is not the final answer. Life always finds a way."

"What an amazing image of resurrection in our daily lives. Many of us have fallen logs in our lives, dimensions of our story that we want to forget, hurts that can't be forgiven, shame that can't be named, ambitions that can't be realized, addictions that can't be overcome, marriages that we can't save, children who can't be reached, and secrets that can't be shared. We try to look away, cover it all up with our well-crafted lives. Yet, the dead logs remain, seemingly devoid of life. But I wonder, what if we don't shut our eyes? What if we dare to sit long enough to face the truth of what has died? What if we allow ourselves to sit in stillness at the foot of a wooden cross, with hearts filled with the rush of fear and doubts, and simply wait. Will we too begin to notice the moss of healing growing in the crevices of our pain? Will we begin to see the sprouts of forgiveness break through the cracks of our mistakes? Will we be given eyes to see the leaves of love emerge from the damp wood of our loneliness? Just as the darkness of the forest was necessary for the shaft of lights to come into view, so too will God's light transform the darkness of our lives, allowing us to live and see in a new way. We must place our hope in God's promise and trust that, on the ground of what has died, the tender shoot of life will emerge. And then, perhaps one day, without our even noticing it, we will be astonished to see a strong new tree with roots nourished by the ground of the old decaying log, a canopy filled with lush green branches reaching up to Heaven."

She wrote this in a moment of deep despair and anguish, wondering if her life had a future. A couple years later, I had the privilege of officiating at her second marriage. Amen.