

“Choose Life”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Readings from Scripture: Matthew 5:21-26 and Deuteronomy 30:15-20

‘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.

Matthew 5:21-26

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.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within—our worries, our joys, our concerns, our distractions. I pray that you would take the words that we

have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from the Gospel and from the book of Deuteronomy as well as the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning. Touch, bless and transform all of these words into the living word of Jesus Christ, the word that feeds our faith, nourishes our spirit and guides and invites us into love and service. May this be the word of Christ to each of us. In Jesus' faithful name we pray. Amen.

In case you have missed the point, a little bit, about today's message and I'm going to embody it just a wee bit in my interpretation of it—I've been thinking about this passage as if it were proclaimed to you by a minister wearing a black robe from a pulpit on high. I don't know about you, but every time I start reading the Old Testament, I hear it with a finger being pointed at me and I want to just----- This passage from Deuteronomy is at the end of Moses' life. He has spent 40 years in the wilderness with the people of Israel having gone and confronted Pharaoh and asking him to let my people go. He has ministered to the congregation as they've spent time rejoicing in God's faithfulness and building golden calves. He has spent time with them as they've given thanks for all the provisions that God has provided and he was with them when they said, "Let us go back to bondage in Egypt. At least we could eat there." Moses, who has pastored the congregation that God had given him, is now at the end of his journey with them, just steps from the edge of the river over which lies the promise of God's richest blessing for the people of faith. And I've heard this passage in Deuteronomy proclaimed from Moses as if he had a megaphone and he was addressing the entire people of Israel. *Look, before you today I set life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you do all that God has commanded you, if you love the Lord and walk in God's ways and observe every commandment, decree and ordinance—if you do all those things, then you shall live and be numerous and the Lord God will bless you when you go into that promised place of our ancestors for us and for our future. If you do the right thing, God will bless you and continue to do so. But if you turn away, like I know you have, if you do not hear, as other times in your history you have not heard, if you are led astray to bow down to other gods or golden calves or whatever it is, then I declare to you today that you shall perish. You will not enter the land. You will not be blessed. You will not be numerous. And your life will be short. In fact, I call heaven and earth to stand as witnesses this day, that I have placed before you the choice, life and death, blessings or curses. Choose life, Moses concludes, so that you and your descendants may live, loving God, obeying Him, holding Him fast. This is what it means to have the life of faith. To love God, to obey God's commandments, to stay near to God and God alone. And if you do that, then you will have life and length of days and the land in which you live will be blessed. And the promise that God made to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob will be fulfilled.* If you're good, you are going to be saved, and if you're not, look out!

I spent most of the week in that place, wondering about this profound message at the end of Moses' ministry. One of the things I realized is that we need to remember that Moses is talking to a people who have a lived history. And he is talking to people who know that they are within the covenant of faith. He is talking to people who have made golden calves and remember the stories about that. He is talking to people who have questioned God's blessing and provision, and remember the stories about that. He is also talking to a people who lived in Egypt and were called out of bondage, and remember that. And part of me thinks he is reminding them all to choose life when they go forth into this promised place of blessing. He is their pastor, their shepherd, and he wants the best for them as they transition forward now, for the first time in a long time, without his leadership. Moses wants them to do the right thing.

I really don't like "if-then" theology, especially if it's if you're good you shall be blessed and if not, look out. As I sat with this passage this week, one of the things that came to me is that maybe instead of thinking about Moses with a megaphone on the mountain proclaiming this message to all of

Israel in the last moments, I wondered if it would sound different proclaimed as a father to his daughter who is about to be married.

My beloved Anna, before you today there is life and prosperity and death and adversity. If you trust the promises that God has for you and for all people by loving God and staying in God's ways and observing what God says, then you shall live and be blessed in the future that you are entering into. But if you turn away, you stop hearing and stop trusting and stop listening, if you are led astray to bow down to the demands of your career or to money or to worry or to some foolish endeavor, then you and I both know that the life you have will not be rich. It will feel as if your soul is perishing, that you are not really abiding in a place of joy and peace, just as God has promised all of us. In fact, you and I both know people who have made the choice to live and who have made the choice to die, and before you today is that choice. Life and death, blessings and curses. Please choose life. Please choose life so that you and your children, your offspring, may live loving the Lord your God, trusting God, staying near to God's promises so that the life you live will be rich and your length of days will be long, so that you may abide in the promises that God has for you and for all people, even the promises that God made to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.

When I sat with this text and heard it from that place, it sounded very different to me. It sounded as a kind word given by a loving father to his young daughter who is about to embark on a new stage of her journey. I heard it offered to me as guidance about how to live my life, day in and day out, and the myriad of choices that bombard each of us, realizing that in each choice we have an opportunity to choose life.

Victor Frankl, in his book, Man's Search for Meaning, talks about our human capacity for choice. Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist who went into a concentration camp and survived, cultivated for himself a deep space between all that was happening to him, all the atrocities, all the inhumane activity, all the pain and all the hurt—he cultivated a space between all of that and his response. And he said that the thing that kept him human was his ability to decide how to respond. In a sense, he chose life. Instead of reacting to the stimulants that were around him—those that were negative and atrocious—he chose life. What might your life look like if you have that simple phrase rolling around in your head as you go about your daily business? Choose life.

I am the Moderator of the Personnel Work Group for the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy, which means I had the distinct pleasure in the last year to have fired several staff members of the presbytery, and now I am in a position to hire new people. I have a colleague in my group who this week sent me an email about some resumés and wanted to make sure that we had the right kind of qualifications, and on and on and the email was just sort of all these things and it felt like I was getting the “you gotta do this, do that, do this, do that” and I sat down and wrote the most blistering response to that email. Thankfully I had this text in front of me, and as my finger went to the send button, I heard someone whisper, “Choose life.” And I moved the cursor up to that red dot on the left corner and I punched it and that blistering response – poof! – went away. And then later, about an hour or so after my coffee was gone, I started typing again, my blistering response, because I was still angry, and the same thing happened again—poof! It went away. It's not heaven and earth, it's me but I can tell you she has not gotten a response yet.

We do the same kind of training about cultivating space in our disaster work. We help people who suffered from violence or trauma in their congregational setting realize that what happened out there does not need to control their response, that we have space. We can again and again and again, choose life. And as Christians we must, every day, every time, every situation, choose life, chose

goodness, choose blessing, choose prosperity for others, prosperity of the spirit. We have that choice. But it seems so often that everything is coming at us and demanding us to react instead of respond.

As many of you know, several years ago a group of friends and I started a project to write some curriculum for training for disaster response. Yesterday in the mail, I got a wonderful surprise. A book showed up with my name on it as the author. Years in the making. It was awesome to get, to open up, to see so much hard work finally come to fruition. But having written it years ago, to be honest, much of it I had forgotten what part I had written or where it would be placed. Everything got moved around by the editor. I would like to share the closing words of the book with you today, because by the mystery of the Spirit, it fits with the passage in Deuteronomy. The last section is called, "The Witness Coming to Wisdom".

It seems fitting that the last words be spoken by those who have walked through the fires of violence and trauma and found their way to wisdom. "I continue to move toward greater peacefulness and joy in life and in ministry, what I now call wisdom. The last several years have been hard, especially dealing with the personal trauma of the shooting incident, the vocational trauma the event caused and my sense of purpose and the trajectory of ministry and the weariness I continue to feel at issues that now seem ridiculously unimportant. I continue to work with a counselor, a spiritual director and others in an effort to discern what God is inviting me to be and do. I continue to refine a new sense of normal, one that appropriates the experiences of the past years and looks to the future with hope. I have also come to see life as a gift of the Spirit, the breath of life, and that our invitation is to live the gift, share the gift and enjoy the gift. I have a much deeper appreciation for the limits of life and the awareness that it could all blow away, way before I plan on it ending. There is something both terrifying and liberating about this." And then a poem.

*I, too will die. So now is the time to live.
Now is the time to suffer and love and serve and learn.
Now is the time to laugh and cry and mourn and rejoice.
Now is the time to walk in the woods and splash in a stream and cook dinners with joy.
Now is the time to love well, pay attention, to care for myself and to offer thanks.
Now is the time to live because I, too, will die. I choose life.
I will cherish quiet, cultivate love, pay attention, make fun, eat well, walk slowly,
accept failings, say no, live small, be closer to the ground, learn gently,
offer thanks, recognize distractions, serve others, trust grace, be loved and be as well as I can be.*

I am grateful that we have journeyed this far together. Amen.