

Choose Life

Choose life but prepare to die. Our Old Testament and Gospel readings this morning seem almost diametrically opposed. On the one hand, we have Moses promising life and prosperity to God's people shortly before they enter the Promised Land. On the other, we have Jesus telling those who would follow him into Jerusalem that they must renounce everything that they would understand as prosperity and prepare to follow him to the cruelest most degrading death possible. What does God promise to those who are faithful, life or death? Prosperity or self-denial? Can both of these passages really be part of the Good News? Is it possible that somehow they lead to the same thing?

Deuteronomy 29 and 30 are set near the end of Moses' life. He has led the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt and during their desert wandering for forty years. As they wait on the east side of the Jordan in the land of Moab for God's permission to cross into Canaan, Moses brings them together for a reminder of their history and a renewal of their covenant with God. He tells them that God is faithful to the covenant and that the choice is theirs as to whether they will be faithful, too. Of course, Moses understands full well who he is speaking to—a rebellious and stiff-necked people. He remembers how they lamented after “the flesh pots” of Egypt, how even a known life of slavery seemed preferable to them rather than the unknown of the desert under God's leading. He remembers how they murmured and complained at every turn; how quickly in his absence they reverted to worshipping the idol of the golden calf; how their continued disobedience and lack of faith brought them that forty years of wandering when they could have been already established in the land of milk and honey. They can be a faithless, feckless bunch and Moses knows it all too well.

And so, he reminds them that the choice is theirs. They can follow God, love the Lord with all their hearts and minds and souls and strength and keep God's commandments. If they do, they will be blessed with a fertile land and the peace to cultivate it and to raise their children. If they turn away from God and live as their neighbors do, then their neighbors will overwhelm them and they will find themselves once again slaves to a foreign culture, scattered as exiles. Even then, Moses tells them, God will remain faithful. Even if they turn away from God, they can still turn back. “If you return to the Lord your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you. Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

As we know, Moses was quite right to foresee the Israelites need for repeated forgiveness on God's part. The Children of Israel proved just as difficult to lead for Joshua as they had for Moses. Almost from the first, there were those who ignored the requirements of God. Again and again, the people balked at doing what should be done. Once Joshua was gone, the repeated refrain in the book of Judges is: “Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. All the people did what was right in their own eyes.” The people decided that they were unable to survive under the rule of God and God's appointed leaders and so they begged for kings, who brought them to their greatest prosperity and led them into their destruction and exile. But God

brought back the remnant from Babylon and we celebrate in the person of Christ Jesus the fulfillment of the promise that God gave Abraham, that his offspring would bless all the families of the earth.

Like Moses in Deuteronomy, Jesus is speaking to a large crowd in this morning's passage from Luke. But unlike Moses, Jesus is not trying to mold the crowd into a nation, an effective fighting force, but rather to winnow them immediately into a faithful remnant. On the road to Jerusalem, to the death that he knows is waiting for him there, Jesus doesn't want the following of an army full of Messianic expectation. He has come to show them a better but harder way. He will reject the use of violence in the service of his mission in favor of non-resistance and self-sacrifice.

Also like Moses, Jesus knows his audience. He knows that confronted with the hard choice, most of them will drop away. The apparently insubstantial rewards of the Kingdom of God cannot compete with day-to-day concerns and self-interest. In a passage omitted from the Revised Common Lectionary cycle, Luke relates a parable that Jesus told at the conclusion of his contentious Sabbath dinner at the Pharisee's house: "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

So, at the beginning of our story this morning, we find Jesus all too aware of the shallowness of the commitment of the crowd following him. They follow for the signs, for the healings, for the miraculous feedings, for all of these are in their self-interest. As soon as they see that what they perceive as their interests are not being tended to, they will leave and Jesus knows it. Perhaps he even foresees that a crowd just like this one will turn against him in Jerusalem, clamoring for his coronation on Sunday and in equally strong voice for his execution on Friday. And so he presents them with some outrageous sounding demands to encourage their departure. Hate your family. Give yourself up to demeaning death. To follow me, Jesus says, you must count the cost and the cost may be high indeed.

Jesus' demands are indeed outrageous but it is important to understand both the linguistic and the societal context in which they were made, particularly his words about hating "father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters." The vast majority of commentaries I read on this passage agree that the word translated as "hate" did not carry the same emotional connotations as our word. It is a word that reflects preference not repugnance. The Gospel according to Matthew gives a slightly different remembrance of this statement by Jesus: "Whoever loves father or mother . . . son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." This sense of preference translated by the English word "hate" is found elsewhere in the Scriptures as well. In the Old Testament, it is used

to talk about the preference a man with more than one wife has for one over the other, the most well-known reference being Jacob with Rachel and Leah. For those of you who know the children's literature of Katherine Patterson, Paul's quotation of the prophet Malachi in Romans 9:13 will sound familiar: "Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated." God did not hate Esau in our sense of the word any more than Jacob hated Leah. But the sense of strong preference is there.

Nevertheless, this is still a strong statement by Jesus. To prefer someone else's leading to one's family, to give a cause priority over family was not only practically unheard of in ancient times, it was dangerous. It was the family unit that provided one's identity and one's means of livelihood. There was no separation between business and family in those days—farm families worked together, struggling against the elements to keep food on the table. Craftsmen and merchants were assisted by their wives and their children, who then carried on the family business. In Mark's Gospel, the people of Nazareth refer to Jesus as "the carpenter." In Matthew, he is "the carpenter's son." It is all one. But if family provided stability and security for the individual, family also controlled the individual in ways that 21st Century Americans have largely forgotten. The honoring of father and mother in Jesus' society meant that one's parents held absolute sway over one's life until their death. Choices were not made by individuals for their own good but by the head of the family for the good of the family. For Jesus to suggest that would-be disciples follow him without reference to their family's desires was a radical suggestion.

Jesus, of course, goes farther still. Those who follow him must prefer Jesus over their own life. They must be ready to give up everything they know to walk with him, just as Peter and Andrew, James and John gave up their fishing and Matthew his government post to become wandering learners, preachers and healers under Jesus' leadership. Whoever follows me, Jesus said, must be willing to carry a cross. There was a sense of shame that was attached to leaving one's family in those days but it was nothing compared to the shame of the cross. In a society so built on honor and shame, Jesus is challenging his would-be followers to abandon all of the social mores with which they have been raised. Absolutely nothing can be more important to them than Jesus' teaching and presence. Unlike the invited ones in the parable, they must give priority to dining with, listening to, following their Master. Whatever desires they may have in life must be left behind and replaced by the new way. All relationship and possessions are forfeit to the Kingdom of God.

Choose life, says Moses, be faithful to God and you will be blessed. Prepare to die, says Jesus, follow me in faithfulness to God and be prepared to give up everything. How in the world do we harmonize two such disparate statements about how we are to live in a God-honoring way? In many ways, our problem is the same as that of the Israelites after Moses. We do not know how to choose life. Despite what are often the very best intentions, we choose the things that look like life but are not life at all. The Israelites chose false gods, idols of fertility and prosperity. They put their trust in kings and armies, only to find they could not compete against the larger, better armed nations. They put their faith in their solemn rituals, mandated by that same Moses, but as the prophets warned them, ritual without justice is as meaningless as the repeated cry, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" Neither impresses God.

In fact, the things that look like life to our culture so often lead to spiritual death, while the things that our culture despises can lead to life. Giving up possessions looks like death to our culture. To have more and more and more is our culture's definition of life. As I walk around our city on my campaign business, I see many large and lovely houses, most of them with two-car garages. But I rarely see cars inside those garages. Usually they are in the driveway or on the street. Why? Because the garages have become repositories for excess possessions—things that are not needed for daily life but which their owners cannot bear to let go, things for which there is no room in the house. More and more, I even see PODS—Portable On-Demand Storage—small cargo containers parked in yards and driveways because not even the garages can hold all the household's possessions. Is it life to be so captive to one's possessions that one cannot house them all? Is this the modern equivalent of tearing down one's barns to build bigger ones, as the foolish rich man did in Jesus' parable?

On the other hand, a life of self-giving looks like death to the world yet proves to be the key to fulfilled life to those who experience it. In Saturday's Seattle Times, there was an article reprinted from the Chicago Tribune. It concerned *Focolare*, a Catholic lay movement which calls for communal living, service to the community and interfaith outreach. Single members live together, in celibacy, in single-sex communities. The article spoke of the fulfillment they find in their communal living and in their jobs and community work. They have made a hard choice, choosing to leave behind what most would see as necessary for modern life—dating, possessions—but they have found a greater good. Sometimes, the choice is made harder by those who love them. One member reported, "My brother said, 'You're abandoning your family.'" After seeing the difference it made in his life, though, his family now supports his decision. To prefer following God to following family expectations can lead to a richer relationship with family.

I also read this week a story about a recruiter for Teach America, the program to which our own Meggie Lavelle has applied. Former Duke University chaplain William Willimon told the story this way: "This recruiter from Teach America looked out on a crowd of Duke students. She began by saying, 'I don't really know why I am here tonight. I can tell just by looking at you that you are probably uninterested in what I have to say. This is one of the best universities in America. You are all successful. That is why you are here, to become an even greater success on Madison Avenue, or Wall Street, or in Law School. And here I stand, trying to recruit some people for the most difficult job you will ever have in your life. I'm out looking for people who want to go into a burned out classroom in Watts and teach Biology. I'm looking for somebody to go into a little one-room school house in West Virginia and teach kids from six years to thirteen years old how to read. We had three teachers killed last year in their classrooms! And I can tell, just by looking at you, that none of you want to throw away your lives on anything like that. On the other hand, if by chance there is somebody here who may be interested, I've got these brochures and I am going to leave them down here and will be glad to speak to anybody who is interested. The meeting is over.'" With that," Willimon writes, "all of the students jumped up, rushed into the aisles, rushed down to the front, starting fighting over her pamphlets, just dying to apply for Teach America." Those students were choosing the death of their almost-certain early success in business to serve those whom Jesus called "the least of these." They might not have been carrying what some Christians would understand as "The Good News" but they were certainly ready to help set the oppressed at liberty through better education and hope for the future. Their families may have been disappointed in their choice but through their willingness to serve, they were inviting

Choose Life

today's equivalent of "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" to the table of society's banquet. I think Jesus would recognize their spirit and approve. Sometimes the hard choice is the best choice.

Of course, we don't always have what it takes to make the hard choice. Or we may confuse the easy choice with choosing life. The people of Israel took the easy way out again and again. The multitudes that were following Jesus prior to his challenge faded away. We may look at the cross and shudder. We may say, "God, I'm not ready to give up certain things to follow you. I can't disappoint my family to pursue what I know in my heart is right." Sometimes, being a true disciple of Jesus is harder than we can bear. Sometimes, we are too frightened or too confused to choose life. But now, hear the Good News. Our God is loving and forgiving. God's love is faithful and God's mercies are new every morning. Just as Moses said, "If you return to the Lord your God, then the Lord your God will have compassion on you." Luke records that not long after Jesus challenged the multitude who followed him, he told the story of a man with two sons. The younger son demanded his inheritance and left home, only to lose everything in a series of choices that must have looked like life to him, but were death instead. Ashamed, he crept back to his father's house, determined to take the place of a slave where once he had been an heir. "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." That is the kind of family that Jesus calls us to—a family of unconditional love; a family where we are always welcomed back, no matter what we may have done; a family that will be ours for all of this life and into whatever lies beyond. For the love of that family, that Father, thanks be to God.