

*Preached by Youth Minister, Alicia Becker, Sunday, February 16, 2014.*

## **LIFE, FAITH, DISCIPLESHIP, AND RECONCILIATION**

### **Epiphany 6 – Cycle A**

#### **Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37**

It strikes me often as I read through the Gospels that Jesus must have walked through much of his ministry with an inner smirk. Walking amidst the law givers, the law keepers and the stringent law followers, so much of Jesus' ministry was about tilting the rule book, changing the context and helping his followers understand the heart of the law rather than the rule of it.

Today's Gospel comes from the Sermon on the Mount, a famously subversive passage that captures the law and infuses it with new life.

The Old Testament Reading today comes from Deuteronomy. Moses engages the people of Israel in a Covenant renewal ceremony as they prepare to enter the promised land. Moses speaks to the masses in his third and final address knowing that the individuals he speaks to are consumed by a longing to be restored to the promised land their ancestors once inhabited. Moses provides a reminder to God's people that following God's laws and keeping the covenant are necessary to live peaceably in the land. This of course, is tied to a reminder that their current status is a consequence of their disobedience.

Moses' call to the people of God comes in the form of a line drawn in the sand, choose life or choose death, nothing lies between the two. To us, in our postmodern context, this sounds like a challenge – a threat. Break a rule and be punished, we might read. But to the people of God who heard these words spoken in Moses' time, these words were meant to sound as a gift. As we remove our lenses of challenge, perhaps we hear the words the same way.

However we hear the words, one thing is certain: heavily steeped in each of our readings today is choice – a choice for life, a choice for the law, and a choice to live differently.

While I attended Bible college, I heard the words "choose" and "choice" often. When did you "choose" to follow Jesus? When did you make a "choice" for Christ? These questions always left me with a bad taste in my mouth. As a baptized, confirmed, lifelong Lutheran, I was unfamiliar with the "one shot" choice to follow God, and even when I tried it on for size, responding to this call or that call, I realized one thing: my life had been steeped with opportunities to choose; and good, bad, or otherwise, I made choices every day that either put me in line with the life God called me to or took me right off the path.

In my mind, the thing about one choice that always left me high and dry was a lack of accountability: the option to make one other choice and take myself right away from a life of faith, and the variable of the fleeting nature of my own desires.

In a moment when I felt incredibly passionate about God, maybe singing a worship song or hearing a great sermon, I might respond positively to God's message. But the next day when I felt like the music was terrible and the message lacked grounding or charisma, I might choose something different. What did that mean for my faith? If I could choose one day to follow Christ, could I just change my mind and face death?

I think if Jesus were standing in the halls of great evangelical centres of worship he might have something to say to the doctrine of one choice. He would say it with a smirk of course.

So what does this passage in Deuteronomy really mean as it calls us to choose life or death?

In a conversation with a great theologian on the entrance to the 7/8 West here in town we talked about the altar call concept of faith. I'm sure I raved against the concept wildly, or shared my thought of its fleeting fruitlessness. He shared, "we do altar calls too." It was a different altar call we spoke of then. The call comes every Sunday morning at Christ Lutheran as we gather at the table. As we hear the call, "Come for the banquet is ready" we respond, "thanks be to God" and with our bodies move to the altar and receive the refreshing and renewing body and blood of Christ. We are called, not once, but every week to renew our commitment, to be refreshed for our call, and then sent out into the world to choose every day how we enact that call.

The choice for life is not necessarily the choice for our own life. I hear the passage of life versus death as a call to heaven or to hell; but to hear the words of Jesus as he illuminates the law we are called to follow, I *know* that life versus death is *more* than an afterlife thought.

Jesus illuminates the laws laid out in the Torah in the Gospel we read today. We are called to reconcile – to forgive and be active in seeking forgiveness, to honour and not shame those whom we partner with in this world, and to provide the life giving gift of our honesty and integrity to the world around us. A choice for life is not a choice we make once, but a choice we make every day.

Did you come to worship with a heavy heart, unable to forgive a debt done to you by a family member or friend? CHOOSE LIFE – get out of here, reconcile.

Did you act out of spite and commit adultery with the goal of shaming someone who has wronged you? The Jewish culture of shame and honour was unlike anything we experience today, but Jesus calls those law givers, law keepers and law abiders to CHOOSE LIFE – be active in honouring rather than shaming out of spite to honour yourself.

Do you need to swear on God's name rather than rely on your own integrity? CHOOSE LIFE – be honest in all of your transactions, beyond reproach, above the bar, live an honourable and respected life and GIVE LIFE to those around you.

A life of discipleship calls us to choose. The law is there to provide us a path and some guidelines, but our choices are about more than just the law. Our choices are about who we are every day as we walk out our life of faith.

One of my favourite literary characters is J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter. Whatever you may believe about the books, he is an incredibly well written character and his story is an incredible saga. I was challenged recently by one of our youth who shared her own thoughts on Harry Potter: "I don't like him. He's so weak!" As I reflected through the continued conversation, I realized that Potter really is a bit of a whiner. His growth as a character truly comes from those he surrounds himself with. His close friends who support him through several seemingly impossible situations, his mentors – who, however bizarre they may seem, always show the way of truth and love in the face of incredible evil. Early on in the series, one of Harry's mentors, his headmaster Albus Dumbledore challenges Harry as he faces yet another challenge, he says, "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

We at Christ Lutheran have made some powerful choices in our life together. This past year we made the choice to host a community barbecue, welcoming our friends, our neighbours, our partners in ministry to come and spend time together outside of any hidden agendas, fundraising goals or pursuit of more members. The choice to welcome was a choice for life for so many people in our community and our congregation. Several years ago, we chose to continue to provide after-school care for the dozens of families who would be without options, a choice outside of any need to make a profit or grow our congregation. We chose to plant a community garden and invite members of our wider community to use our land to improve their lives, without the need to make a profit or gather followers. The number of groups and committees within our congregation that choose life every day is incredible. We are a congregation who loves and cares without asking for anything in return. We are a congregation of individuals who make a conscious choice to choose life EVERY DAY.

Like Potter, we are surrounded by those who would encourage, uplift and support us through any challenge in our lives. Choosing life, of course, is not about choosing the easy way. Most often it is the way of challenge. But it is always easier to make the hard choices, the choices for life, when we live in the strength of our community.

That's why at the crux of all of these choices, I believe, God calls us into relationship – with God and with one another. As we read through the passage from Matthew we hear the words of Jesus (smirking again), as he shares the greatest commandment with those who would challenge his teaching. In Matthew 22: 37 Jesus begins with something that is familiar to his listeners, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And then without skipping a beat illuminates this passage by sharing one more like it, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

God calls us to relationship. God has ALWAYS been calling us to relationship. In the garden, in covenant relationships with the people of Israel, in His own Son, God calls us to relationship. We hear it again in the words of our Corinthians passage, "For we are God's servants, working together."

Life, Faith, Discipleship and Reconciliation can all happen in some form individually, and the choices we make are our own, DAILY. But God's call to life is a life that involves more than just you, more than just me making one choice, one time. God's call to life is a call to relationship and sharing the life-giving message of peace, love, hope and justice with our world.

God's plans for our life together are big. The people we encounter, the opportunities we meet, are part of our call to *give* life. As we approach the altar each week, we are called. As we approach the door to leave, we are called, and as we approach each day we live, we are called.

May God's deep love, strength and grace live in us and through us as we respond to God's call and as we give life in each choice we make.

May we choose life. Amen.