

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, February 12, 2017

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.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Matthew 5:21-37

[Jesus said:] "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; 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."

Let us pray...Amen.

By any definition, today's scripture readings are a challenge. A challenge to read, and very difficult to interpret.

And while I will concentrate mostly on our gospel lesson from Matthew today, our Hebrew scripture sets the tone, or the parameters of our conversation by establishing that God expects God's children to abide by the sacred rules. Rules that God set forth for humanity in multiple covenants with Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, David, and ultimately, Jesus.

Like all good covenants, the limits of the agreement are set forth, consequences are described should the agreement be broken. But the most important thing in the Deuteronomy passage is the element of choice: this covenant between God and God's children reads like an agreement between equals. Both parties have a choice whether to follow the agreement or not. Of course, God is really the more powerful of the two parties, we all know that, but I find it interesting that all along, since the first covenant with Adam and Eve, God has allowed humanity a choice, freedom to follow or break the laws and rules set forth.

God uses language that is symbolic and intense, characterizing the consequences of breaking the law as death and adversity. Obviously, God did not mean a literal death, as there were plenty of people of Israel who were unfaithful to these laws who did not die. They did, however, suffer the metaphorical consequences of death and adversity, meaning they reaped what they sowed, they got the symbolic version of death and adversity in their lives.

It's always good to stop and pause for a moment when we transition to the Christian scriptures, because we sometimes forget that the God of the Old Testament is very different from the God of the New Testament: Jesus is the embodiment of God's change of heart, from a punishing and vengeful God to a forgiving and healing God. And that means we need to interpret both our Hebrew Scriptures and our Christian Scriptures through the lens of history, and through the new covenant in the Christ's body and blood, broken and shed for each of us.

So the death and adversity God speaks of in Deuteronomy is a symbolic death and adversity. And frankly, don't the people who commit serious

crimes live a type of life that is like a death, don't they experience a certain type of adversity without God in their lives? This passage is not referring to those who follow other religions or faiths, this is specific to those who profess to follow the God we worship, but who choose not to keep the laws set forth in God's sacred covenant. All is not lost for them, however, because Jesus came among us to save us from our sins, to forgive us our trespasses.

In our Matthew passage, Jesus is addressing the modern issues of his day in relationship to the laws God set forth in the covenant.

Murder, adultery, divorce, and the swearing of oaths were the things Matthew felt needed to be addressed. Jesus points out that everybody knows the law, everybody knows what the consequences are if one breaks the law.

But he wants the faithful to know that he expects more from them. He wants the faithful, meaning us, to understand that it's not enough to follow the rules God has set forth, we now must understand and obey the rules from a deeper, more profound relationship with Jesus: holding a grudge is as serious as taking a life. Thinking about another person's spouse is as serious as having an affair. Marrying a divorced person is as serious as being divorced yourself. Swearing an oath on anything is as serious as swearing by God. These were the issues of that day. They may or may not be the issues of *our* day. But again, the operating principle here is that people of faith who follow Jesus *have a choice*.

In the 2017 years since Jesus rose from the dead, humanity has evolved a bit. Murder is still against the sacred law, and civil law. Adultery is still frowned upon, though tolerated by popular culture, divorce is allowed and happens in half of all marriages in our culture, and people swear all the time. So 3 out of 4 issues important in Matthew's time have become less important today.

But relationships are still the cornerstone of our faith. Removing the grudges that we cultivate, keeping true to our spouses in thought and

deed, and not swearing an oath to anything can only lead to improved relationships with God and with those around us.

But what are the modern issues we face in connection with our faith?

Do our faith communities provide meaningful help to others besides ourselves? Are we encouraging those who represent us in government to practice compassion and tolerance towards those who cannot care for themselves? Are we practicing our faith so that our beliefs are clear to those around us? Can our neighbors and friends tell that we are Christian by the way we behave?

With Jesus by our side, we can take all the risks we need in order to go the extra mile with God's laws. And that is what Jesus is calling us to do: to choose the way of life, but not only complying with the spirit of God's sacred law, but by symbolically going even further to protect the relationships around us by practicing our faith.

If there is a disconnect between what we know to be right and true about the Christ's expectations of our behavior toward the world, and toward each other, then we aren't choosing life.

If we aren't going the extra mile in the way we practice our faith, then we are choosing the death and adversity mentioned in Deuteronomy. Symbolically, of course, but a choice nonetheless.

And most of the culture around the world chooses death and adversity. Very few cultures are choosing spiritual life and prosperity. We have a choice. Every day, when we wake from our slumber, we can choose to live our faith or we can choose to spurn our faith. From the very beginning, God defined our relationship with the sacred as being based on choice. Free will. It has to be our *choice* to live out our faith, or else we're simply robots following program that can't be altered. We have to choose spiritual life and prosperity *over* death and adversity, and sacrifice whatever we must in order to follow Jesus.

And if we can't do that today, and we ask for forgiveness, then we can try again tomorrow. Because Jesus and God forgives us in the hopes that we will grow and mature, and change our ways.

The things that were important to Matthew at the time that he wrote his gospel may not be the things that are important now. That road map may no longer be relevant to our journeys. But Jesus makes those concerns timeless by showing us the spiritual foundation upon which they were built, helping us see the bigger picture, helping us put those ancient laws into a personal perspective.

What hasn't changed in all this time is that you and I have a choice to make. A symbolic and literal choice to either live our faith or not. To apply the sacred laws and all that goes with them in our personal lives, or not. To follow Jesus on his way, or not.

The consequences are not so much a literal death, but an adversity that just might seem like death. Or a spiritual prosperity that has little to do with money, but a lot to do with love, forgiveness, compassion, integrity, sacrifice, and patience.

We woke up to a brand new day: God and Jesus hope we choose the life that really is life. Amen.