

## **CHOOSE LIFE!**

**Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; Matthew 5: 21-37**

Sometimes when using the Lectionary Scriptures for a Sunday, I am not always clear how the suggested Old Testament and the New Testament passages connect. Often, they do not seem very compatible.

Today, however, they fit like a glove. The Old Testament leads directly into the New Testament. The Old Testament, I think, provides the foundational piece for the sermon and the New Testament provides practical applications of living out the Old Testament foundation.

In the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 30, we see the Israelites are getting close to the Promised land. Moses has led them for 40

years in the wilderness and they are about to cross over into the Promised Land.

Before they do that, he is challenging them to put up or shut up. He is saying we are at a crossroads. We are at a moment of decision. What we decide will direct our future. What we come up with will direct our next steps.

It's always a bit scary when you are at a crossroads in life. Some people call it liminal space. It's as if you are standing on a threshold and you have several directions you can take. You can go right or go left or... You cannot go back, only forward, and there you stand.

It happens all the time in life. Shall I take that job or shall I keep the one I have? Shall I move to be closer to my children as I age or stay here with friends? I need assistance more

these days and think about leaving my home for a retirement home. I talked with my financial advisor and wonder what to do about my investments.

We stand on that threshold, that liminal space, ready to make a decision. What will we choose?

That was the case with the Israelite people. And Moses put it to them rather directly in verse 15:

*“See, I put before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.”*

You have to decide, Moses declared. You have two choices. Make up your mind! For entertainment, I watch the Judge Judy program. It is amazing how many relatives sue each other. Or how many “friends” sue a “former friend” in court. Judge Judy is rather

clever about asking questions. And often she declares when someone starts telling a story about their case, “That is a yes or no answer!” she cuts them off and forces an answer.

Just like Moses. He had dealt with these folks for all these years through all kinds of problems. Now that we are getting close to the Promised Land, it is time to fish or cut bait. Choose either life and prosperity or choose death and adversity.

He provides for them the arguments on both sides:

Follow the commandments of God

Walk in God’s ways

Love the Lord your God

And then you shall live and become numerous. God will bless the land to which we are entering to possess.

OR

Be led stray to bow down to other gods.

Serve other gods.

Turn your heart away and not listen

THEN, you will perish. You will not live long in the land to which we are headed.

It's your choice. So Moses serves it up with this imperative: CHOOSE LIFE so you may live

Loving God

Obeying God

Holding fast to God

Then you can live fully in the land that God swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Sounds rather simple: Choose Life. Everything is taken care of. Follow the

commandments and you shall prosper. Love God and neighbor and all will be wonderful.

Well, for me, the struggle is how do you define Life? How do you define what Choose Life means? We probably would end up with as many definitions of Choose Life as there are people here. So, what does one do?

That is where the Matthew passage is so helpful. That is where Choosing Life is spelled out rather clearly. That is where we get some real insights into what real life is all about.

When we talking about choosing life, we are talking about ethics. We are talking about our behaviors. And if we are not careful, we could boil down our behaviors/ethics to following certain rules and regulations. We could find ourselves keeping the commandments and making sure we follow

them to the letter. Yet Jesus goes beyond following rules and regulations.

In Matthew 5, Jesus make this statement several times: “You have heard that it was said...” then, “But I say to you...”

It is called the Antithesis. That is, he quotes an Old Testament commandment or law and then he redefines its meaning. He is trying to move us from the external behaviors we exert following the commandment back to the intent in our hearts and minds. He is pushing for more of “WHY” we do something rather than WHAT we do.

And the reason for this is because we could declare we never murdered someone and therefore are innocent. We never committed physical adultery and therefore are blameless. We bring our offering every Sunday and tithe

our income so we have satisfied the law of the church. We have never divorced our wife and therefore are innocent.

Remember the Rich Young Ruler? He was ecstatic that he had kept all the commandments. He had fulfilled all the law, so he thought. And yet, he lacked one thing: go, sell all you have and give to the poor. Then, Jesus declared, come follow me.

We build up ourselves because we stay in the speed limit on the highways. We stop at all stop signs. We keep all the laws. We are fulfilled. And we are choosing life!

OR ARE WE? Is life about keeping all the rules? Is life about being the model citizen everyone admires? Is life about doing everything right in the eyes of others so they respect or like me? Or is there more?

Jesus in Matthew 5 suggests there is more. Let's look at them some more.

You shall not murder. Yet how often are we stabbing people in the back with our comments about them to other people? How often do we disregard people as people because we do not like them or are prejudiced against them? How often are we disdainful toward those of a different sexual orientation are we? No, we never murdered someone physically or literally. But we never enabled them to live fully so their life was meaningful.

We come tooling into church on Sunday and make our offering. We are rather proud of how much we give. And we want others to recognize our faithfulness and piety.

Yet there is that church member I cannot tolerate who is a burr in my saddle. The

church member sits all prim and proper on the other pew. They are going to get their come uppends we believe because of their false piety and arrogance.

Jesus declare forget that offering you bring. Forget the position you hold in the church or in the PW or in the choir. That is nothing. You got work to do and need to go and be reconciled to that person so your gift is one given genuinely and without malice.

Remember Jimmy Carter? I think he is my favorite President because I was serving a church in Southwest Georgia in my first pastorate. On election day in 1976, I drove over to Plains, Georgia, so I could say I was there in case he got elected.

With all due respect, Plains, Georgia, ain't much. I don't think they had a stoplight

or even a blinking light when I was there.

Jimmy because famous over lusting after a woman and committing adultery in his heart. (as an aside, Jimmy is not a real Baptist. He is much closer to being Presbyterian, I think, but in Southwest Georgia, there are more Baptists than people. So, he had little choice!)

The issue is not about physical adultery. The issue is about looking at another person and viewing them as an object. As being someone you would take advantage of because of beauty or looks. It is not about seeing the person as a human being, but someone to be used for one's enjoyment.

Jesus talks about divorce. In that day divorce was a big issue with one group of Jews being more lenient about it and another group was stricter. Again, the issue is about promises

made and a covenant created between two people. Do you violate those vows because things might not be suitable for you? Or do you honor the vows and work hard about the relationship to see if there is possibility or not.

Finally, making vows and declaring where you stand. Being politically correct then was a big issue like it is now. Do we say things to please people so they will like us? Do we go along with the crowd to avoid conflicts? Do we swear on our parent's grave we are telling the truth when we are not?

No, just make your Yes, Yes and your No, No. One need not be haughty about declaring where you stand on an issue. Just be honest, humble, and even open to being wrong.

Jesus is really declaring what it means to Choose Life! Choosing life means we are clear

about our motivation and our intentions. It is not about our external behavior as much as it is about our attitudes and motives that generate those behaviors. Are we living out of love and compassion **OR** are we just trying to stay ahead of others and do what we think is “right?”

Do we always have to be seen as being right or are we more concerned about our motives and reasons of why we behave as we do?

Choosing life is not about what we do “out there” but about what happens “in here.” And the value of being clear why we do what we do relieves stress, keeps our blood pressure down, and enables us to be content people filled with God’s love. If that is not real life,

what is? What more could one want on this earth?

Choose Life! Live full, freely, completely. There is nothing better!

## Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

**15** See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

**16** 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.

**17** But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them,

**18** 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.

**19** 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,

**20** 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.

## MATTHEW 5: 21-37

**21** "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'

**22** 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.

**23** So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, **24** leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. **25** 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. **26** Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

**27** "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

**28** But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. **29** 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. **30** 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. **31** "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

**32** 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.

**33** "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.' **34** But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, **35** or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

**36** And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

**37** Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.