

Choose Life!

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 & Matthew 5:21-37
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
February 12, 2017 — 6th Sunday after Epiphany
Pastor Tom Thews

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (NIV)

¹⁵ See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶ For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰ and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Matthew 5:21-37 (NIV)

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body 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 part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

³³“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Choose Life!

The ability to make concise and accurate decisions is one of the great secrets of successful living. Those of you who are sports fans will appreciate the story of a college football team whose starting quarterback was injured. The number two quarterback had not even dressed out due to illness. This left only a freshman quarterback who also did their punting, but had absolutely no game experience as a college quarterback. The coach, however, had to throw him into the fray.

It was first down, but the ball was resting on their own three yard line. The coach’s main thought was to get them away from the goal line so they would have room to punt out of danger. The coach said, “Son, I want you to hand-off to Jones, our big fullback for the next two plays, let him run into the middle of the line and get us a few yards. Then I want you to punt.”

The young quarterback did as he was instructed. On the first play he handed off to Jones, but almost miraculously Jones found a hole off tackle and ran fifty yards. The young quarterback called the same play again and once more, miracle of miracles, the hole was there again. This time Jones ran forty five yards. The fans were going crazy. The ball was on the opponent’s two yard line — just six short feet from the goal line.

Confidently the team lined up quickly and the young quarterback received the snap, stepped back and punted the football into the stands. As the team came off the field, the coach angrily grabbed the young quarterback and asked, “What in the world were you thinking about when you called that last play?” The quarterback answered blankly, “I was thinking what a dumb coach we have.”

Well, at least that young quarterback was good at taking orders. The truth of the matter is that many coaches today do not want their quarterbacks making decisions. Even in the NFL few quarterbacks call their own plays. The plays are sent in from the bench.

Now obviously we are not here this morning to talk football. But there is an important point here we need to see about our relationship with God. God has paid us the ultimate compliment.

GOD ALLOWS US TO CALL OUR OWN PLAYS.

God allows us to make our own decisions. When He created us in His own image, this was primary among the characteristics with which God endowed us — the ability to choose.

In the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed to sustain their life. But in the middle of the garden He planted a tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The moment

God did that, He provided them with an opportunity to make a choice. They could heed God's instructions and live forever in Paradise, or they could eat of the forbidden fruit and die.

What an absurd choice, you say. Who would ever choose death over life? Yet people make that same choice all the time. It was 50 years ago when the following notice first appeared on cigarette pack — Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous To Your Health. It marked a turning point in our society. Suddenly we had to face the fact that the link between tobacco and lung cancer as well as heart disease, high blood pressure and a host of other diseases was scientifically established.

Did people quit smoking tobacco when that warning appeared? Millions did, but for many others the habit was too well established. Why would anyone ever choose to begin to smoke? Why choose death when you can choose life? Yet there are teenagers this year who will still choose to take up this deadly habit, though, fortunately, not nearly as many as when most of us were young. In that respect, teenagers are a lot smarter today than we were.

There is not a person in this room who is not aware of the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse, yet there are people within the sound of my voice, who would rather listen to the serpent saying, "Why, that won't happen to you" then to listen to the voice of reason or of God.

Unfortunately, it is not only ourselves whom we sometimes hurt through the misuse of our freedom to choose. There are people who treasure their marriages, but they are morally weak. They would not want to hurt their spouses for anything in the world, yet they are playing with fire — choosing, perhaps, the death of a very precious marriage relationship because of a moral weakness.

Many more examples could be used. Some of us face a choice every day with a variety of unhealthy habits. Who in the world would choose death over life? Millions of people do it every day.

That was as true three thousand years ago as it is today. So it was with great urgency that Moses called the people of Israel together and issued this earnest plea: "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him. For the Lord is your life, and He will give you many years in the land He swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

ONE OF THE KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL CHRISTIAN LIVING IS THE REALIZATION THAT GOD HAS GIVEN US THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE OUR OWN DESTINIES.

A social worker in San Jose, California tells of knocking at the door of a decrepit house. A woman opened the door a crack, put her foot against it and said through the opening: "You needn't come in here. Me and my husband don't take no interest in nothin'." What a pitiful description of persons who have given up control of their lives. "We don't take no interest in nothin'."

Bishop Will Willimon tells of seeing a movie years ago in which one of the leading players lived a tragic life, careening from one disaster to the next, never able to hold a job or support a family or keep friends. He finally dies in a tavern brawl.

At his death, one of the men who had tried in vain to befriend him and help him get his life in order says, “Joe died almost like he was born. He came into this world kicking and screaming and fighting and understanding nothin’! And he went out of this world fighting without the slightest notion of what he was put here for or where he was goin’.” A pitiful record of another life out of control.

God has given us the ability to take control of our own lives. We can choose our own destinies. Every study of great leaders has emphasized their decisiveness. They knew where they were going, and they made the decisions necessary to get there.

A cartoon in the newspapers called Berry’s World says it well. It shows a picture of a down-and-out vagrant sitting on a sidewalk. Beside him is a large sign that reads like this, “Keeping my options open. Thank you.” It would be nice to go through life always with our options open, but somewhere along the way we have to make some hard choices.

Some of you may remember one of Uncle Remus’ delightful stories about Brer Rabbit. In this story Brer Rabbit is invited to dinner on the same evening at the same hour at Brer Terrapin’s and Brer Possum’s. There he stands hungrily at the crossroads, “Do I eat with Brer Terrapin or do I eat with Brer Possum?”

First he runs down the road toward Brer Possum’s. Then, changing his mind, he reverses himself and starts towards Brer Terrapin’s. Then he changes his mind again and starts towards Brer Possum’s. With the thought of two meals awaiting him, he runs back and forth, unable to make a decision until finally he misses dinner at both places.

There are many persons who live their lives like Brer Rabbit. There is no firm destination for their lives, no vital commitment, no beckoning call. In the words of Elijah, “How long will you limp between two opinions? (I Kings 18:21).” Or in the words of Joshua: “But if you are unwilling to obey the Lord, then decide today whom you will obey... (Joshua 24:15, Living Bible).”

One of the keys to successful living is the realization that God has given us the freedom to choose our own destinies. This brings us to the second point and it is a hard one.

WHILE WE ARE FREE TO MAKE OUR OWN CHOICES, WE DO HAVE TO LIVE WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF THOSE CHOICES. IF WE ABUSE THE FREEDOM WE HAVE, WE PAY THE PRICE.

You may know the story of a man who had been caught driving 40 miles per hour in a school zone. He was fined \$200. The clerk offered him a receipt when he paid his fine. “Why would I want a receipt

for a traffic violation?” the man growled. “Oh,” the clerk replied, “with four of these you get a bicycle to ride.” That’s a sad truth about life. You do the crime, you do the time.

Pastor Ed Sasnett tells about a family of six named Ferguson of Laguna Hills, California that took a trip of a lifetime several years ago. It was a 10-day cruise on Royal Caribbean’s Legend of the Seas from Ensenada, Mexico to Hilo, Hawaii. But halfway through the cruise the ship came to a sudden halt. The reason? It was the Ferguson’s youngest daughter, 20-year-old, Kelly.

Kelly was homesick for her boyfriend back in California. She wanted to go back home instead of going through with the family vacation. So, she decided to leave a couple of fake terrorist threats in one of the women’s restrooms in hopes it that one of the ship’s stewards would find them and the ship would return home. One of the notes said, “I have been sent on a mission to kill all Americanos aboard Legend if we port on American soil.”

Someone found the notes and the ship dropped anchor in waters off Oahu. There the ship was boarded by the FBI, 120 members of the Hawaii Joint Terrorism Task Force and the Coast Guard. An intense search ensued for biological, chemical and explosive weapons aboard the ship as well as an interrogation of all crewmembers and 2400 passengers. It cost the Coast Guard alone \$336,000.

Kelly Ferguson was quickly singled out as the source of the notes. She was indicted by a Federal Grand Jury, under the USA Patriot Act, with two counts of threatening acts of terrorism — each count punishable by a maximum of 20 years imprisonment. Ultimately, in 2003 she was sentenced to the minimum possible under the law — two years in federal prison with no chance of early release.

Do you think that young woman ever thought her determination to go back home to her boyfriend would ever result in such a massive mess? Probably not. So many of the trials and tribulations of life are the result of bad decisions, unworthy actions, dishonest motives and means. And there is a price to be paid.

God forgives us for our misdeeds, but God does not suspend the law of consequences. What we sow, we reap. We have the freedom to choose, but with that freedom goes the responsibility to choose life and not death.

This brings us to the final thing to be said.

THERE IS ONE CHOICE THAT SURPASSES ALL OTHERS IN IMPORTANCE. THAT, OF COURSE, IS THE DECISION TO CHOOSE CHRIST.

When Moses instructed the children of Israel to choose life, he was impressing upon them that they should obey the commandments of God. To obey the commandments was life in Moses’ teachings. Of course, you and I have discovered something even more vital than the commandments. We have discovered Christ Himself. “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life...” said Jesus (John 14:6).”

To choose Jesus is to choose life! Millions of people through the ages have made that discovery and it is the most important discovery that anyone can make.

In the 1960s there was a player in the NFL named John Bramlett. Bramlett was once known as the “Meanest Man in the National Football League.” A free agent who became a starting linebacker for the Denver Broncos in 1965, Bramlett was runner-up to Joe Namath for rookie of the year honors. He played in two Pro Bowls and in 1970 was voted Most Valuable Player for the New England Patriots.

Off the field, however, his life was a mess. His family never knew when he left home whether he would come home drunk, or call from a jail, or not even come home at all, because he was often involved in fights in bars.

One day some visitors came by the Bramlett home. They wanted to talk to John Bramlett about Christ. The impact of that visit changed John Bramlett’s life forever. Suddenly he turned from pursuing death to pursuing life. That is what repentance is. It is the exercise of our freedom to decide, by God’s grace, for those things that are of eternal value. John Bramlett made that choice. He even became a Christian minister. Today his life is a living testimony to the change Christ can make in a person’s life.

Perhaps Bramlett’s greatest testimony, however, is his son Don. Don played in the NFL, as well. Don still has a Christmas letter that he penned in an elementary school classroom many years ago. The subject was “All I Want for Christmas Is...”

Here is what young Don Bramlett wrote: “All I want for Christmas is for my family and me to have a very Merry Christmas like the other two Christmases we’ve had. My dad was out drinking and fighting three years ago and we were all worrying about him and wondering when he would come back.

“While opening our presents, we were so miserable through those years. Now we have a happy and Merry Christmas after my daddy accepted Jesus in his heart and we have a lot to be thankful for. This is all I want for Christmas and I’ve got it.”

“I have set before you life and death,” said Moses. “Oh, but that you would choose life.” Don Bramlett is not the only person to ever offer a fervent prayer on behalf of a father, or a spouse, or a young person. It is an urgent plea that comes straight from the heart of God. It is directed to every one of us. God has given us the gift of choice. Bad choices, however, lead to negative consequences. Choose Christ and let Him help you with all the rest of your choices. For Heaven’s sake! Choose life! Choose Christ!

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