

A Epiphany 6 2.16.20

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

Focus Statement: We have been chosen.

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity...Choose life that you and your descendants may live.” Thanks to this line from Deuteronomy being in our reading this morning, I’ve had an early nineties Christian praise song stuck in my head all week. Now, I’ll tell you I’m not a huge fan of a lot of early nineties Christian praise music because a lot of it is pretty theologically questionable. And this song is for the most part no exception to that concern, but there is one line in it that I think gets, possibly unintentionally, right to the heart of what Moses was saying to the Israelites. The line I’ve been singing all week goes like this: “Choose life, the way that is true / From the One who chose you, your Father in heaven.” It’s the second half of that which gets me. “Choose life... From the One who chose you.” What we hear there is this statement that the choice we are invited to make is the response to already having been chosen. We don’t choose to BE God’s chosen, that choice was already made. Rather we choose because we ARE God’s chosen.

That’s what’s happening in the Deuteronomy text Teresa read this morning. The whole book of Deuteronomy is basically Moses’ farewell address to the Israelites. Having rescued them from slavery in Egypt, having led them across the desert to the very cusp of the Promised Land, having put up with forty years of their whining, Moses is about to send them off into their promised yet unknown future. Before he does that, he wants to send them off as prepared as possible, so he delivers this very long speech, in which he recounts their history, outlines rules to live by, and stresses their responsibilities and obligations.

This is not unlike the lecture a parent might deliver to their pre-adolescent child about to be left home alone for the first time.

Today we heard the very end of this speech. Chapter thirty, verses fifteen through twenty are literally the very last words of Moses' exhortation to these people whom he has loved and cared about for so long. I had a housemate who whenever I left the house would yell out the door after me, "make good choices," and that's basically what Moses left the Israelites with. Make good choices. If we think back to the parent-pre-adolescent child analogy, that lecture is not "here are all the things you need to do in order to earn the right to be my child." Rather, that list of expectations and obligations are made out of love. Here are the things you need to do so that you, and any younger siblings, pets, houseplants, you've been left responsible for can live and thrive while I am gone.

For Moses, choosing life meant choosing God. It meant loving God, walking with God, listening to God's voice, and following God. Some translations translate this act of listening as "obey God." But in our modern context, blind, unexamined obedience to authority is at best short sighted and at worst dangerous. What Moses refers to here is not "do whatever God says because God is God," but it's be in relationship with God. It is the active practice of walking, listening, learning, of growing deeper and clearer into who you are and how God is calling you to be.

Choosing life is also not an individual action. We do not choose life simply by choosing God and ignoring others. Choosing life means choosing, loving, each other, both friends and

neighbors and foreigners and strangers, and loving and caring for God's creation. As Christians we tend to have the unfortunate habit of seeing the Law as this very legalistic, moralistic list of prerequisites to be met. It is either this thing that absolutely must be kept exactly as written in order for God to accept us, or it is so impossible as to be completely ignored, Christ died for me, so I get to live however I want and you have to live how I say. This is true today—whoever you're considering voting for in the next election, democrat or republican, liberal, moderate, or conservative, has certainly told you that God is on their side—and has been true throughout our history. Arguing about whether and how the law applies to us is like the favorite theological struggle of the Christian movement. So it's important to remember as we're hearing these words from Moses that our Israelite forebears did not have the same fraught relationship with the law that we have. For them, the commandments of God were not seen as burdensome or impossible, rather they were spiritual practices to be followed as best one could. They were ways to remain faithful, to mark their identity of people of God, and to respond to the gift of God's claiming them as God's chosen people. I'm sure I've shared before that my Old Testament professor in seminary referred to the Ten Commandments not as the regulations which decided who was in, but the rules of the playpen to help the people of God, those who were already in, live well together.

Which gets us to our Gospel reading for this morning and this next chunk of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. After grounding us in our identity as blessed, salty, light-bearers, Jesus now digs in to what that identity looks like in practice. "You have heard it said" Jesus starts, listing off various commandments, "do not murder, do not commit adultery, get divorced in

this way, do not swear falsely. But I say to you," this much harder thing. It is not enough to just not murder people, if you so much as are at odds with someone, you must seek reconciliation. It is not enough to not commit adultery, if you even look at someone with lust, you must cut off your hand or pluck out your eye. It is not enough to get divorced legally. It is not enough to not swear falsely, you must not swear at all. What Jesus did here wasn't about replacing the law with something harder, what he was doing was intensifying the law, drilling down into the heart of why it had existed in the first place. Remember what Moses said to the Israelites so many years back, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity...Choose life that you and your descendants may live." Let's think about this command to not murder. My first thought on reflection is this is a ridiculously low bar. But I started drafting this sermon on Lincoln's Birthday and I thought about the Civil War and the hundreds of thousands of people who died, and killed, defending our freedom and fighting for freedom for all people. Certainly we don't consider that murder, but lives were taken. What does it mean to choose life on the field of battle? Can the choice of and for life at times require taking life? My friend Pastor Chris is an army chaplain and I give thanks every day that he helps the young men and women of our military sit with the results of those questions every day, a choice often made for them by leaders far away from the actual places and people where those choices play out. Or I was walking through St. Philip the other day, and I noticed they have a suicide prevention bench in the hallway. The idea being if someone is feeling alone or depressed they can sit on that bench as a signal that they need a friend. Are you choosing life if you walk past someone seated on that bench? Yes, you are not murdering anyone, but certainly someone is being left in need.

“You shall not commit adultery” is a seemingly low bar, but what about the harmless banter, locker-room talk, and the effects of our Instagram happy society on the self-perception of both men and women? Are Snapchat filters choosing life? Which side of the Super Bowl halftime show debate was choosing life, the side that said it was a disgusting objectification of women’s bodies or the side that saw a powerful display of strength, and a call for justice and inclusion? How should we consider divorce now that marriage is a decision between two consenting adults rather than, as it was in the time of Moses, a land contract between two men often involving the sale of a woman in exchange for camels. How is choosing life different now than it was then, when a divorced woman was a pariah to society? What does it mean to not just swear falsely, but to not swear at all? Our Pledge of Allegiance, only since 1954 I might add, has included the phrase “one nation, under God,” before “with liberty and justice for all.” Does God belong in our national allegiance? To be clear, I’m not arguing yes or no, I’m merely raising the question of what God are we pledging to, and who decides the ideas and beliefs that allegiance to that God contains.

These are hard questions, dear people of God. Hard questions with no easy answers. And do I wish some days that ours was a God who just spelled out for us how we have to live in with a very clearly delineated list of rules and requirements, yeah, some days I do. But I also know that the world is not that simple, there is too much complexity for any rule to work perfectly one hundred percent of the time. And the good news for us in this text is we have a God who knows that. We have a God who gets that no law can just work perfectly every time, in every case. And so instead of a list of hard and fast dos and don’ts, ours is a

God who gives us the tools to make good choices. And a God who knows that the choices we make, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, will not always be good choices. And when we fail at this. When we get caught up in our own doubts, fears, egos, or idealism, and we do not make good choices, ours is a God who meets us again and again at the font and at the table, with this unending promise of forgiveness, grace, and love. So choose life, dear people of God. Choose life, because you have already been chosen. God has chosen you. Amen.