

Choose Life
Pastor Cynthia Lapp
Feb. 13, 2011

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 119:1-8
Matthew 5:21-37

Every day we are confronted with choices. It is part of living in a wealthy city, in a wealthy country. I am often overwhelmed at the grocery store when in the cereal aisle or the bread aisle. Too many options.

I remember my visit to East Germany in 1985. There were precious few choices when it came to buying bread; you bought whatever happened to be on the shelf. There might be three or four loaves left at the end of the day. Some days that seems so much simpler and saner. Just buy what is in front of you. "You get what you get and you don't get upset," as teachers of young children sometimes say.

Not having a choice seems almost impossible. Sometimes we say, "Well, what choice did I have?" But we always have a choice. It is one of the things that distinguishes us from other animals; we don't have to act only on instinct. We can choose what to eat, where to live, how to dress, how to react, if and when to procreate and so on.

When choices are taken away from us, especially in this country where having a multitude of choices about almost everything is prized highly, some of us get angry. We are entitled to make a choice and the government can't take that away from us. If I want to choose to go without health insurance that is my choice. If I don't like the curriculum in the public schools, I can teach my children at home. It is my choice. If I want to protect myself with a handgun in my home or in a public space, it should be my choice.

On the other hand, if I choose not to pay the part of my taxes that go to the military I will get in trouble. Or if I choose to employ people who do not have the proper documentation there will be a penalty. We do have choices, a lot of choices and they have consequences.

In this passage from Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people, as they prepare to cross over the Jordan River, that they will be faced with choices. Life is beginning anew for them in the Promised Land. It is the land of many choices, flowing with milk and honey, verdant with possibilities for prosperity. And they are told to “choose life;” to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors. By choosing life they are making a positive choice not only for themselves, but for their descendents as well.

Moses gives them two choices. Choose life or choose death, choose prosperity or choose disaster. Whichever is chosen will have logical behaviors and consequences that follow.

We read two weeks ago that the prophet Micah called on the mountains and earth as witnesses against the people, and today we read that Moses calls on nature to witness this covenant. *I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.* In this monotheistic religion, there are no other gods that can witness the covenant; there is only one God. It is up to the mountains, the earth, the creation and the heavens to act as witnesses.

Choose life. We most often hear this verse from Deuteronomy quoted by people when talking about abortion. But Moses is not talking about one discreet event; Moses is talking about a whole way of approaching the world. Choose to love God, to follow God's commandments, the laws and the customs. Hold onto this community as you

prepare to enter into a new land where there will be new challenges, new customs, new religions, new gods. YHWH is the God that gives life, the way of YHWH and the commandments received from YHWH are what make life possible, what enrich life. Choose life.

The people are moving from a life of wandering and dependence on God, to a settled life of farming, building and business, and the *temptation* to be less dependent on God. Moses' instruction to choose life and the commandments is a timely reminder because he knows that the people will begin to see the world in new ways and make choices that may take them away from YHWH.

It is hard to hold onto the old customs and old ways when one moves to a new land. It doesn't take many generations for the language to be lost, recipes to be adapted, religious practices to change so that they fit into the new culture and land. This was true for Mennonite immigrants to Russia, Canada and the U.S., and it is true for other immigrants as well.

It is not that the old customs don't survive. They are preserved and taken down often from the shelf to be enjoyed, but more as artifacts than as something useful. Vareniky, borscht, Platt Deutsch, Pennsylvania Dutch, fasnacht day, fraktur, even hymn sings. These foods, languages and customs from another land and time still have meaning, but we treat them as relics to be preserved rather than traditions that are life giving. Is there meaning in the old ways? Can there still be life in old commandments? Jesus addresses this question when he speaks in Matthew about the commandments. *You heard it said to those in ancient times, "You shall not murder."* Yes, we remember that one Jesus, not so hard to keep. We choose life on this one.

Jesus pulls it from the shelf, dusts it off and says, “Well, I am telling you — that translated for this time and place — it is not only about killing, it is about how you treat one another. If you get angry with a sister or brother, or insult them, or even call them names you are headed to the fires of Gehenna.”

Some translators use the word hell, “you will be liable to the fires of hell” if you insult your sister or brother, or lust in your heart. The original word is Gehenna. Gehenna was a dump in a deep narrow valley outside the walls of Jerusalem. Fires were kept burning there all the time to get rid of the garbage and control the stench. It was also used as a place to dispose of the bodies of executed criminals or others who were denied proper burial. As it was outside the city walls it was not a safe place to be.

It is easy to see how this word has come to be translated “hell.” If you do not follow the commandments you will find yourself outside the community. You will find yourself in a place where fires burn night and day and there is no safety.

Jesus goes on to reinterpret and redefine some of the other commandments as well. Jesus says in a very graphic way: Choose life, not death. It is not enough to follow the letter of the law. It is about how we treat each other all the time; it is about the relationships we have with each other. But it is not only relationships with each other; it is our relationship with God and the earth as well. It is not enough to not swear an oath. You must not swear to God, to heaven or earth. Earth and heaven are part of God’s creation. Just say “yes” when you mean “yes” and “no” when you mean “no” so that your word can always be trusted.

This is another one of those places in the Sermon on the Mount, like turning the other cheek and loving enemies, where Mennonites have traditionally taken Jesus literally.

You may have noticed that when you go to the court house for jury duty and they ask you to “swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God,” they also offer you the opportunity to **affirm** that you will tell the truth. This is for us, so we don’t have to swear an oath; we can affirm that we always tell the truth. It may seem a small matter, an old commandment that is quaint, but at one time it had great significance for our Mennonite ancestors.

Where we have not taken Jesus literally, thank goodness, is in plucking out our eyes when we lust or cutting off our hands when they cause us to sin. We must have figured out along the way that we could be disciples of Jesus without following his hyperbole to the letter.

Is Moses also using hyperbole? Choose life and God will bless you? What about Job? He chose God’s way and bad things still happened to him. What about Lazarus? His best friend was Jesus, and Lazarus still died. We have to be careful in prescribing this remedy, choose life. Death is still a part of life; pain will still find us, even when we choose God’s way, even when we choose life. Part of choosing the life that God commands is choosing a people with whom we live out those commands. We just hope that they are wiser and more of a comfort than were Job’s friends.

Yet the connection that we are given between choosing life and prosperity is uncomfortable. Is this the prosperity gospel? I don’t watch television, but I have heard that there are preachers on TV (and in real churches) that preach that God wants you to

have a new car and a new house with a swimming pool and a high paying job (and share a lot of that money with the church and the pastor.)

Isn't this self-serving? What about the suffering servant? What about Jesus' instructions to take up your cross, travel without even an extra coat or shoes, and no plans for where to stay overnight?

An article by Phil Lindell Detweiler in **The Mennonite** this month caught me short. He writes about his experience with the prosperity gospel, in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, where he lives and works for Mennonite Mission Network. Each week before the offering, he joins the congregation at Break Thru Church International in affirming the belief that God will give them "jobs or better jobs, checks in the mail, gifts, bills paid off" and much more.

Detweiler admits to being very uncomfortable with this and yet as he worships with this congregation he is challenged as well. He says, *"One challenge to my anti-prosperity gospel radar came when I learned to differentiate between self-centered and God-centered prosperity. What do we do about the biblical indications that God made the patriarchs prosper materially (Genesis 13:2; 26:12-14; and 30:37-43)? I am still infuriated by a gospel that preaches prosperity devoid of self-sacrifice. But I have come to believe that there may well be a place for a biblical understanding of prosperity that is both God-centered and self-sacrificing."*

In fact, Detweiler says, he now understands a connection between spirituality and economics that he had not considered from his western perspective. *"I now believe this association of spirituality and economy is a more biblical worldview than was my own. Having lived in Africa, I no longer believe that wealth has to be inherently evil or*

that wealthy people are intrinsically sinful. The concept of shalom leads me to believe that God is interested in making us prosper in all areas of our lives: bodily health, peace, justice, harmonious relationships with God and our neighbor, provision for our families and freedom from want, fear and harm. This does not negate us carrying our cross daily, and it is not a blank check written on some divine bank account. But we need to question our knee-jerk reaction against any reference to prosperity..."

(http://www.themennonite.org/issues/14-2/articles/Rethinking_the_prosperity_gospel)

Detweiler's remarks remind us again that our understandings of God and God's commandments, what it means to choose life, are dependent on **where** we stand and **with whom** we stand.

In Deuteronomy the people are preparing to go into the Promised Land, to possess and occupy the land, to take it from those who already live there. There is room only for one God, one people, one way to choose life.

Today we are the ones in that Promised Land, a land of many people and many gods. Some of us have been here for generations and some of us have only recently arrived. Are we choosing life? Or are we choosing prosperity and hoping that life will follow?

Choosing life is hard. The prosperity that follows is not immediate. Choosing life in Egypt the past two weeks meant giving up sleep, skipping work, risking life itself. As Moses said, choosing life is about looking to the ancestors and living out the commandments for your descendents. *Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live, by loving YHWH, your God, by obeying God's voice and by clinging to YHWH.* Choose life, in all its beauty and trouble, choose life.