

“Once You Are Chosen, You Can Choose”
+ 6 Epiphany Year A +
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37
February 16, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it. The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day particularly these words from Deuteronomy: “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.”

“Choose Life!” seems to be the correct response to what is set before the Children of Israel in our reading from Deuteronomy. I mean, who doesn’t want life and prosperity? Certainly the choice would be for “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” but that, my friends is from the Declaration of Independence and, while that is a wonderful document, what is being laid out before the Children of Israel and before us this morning is quite different. All of life is a gift from God our Creator and Sustainer – new life in Christ, faith, eternity in the presence of our God and all the saints – all of that is a gift not by works – nothing we earn or deserve, and unless your parents, significant other, spouse or child is particularly horrible at choosing gifts or no longer wants to look at your horror when you open one from them gifts are something you simply receive.

They are also something for which we should give thanks and I’m afraid I’m terribly behind on that. Many of you gave me birthday cards and I have not acknowledged your generosity. With Mary’s catastrophic fall and ankle break and dislocation I didn’t even open them for a month. There’s a thank you for lentil soup, for many dinners and cards that I have neglected. Truly, we are thankful for your continued love and support in what has been a most difficult time. For what we are given we should have thankful hearts!

With Israel – well, out of all the nations God chose them to show God’s never-ending patience, mercy, justice, and love to the world as God cut the Covenant with Abraham, Isaac & Jacob. All their children lived under that covenant, renewed it with their naming before God as infants and with circumcision for the baby boys. However, it was GOD who kept the covenant, brought them into a relationship with them saying, “I will be your God and you will be My people.” God was, is, and ever shall be the “Promise Keeper.”

Us, well, not so much. Like Israel, whose faults and foibles we frequently focus on to pump up our pride – like Israel, we don’t follow God’s will and God’s ways, we turn from life and choose death and destructive paths. So it will always be as sinners in a sinful world even as we are marked as saints, washed like little Noah Friedmann, and brought into God’s family of faith where we can always find nurture and strength in God’s Word, always find comfort and hope as we receive the Lord’s Supper and remember our own call to faith, our own baptism where God does all the work and we simply receive.

You see **Once You Are Chosen, You Can Choose** – renewed and empowered by the Holy Spirit you can do what Paul wrote to Timothy, "Take hold of the life that is truly life." (1 Timothy 6:19). That, choice, in itself is a response to what Jesus tells us His vocation

was all about: "I've come that you might have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10). Ah, but that often leads American Christians back to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" which often leads to pursuing by any means what we think might bring us happiness: stuff, more stuff, really good stuff and money – lots and lots of money. And in our pursuit – well, what does it matter if we hurt other people, step on top of them to reach our goals or even break some laws. 4 verses before the start of our Gospel for today Jesus also said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." That leads into today's restatement by Jesus in the Gospel of the laws against murder, adultery, property disputes and divorce.

Yes, even the Declaration of Independence led to a Constitution outlining laws for citizens to live by in so life in our country might have order and reasonable peace instead of chaos. The laws of God remain – we cannot shove them aside for personal convenience or stop recognizing the brokenness of sin as being the result of sin – our sins, our faults, our own most grievous faults. But did you notice what Jesus puts in the middle of this discourse? Forgiveness and reconciliation are laid before us – another choice – a very painful choice in many cases as we have to admit that our own sinfulness has been involved in this breach. Paul mentions this to the Ephesians,

“Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” (Ephesians 4:31-32)

This life we get to choose because we've been chosen by God is marked by kindness, tenderhearted behavior that believes the best, not the worst about the other person, and leads to forgiveness – the undeserved kind that God has shown to you and me through Jesus Christ our Lord. In our Epistle today Paul gives a picture of what this life in God – where God chooses us so we can make choices and follow should look like: “For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.” (1 Corinthians 3:9)

Yes, that's us – God's building & servants working together here at the corner of Thomas & Snelling as members of Jehovah Lutheran sowing seeds of grace and reaping the harvest of souls that God desires, for God “does not want any to perish but all to come to repentance.” As individuals who have found forgiveness for all our sins, past, present and future we are called to live together in servanthood – to view the people in the church and outside these walls with new eyes. Author and speaker, Phillip Yancey wrote in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace* about the people who came to the communion rail at his church, “There was Mabel who came to the Senior Center. My wife worked with her for seven years before she revealed her dark secret: she'd been a prostitute. 50 years earlier she'd sold her child to a couple in Michigan. She could never forgive herself, she'd said, but now she was standing at the communion rail waiting to receive the gift of grace, ‘The body of Christ, broken for you, Mabel. Then came Sarah, a turban covering her bare head, scarred from where doctors had removed a brain tumor, and Michael, who stuttered so badly he would physically cringe when anyone addressed him. ‘The body of Christ...the blood of Christ...what could we offer such people other than (God's) grace?’” The parade of sinners receiving grace in the Body & Blood of Christ each week is thousand upon thousand sinners long – leaving renewed by grace.

This past week my Rheumatologist asked me, “So, how long are you going to go on preaching morality?” I said, “I don’t preach morality. I preach forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ alone. God’s Laws are clearly stated. I don’t need to hammer away on them. I don’t tell people how to be good to get to know God – that’s not the Gospel. When people come to know that they need God in brokenness and repentance I get to tell them about God’s love and forgiveness.” It was a rare moment. My doctor asked me to repeat something so he could write it down that didn’t have to do with my gout or arthritic knee.

“Once You Are Chosen, You Can Choose” - choose a life full of the abundance of God’s love and grace – a life in community with others who are not perfect but, like you are perfectly loved. People who don’t know Jesus as Savior will notice that love – even if they never embrace it. Bertrand Russell who once said, “I would never die for my beliefs, I could be wrong” later wrote, “What the world needs, I’m ashamed to say, is Christian love.” He could see it – marveled at repentance, forgiveness and God’s unfathomable love but he would not embrace it.

Many will leave churches this morning having heard sermons on these same texts thinking about what they need to do to be better, feeling ashamed for the ways they’ve murdered with hate, committed adultery with lust and will carry away nothing more than a load of guilt and more “shoulds” and “musts” than any soul can bear. I hope that you will leave this service amazed at God’s grace that has brought a new soul into the family of faith, nourished by God’s feast of forgiveness, and emboldened to choose to live love.