

The Choice
Deuteronomy 30: 15 – 20
Luke 14: 25 – 33
Sunday, September 4, 2016

Moses said, “I call upon heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you, life and death...Choose life so you... may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying and holding fast to him.” (Deuteronomy 30: 15 – 20)

Two thousand years later, Jesus refined Moses’s call to radical obedience. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children... yes, and even life itself cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14: 26– 27)

Both Moses and Jesus drew lines in the sand. Unless you choose life and carry the cross, you can never be completely right with God.

For the past two Sundays, I’ve been preaching about the discrepancy between man-made religion and heaven sent faith but also about the world system being oppositional to the Kingdom of God. From the beginning of the Old Testament until the end of the New, prophets and apostles alike insisted on radical obedience to God over against an easy religion organized around rituals and teachings that domesticate God and renders God harmless.

The apostles were determined not to let this happen and labored long and hard defending Christ’s gospel against any attempts to dumb it down. Because the early Christians refused to compromise their faith, under the threat of persecution, Christianity had to go underground. Much later, by the fifth century Christianity unintentionally but decidedly lost its radical edge when it was co-opted by the Romans and became the new state religion, the glue holding the empire together.

That was a good thing right? Yes and no. Yes, because Christians were no longer targeted for persecution but “no” because by becoming the new state religion the Church became institutionalized to accommodate the requirements of society. The expectation of discipleship became the call to citizenship. Loyalty to the Empire became synonymous with faith in Christ. The boundaries between church and state were blurred as the prophets of the apostles were replaced by bureaucrats and priests.

This was a far cry from what Jesus had in mind. Read the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus clearly outlined in simple yet forceful terms how God’s people are expected to love, serve and live together in the world as we wait for the coming of God’s kingdom.

Despite the Church's descent into institutionalized mediocrity, in every generation there have always been pockets of faithful men and women keeping the faith alive by making the hard choice to live by the Sermon on the Mount. Some, like St. Augustine and Pope Gregory the Great, held high church office. Others, like St. Francis of Assisi and more recently Mother Teresa, formed small faith communities determined to follow Christ's call to radical obedience. These are the saints who carried the cross and remained faithful in word and deed.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus taught if you really want to be a Christian it's going to cost you something, if not everything. Remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer's warning, "When Christ calls you, he bids you to come with him to die."

Not everyone is called to martyrdom but all of us are called to surrender our wills and sacrifice anything keeping us from giving ourselves totally to Christ.

Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

This is what some Biblical scholars call one of the hard sayings of Jesus. Hearing these sayings you have to remember one of Jesus' teaching techniques was to use shocking hyperbole to grab our attention. So, Jesus doesn't expect you to literally hate your family. That would undermine his law of love. Instead, Jesus was saying sometimes you have to choose between your family and Christ.

Here's an example: A young man came home late one night frantic. It was obvious he'd been drinking. He pleaded with his father to give him an alibi. When driving home, he plowed into a parked car and left the scene. He told his father he could bring his car to a friend who could quickly and quietly repair the damage. Then the son told his father if he was ever questioned by the police, to lie and say his son was home all evening.

Some fathers would choose to lie for their sons. Other fathers would say, "Look son, what you're asking me to do is just wrong. You have to face the music but I'll do everything I can do help you. Let's do the right thing and call the police."

By choosing not to lie for his son, far from hating him, this father loved him, as Christ loved him.

But this teaching goes beyond making the right choice when facing ethical dilemmas. Jesus knew there'd be times when Christians would have to choose Christ over their families. Keep in mind, Jesus was preaching primarily to Jews. After hearing Jesus preaching, if a religious Jew went back home and declared to his or her parents, "I'm not keeping the law according to the Pharisees any longer. From now on I'm following Jesus," chances are the parents would shun their child. But shunning wouldn't just come from the family. Friends and neighbors would turn against them too. According to the Book of Acts, many were put out of the synagogues and even thrown into prison.

This shunning still happens today, especially in countries like Iran and North Korea. Every day, newly minted Christians must choose between renouncing or keeping the faith. Count your blessings that we live in a free country.

But just because we live in a free country doesn't mean we're off the hook. Maybe our choices aren't a matter of life and death but then again, maybe ours is a choice between life and death.

Jesus concluded his teaching by warning against being a good starter but a bad sticker. He told a parable about a man who didn't count the cost of building a tower before laying the foundation and another parable about a king who didn't count the cost of waging war before committing his army to battle.

Likewise, before assuring yourself, "I'm a bona fide Christian because I believe Jesus died for my sins," you need to count the cost Jesus paid to save you. If after standing beneath Jesus' cross you're still not ready to accept the cost of discipleship, you still need to stand there until you can identify whatever it is in your life keeping you from completely surrendering yourself to Jesus.

You maybe thinking, "That's a tall order. Where do I start?"

It starts with prayer, praying for an awareness of the presence of God, praying for an awareness of the will of God and finally praying for the desire to submit to God.

Moses said, "I call upon heaven and earth to witness against you... that I have set before you life and death. Choose life so you may live loving the Lord your God and holding fast to him."

Jesus said, "... whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

The first Sunday of the month we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Remember Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, "... nevertheless, not my will but yours be done," then pray along with Jesus as you sort out whatever keeps you from giving yourself over to Christ. Become aware of God's presence living in and around you so you can be in sync with God's will so you will be prepared to prepare others for the coming of God's kingdom.

Finally, pray for each other. Pray that together, we will be faithful witnesses to Christ and his gospel of justice and peace. Also pray for the time coming soon when God will use us to bring Christ into our neighborhood. And then keep an eye out for the coming of Christ's kingdom whenever God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven through you.