

February 16, 2020
“Life or Death”
Deuteronomy 30:15-20 & Sirach 15:15-20
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We're talking today about choices. About life-giving choices. And I just want to say that I made the choice yesterday – with Amy – to put off sermon preparation and go on a date! And I also want to say that it was the right choice, and if it shows in the sermon, at least you'll know why!

Choices matter, big and small.

Some of you have met my dad. On the whole, he is a pragmatic man, far more than he is philosophical or emotional. And so it's no surprise that he was the one who introduced my older sister and me to the simple practice of making a list of pros and cons when facing a decision—especially one that felt bigger, more significant, more difficult. Raise your hand if you have been similarly introduced to this practice!

In the language of the Enneagram model of human personality, I operate more out of an instinctive center than a thinking or feeling center. More from my gut. I can easily get stuck spinning my wheels at the intellectual level. Making lists of pros and cons can, of course, be a heady exercise, but I've found it useful at different stages of my life—at least as a starting point—to help provoke and access my instinctive center. To help me dig deeper into myself, with more intention, in considering choices. When choices matter. Because, of course, choices do matter. Because our choices reflect who we are and what we are about.

“It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” This you may recognize as the affirmation of Albus Dumbledore, headmaster at the wizarding school, Hogwarts, to Harry Potter, at the end of J.K. Rowling's second installment of the *Harry Potter* series, *Chamber of Secrets*. My son, Gabe, and I finished reading it together, fairly recently, so it comes to mind.

We make choices, individually and collectively, however limited they may be, in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves in. And choices make us.

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live . . . “

The Moses we find in this passage from Deuteronomy is an old man, nearing death. He himself reports, in the very next chapter, that he’s 120 years old. And he also reports, as God has told him, that—40 years after the dramatic escape from Pharaoh’s oppressive grasp in Egypt, after 40 long years of wandering in the wilderness with the wayward Israelites—he will not be making the trip with them from Moab, across the River Jordan to the promised land.

This is Moses’ swan song.

As you may know, Deuteronomy is presented in the scriptural canon as the fifth and final book of the Torah, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible as we know it.

The book itself is an extended exhortation on the importance of Mosaic law. It both recalls Israel’s past and anticipates its future as a people of the covenant. It is not the legal discourse of Leviticus, but a series of “testamentary speeches” delivered by Moses to remind the people (again) whose they are and where they came from, and to consider (again) how they are called to be as God’s people, in faithfulness to God and in faithfulness to the covenant.

Biblical scholar Dennis Bratcher sets up the pivotal scene of Moses’ final speech, his final sermon: “The failures of the past lie behind them in the desert, and the challenges of a new future lie before them across the river. The past is important as a grounding for who they are as God’s people and who God is as a God of grace and deliverance and promise. The future is important because it is the arena in which they will be able to live out being God’s people in blessing, where they will be able to worship God in security, and where the promises will be realized. . . . They are called to remember their failures, to look forward to the opportunity to move beyond them, yet all contingent on their willingness to make decisions in the present.”

And he continues, sounding like what you might find on the book jacket of a young readers’ novel: “Will they be governed by the failures of the past? Or will they move into a

new and unknown future defined by God and (God's) promise? They are faced with a choice."

This is the core of the book of Deuteronomy, and moves us to the heart of this particular reading and Moses' effort to renew the covenant. God's people face a choice, and Moses makes it clear that is a choice between life and death.

Beginning with verse 15: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in (God's) ways, and observing (God's) commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

"But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess."

Moses' words are echoed in the lesser known book of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus, or Ben Sira as it's known in rabbinic tradition—named after its author, the son of Sirach. We don't see it much because it's not considered part of the Biblical canon in Protestant tradition, though it is in Catholic and Orthodox traditions as part of the Apocrypha. Sirach contains ethical teachings, not unlike Proverbs, including this from the lectionary reading this morning: "If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. (God) has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given."

Life and death. Now both of these texts pack a dramatic punch. Choose life and that's what you'll get. Choose death and that's what you'll get. But this is not direct cause and effect—life's choice's are more complicated than that. There are, of course, actual, literal life and death choices, but I hear in these words a rhetorical emphasis on taking our choices, individually and collectively, seriously. And considering seriously the consequences of our choices in the context of community. Life nurtures life. Death invites death.

We might think of all the commandments, decrees and ordinances—all 613 of them—as an extended list of pros and cons to help God's people dig deeper within themselves in considering their choices, and the consequences of their choices, in the context of community. Choices matter!

God calls God's people to a higher standard, to make choices that incline toward life rather than death. Choices that are life-giving and life-honoring rather than death-dealing. And we're not talking here, necessarily, about mortality, but about that which leads to life lived more fully, more abundantly. Or not.

We have freedom to choose. That's a gift. But, of course, with that freedom comes responsibility. And so the refrain echoes: "What does the LORD require of you?" We heard Micah's prophetic answer to the question two weeks ago, and we reflected last week about rules as merely signposts, with love alone as our hitching post. You can't legislate love but the letter of the law is intended to point to the spirit of the law, which is love.

What does LOVE require? Paul Ramsay writes, speaking specifically about a Christian conception of love: "If everything is permitted which . . . love permits, everything is demanded which . . . love requires. So let others say, 'Anything goes.' The Christian asks, 'What does love require?'" And William Sloane Coffin writes in response, "In short, we have come up with love as an answer to legalism on one hand and lawlessness on the other. Love hallows individuality. Love consecrates and never desecrates personality. Love demands that all our actions (our choices, if you will) reflect a movement toward and not away or against each other." Hear that. And hear that in Moses' exhortation.

Coffin puts it another way in his book, "Letters to a Young Doubter": "It is always a good time to change your mind (and I might add for our purposes this morning, to make a different choice) when to do so will widen your heart." When it will widen your heart.

We are free to make our own choices. But the biblical mandate, the covenant, demands a higher standard for our ongoing and intentional consideration. Not a self-serving or self-righteous standard, but a standard worthy of the wider good. Worthy of abundance of life for all.

God intends life and love for you. For all. For all of creation. And we are called to both embrace that life and love, and enable that life and love—for ourselves, for our neighbors, for the earth itself. As fully as we can. That is what it means to choose life. It doesn't mean we are free of pain or adversity or death. It means that we are lifting up life, even in the midst of pain, adversity, even death.

We did not end up including in this morning's scripture reading the continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, as I suggested last week that we would. But you know where to find it—chapters 5-7 in Matthew. The one who said he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly goes on with his profound litany of refrains: "You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . . "

In *fulfillment*, not abolishment of the law, Jesus calls us to dig deeper within ourselves in considering what love, not just the law, requires in making our choices. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."

Again, rhetorically dramatic and punitive, but the point is made about accountability to a higher standard. A deeper standard.

Jesus goes on: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

The point is made about accountability to life and love—within ourselves and in honoring relationship with our "neighbors." The example is presented on an individual scale but the lesson applies more widely. Our individual and collective choices matter. Choices, individual and collective, define who we are. Choices, individual and collective, define who and what we believe deserve life and love—including ourselves.

Choices big and small, choices made by action or indifference—yes, indifference, because we know that NOT to choose is a choice, with consequences. "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference," wrote Elie Wiesel. "And the opposite of life is not death,

its indifference." In choices made by action or indifference, are we embracing life and love for ourselves? Are we enabling life and love for others? For the planet?

Now we know in reality that it's not as simple as all that. Individual choices are, of course, made within the broader social and political context—and so often impacted and complicated by someone else's choices, or for so many by the broader, death-dealing and literally death-causing choices fueled by racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, poverty. Choosing between rock and hard place is no choice at all.

We are witness to collective choices that deny life—life abundant or life at all—to people and the planet. In the face of such injustice, such brokenness, such death, we are called, collectively, to advocate and organize and legislate for choices that enable life and love for all.

Individually, too, we often don't make life-giving choices. We aren't perfect. We make choices we regret. We make choices without really thinking or understanding or even caring about why we made them, or what the consequences might be. Because we're too distracted or overwhelmed or tired or stressed or angry or depressed or afraid or hurt. In such circumstances, there are many ways we as a people choose death—literally and spiritually and otherwise, intentionally or by default. Sometimes it's not clear what's actually most life-giving in a given moment. We may not agree about what's truly life-giving, or what might be most life-giving for us comes up against what might be more life-giving for another. It can be complicated.

And we know, of course, that the world is full of other gods, other choices that may on surface be or appear to be life-giving but are not. Consider Rumi's poem, *The Many Wines*:

*God has given us a dark wine so potent
that, we leave the two worlds.
God has put into the form of hashish a power to
deliver the taster from self-consciousness.
God has made sleep so that it erases every thought.
God made Majnun love Layla so much
that just her dog would cause confusion in him.
There are thousands of wines
that can take over our minds.*

*Don't think all ecstasies are the same.
Jesus was lost in his love for God.
His donkey was drunk with barley.
Every object, every being,
is a jar full of delight.
Be a connoisseur, and taste with caution.
Any wine will get you high.
Judge like a king, and choose the purest,
not the ones adulterated with fear,
or some urgency about "what's needed."
Drink the wine that moves you
as a camel moves when it's been untied,
and is just ambling about.*

Friends, we are free to choose among many choices, many ecstasies, many wines. And we are called to a higher standard, a higher intention in considering our individual and collective choices and their consequences. We are called to keep the covenantal questions before us, and live into them as fully and abundantly as we know how: What is most life-giving, life-honoring for me, for others, for the planet? What does love require?

May we err on the side of life and love. And may it be so.