

## **Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

<sup>15</sup>See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. <sup>16</sup>If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his 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. <sup>17</sup>But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

## **Matthew 5:21-37**

<sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup>Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup>Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

<sup>27</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup>But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup>If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup>And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

<sup>31</sup>“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup>But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

<sup>33</sup>“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ <sup>34</sup>But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup>or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup>Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

## **This or That**

**February 12, 2017**

Like most of you I get up each day faced with a myriad of choices. Coffee or tea, oatmeal or toast, or both. Jeans or dress slacks, denim shirt or turtleneck. Watch the news or look at Facebook postings. Leave the house or stay home? Read my bible, pray, write, sing, dance, move firewood, cook, clean, the list is endless. Each day we have choices about how we live and move in this life. And our readings today are giving us some choices that would encourage our lives and our living. “Choose life,” the writer says. Choose to follow the ways of God and don’t turn your heart away to follow the idols of the world but hold fast to God. Loving God and following his ways that you may live long in the life that he has called you too. And Jesus builds on that as

well when he tells us that when we have some conflict between ourselves and a sister or brother, that if we don't take care of that, our lives are diminished as well. We can't really live fully and joyfully when there is this division or hurt between us and another person. This morning I want to share a few stories and thoughts about that which are by no means exhaustive or even logical, but hopefully will bring both challenge and comfort.

When I was 21 I got married the first time. In our wedding plans, we decided to ask my father to sing and we had a list of songs we wanted. He agreed to sing and then sent us a list of songs he would prefer to sing. His list looked like something he would sing at his nightclub act and so I told him that his songs were not what we wanted, that our wedding wasn't some gig for him to sing at, and if he couldn't sing the songs we had in mind then just don't sing. I was young and not just a little self-righteous. Of course, he said, "Have a nice life, and don't expect us to show up."

It was youthful foolishness and I was really quite devastated that my father wouldn't be at the wedding. My actions were eating away at me and I knew I had to do something but I was just too prideful to do it. I knew I couldn't get married with this hanging over my head and damaging my spirit. A few days before the wedding, with the encouragement of a friend, I called my dad to tell him how sorry I was. I remember tears of relief that he still loved me and it was really alright. He still wouldn't be coming to the wedding and I didn't expect that, but at least we could both move forward and get on with living. This may not be what choosing life looks like but maybe Jesus knew that this type of forgiveness can make a difference to your spirit and your relationship with God.

There are certainly some other wonderful examples in the bible that speak to this. I couldn't help but think of that wonderful story of Jacob and Esau where Jacob stole his birthright and then Esau got so mad he was ready to kill his twin brother. He was just waiting for his father to die so he could do it. And of course, Jacob got out of town in a hurry. But the part of the story that always gets me is when Jacob is heading back home with all his family and flocks and property and then he sees his brother from a distance. He of course sends his family and flocks before him to sort of soften the blow I guess but that didn't matter. He bows before him, humbling himself as he approaches. When Esau met his brother the bible says, "he ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." Whatever it was that was between them was now resolved as they met face to face. Maybe they realized that a birthright wasn't something to kill each other over. I don't know. Maybe time heals all wounds. But tears and forgiveness seem to go hand in hand.

I'm guessing just about all of us over the age of 10 have a story like this. And maybe it isn't with a relative but maybe with a friend or someone you work with. And I hope you have been faithful to follow this teaching of Jesus when it comes to being forgiven as well as extending forgiveness. It is terribly unhealthy to your spirit and relationship with God to carry these things around. And I think we know that, don't we? It becomes a sort of prison that we can't get out of and the only way is to humble yourself and ask for forgiveness or say, "I'm sorry" in the hopes of beginning again. Perhaps this is what, 'Choosing Life' is all about. I don't know. I struggle just like you do. Some comfort that is!

And if I'm honest I admit that most of the things that Jesus mentions here I have been guilty of. I haven't murdered anyone, though I've certainly entertained murderous thoughts. But with that one exception, I get high marks on committing all the rest, and I'm sure some of you are right up there with me. I'm a sinner and I willingly admit it.

This week many will celebrate that lovely Hallmark Holiday called Valentine's Day. A holiday dedicated to the celebration of romantic love in our culture. A day filled with flowers, special dinners on the town, chocolates, cards, and a whole lot of unreasonable expectations. And I find it somewhat ironic that in Jesus' list of 'You heard this, but I say this' we find the same thing; unreasonable expectations! I think Jesus is setting us up for

failure. He knows we can't do these things even when we try. And maybe that's the whole point. This is a set up to remind us that our failings are going to be followed by grace. Because we know that later on, Jesus sums up the law by saying that we should love the Lord with all our hearts, minds, and strength and love our neighbors as ourselves. But we know we don't do that on our own. We know we have to hold fast to Love's messenger, Jesus. Who walks with us and show us by his life and ministry what he means by all these things. And he always chooses life. He always sees what is good in us and reminds us of that goodness even when we fail.

This is the same Jesus who found no fault with a woman caught in adultery. Who forgave a disciple who swore he didn't know him. Who ate dinner with sinners and hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors. Who forgave a man hanging on a cross next to him and then forgave all those who crucified him! And difficult as it is sometimes to forgive, he asks us to do the same. Why? Because this is what choosing life is all about.

Eleven years ago, a gunman barricaded himself inside a one-room Amish schoolhouse near Lancaster, Pa. Then he opened fire. Charles "Charlie" Roberts killed five children and injured five others before killing himself. The Amish community responded in a way that many found surprising: They forgave the shooter. And, in the years since, they have grown close to his family. His mother Terri Roberts shared her story during a recent visit to Story Corp which is a program heard on NPR.

She said, "As I turned on the radio on the way there, the newscaster was reporting that there had been a shooting at the local Amish schoolhouse. By that time, I was at my son's home, and I saw my husband and the state trooper standing right in front of me as I pulled in, and I looked at my husband, and he said, 'It was Charlie.'

He said, 'I will never face my Amish neighbors again.' "

Terri's initial reaction was that she had to move away. But the Amish came to her the night of the shooting to say they wanted her to stay. That week, the Roberts had a private funeral for their son, but as they went to the gravesite, they saw as many as 40 Amish start coming out from around the side of the graveyard, surrounding them like a crescent.

"Love just emanated from them," Terri says. "I do recall the fathers saying, 'I believe that I have forgiven,' but there are some days when I question that." Terri finds it especially hard to accept that forgiveness when she thinks of one of the survivors, Rosanna.

"Rosanna's the most injured of the survivors," she explains. "Her injuries were to her head. She is now 16, still tube-fed and in a wheelchair. And she does have seizures, and when it gets to be this time of year, as we get closer to the anniversary date, she seizes more. And it's certainly not the life that this little girl should have lived."

Terri asked if it would be possible for her to help with Rosanna once a week. "I read to her, I bathe her, dry her hair," says Terri, who herself is battling cancer. And, while she can't say it with 100 percent certainty, Terri believes Rosanna knows who she is. "I just sense that she does know," she says.

"I will never forget the devastation caused by my son," says the 66-year-old Terri. "But one of the fathers the other night, he said, 'None of us would have ever chosen this. But the relationships that we have built through it, you can't put a price on that.'" "And their choice to allow life to move forward was quite a healing balm for us," she says. "And I think it's a message the world needs."

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole, there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

It's hard to get through a day right now without getting angry at someone in the news. Judgement and name calling are rampant and there is blame aplenty to go around. But Jesus' call is clear. If you want to live long in the land then for goodness sake, stop doing these things. Bow down to one another and offer forgiveness or beg forgiveness, whichever you need to do, so that you might live and live fully the life God intends for you.

Don't forget that God wants us to be whole. And all of God's working in our lives moves towards reconciliation and restoration. If the good news of the bible is about anything, it is certainly about that. God created us to live in harmony with one another and to flourish and to see the divine in everyone we meet. That alone should keep you from hating your sister or brother.

We should always be seeking to be reconciled to one another. We should do it, not only because Jesus asks us to, but because if we deny that God's grace is at work and present in that "other person," we are really admitting that God's grace is not at work in our own lives. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and grace, are not just things we experience individually, but they are the ways we show the world about God's transforming love for everyone and all creation.

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, is how that old song goes. We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. And we pray that all unity may one day be restored: (sing with me) And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.