

Preaching: Deuteronomy 30:15-18 “Choosing Obedience-Choosing Life”

6th Sunday @ Epiphany

Sunday, February 12th, 2023

Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-18

¹⁵ "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.

Exegetical Statement

The LORD had chosen Israel to be His covenant people when He saved them from slavery in Egypt by the work of His mighty hand. He chose them and guided them through the wilderness wanderings all the way to the edge of the Promised Land. As they entered and took possession of this land they had two choices as to how they lived. They could choose to remain in a repentant and obedient faith relationship with Him by meditation on His Commands and making use of the sacrificial system to receive His grace, mercy, and forgiveness for their failures, remaining focused on Him as the One and only God. Or they could turn away from His word and the means of grace offered. If they chose this they would most certainly fall away into worshipping the false gods of their neighbors, be chased out of the land, and wind up living apart from the gracious presence of the LORD now and for eternity.

Focus Statement:

Jesus called us into His family of faith, His Church, by choosing us when we were unworthy sinners. He gave His life on the cross for us to take away our sin and make us worthy of life with Him now and eternal life to come. He desires that we remain in a repentant faith relationship with Him and so give us His law so that we see how we make ourselves more important than Him, and turn in repentance back to Him, seeking once again to live in love toward Him and one another.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

As His called children we are to show our love for Him by obeying His commands. But keeping them in thought, word and deed is difficult. We especially see this in Jesus' explanation that anger toward our brother is the same as murder. By our refusal to see how we put ourselves and our pride ahead of obedience to Christ's call to repent we block the Spirit's work in our life. Continued unrepentance can cause us to fall away.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Make use of the means of grace where the Spirit works to keep us in repentant faith. Honestly examine the commandments to see our failures. Confess and ask Jesus' forgiveness and help living to put Him first and others second.

Subject Sentence: Repentant Hearts Choose Loving Obedience

Introduction:

There was once a man who got lost in the desert. He wandered for days hoping he would stumble across some sign of civilization, or at least some source of water. He had a 2 gallon canteen when he started off, but that morning he drank the last of what was in there, and His mouth was parched and dry. He was surprised his body had enough water left for him to perspire, yet the sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes, running down and into his panting mouth. It tasted salty, but at least it was something moist. It was early afternoon and he knew that if something didn't happen soon he was going to collapse from exhaustion and dehydration. And if he did, he might not ever get up again.

Then in the distance he saw what appeared to be a building. He pushed on towards it with sheer willpower until he got close enough to see what it was. It was an abandoned stagecoach stop. Not much was left of it. Nothing useful inside. But it had this, a hand pump sitting out back. Tied to the pump was a half-gallon milk container of water and a note. The note said: "Pour all the water into the top of the pump to prime it. If you do this, you will get all the water you need". The man stared at the half-gallon jug of water and the note for a long moment. He found himself faced with a choice. He could just grab the jug and drink some if not all of the water now, maybe take some with him and hope that it would be enough to get him to civilization. Or he could trust what the note said, pour that water into the top of the pump, and then begin pumping. It was a hard decision, made harder because it would involve him having to work that pump handle in his exhausted state, only to become more exhausted, perhaps to the point of collapse, especially if no water came forth. He would've wasted the half-gallon's worth of life-giving water for nothing.

He faced a life-or-death decision. The problem was the answer was not all that clear. What should he do? Faced with the same predicament, what would you do? It's easy sitting here with all the water we could ask for just by turning on a faucet or putting a cup under the water cooler machine in back. It's easy to say, "I'd do what the note says." But what if it was you, dying of thirst? What would you choose?

Choosing Life or Death

Deuteronomy 30:15 [See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil](#)

In our Old Testament Lesson, the LORD is setting before Israel a life-or-death choice. One choice is to do what is good, what is right, which will result in life, with them living in the land that the LORD God was giving to them. The other choice is to do evil, with the result that they would be chased from the land or would die trying to defend it. Well, you say, that's an easy choice. Just do what is good, right? But then how can we really discern what is truly good? After all, there is what is good for me, and then there is what is good for others. And those things are most often not the same. In fact, they can be polar opposites.

Deuteronomy 30:16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

Well, it seems the LORD has made it a little clearer for the Israelites and for us. Choosing good and life means choosing obedience. Still, as Lutherans, this whole concept of choosing life can be very troubling for us. This at the outset seems to stink of decision theology. That is the belief that is prevalent in some Protestant denominations that believe, teach, and confess that you make a decision to believe and follow Jesus. They say that you just need to pray this prayer and invite Jesus into your life.

But that is not what is going on with the Israelites. They made no decision to be the special people of God. Instead, He chose them. He chose them when He decided to redeem them out of slavery in Egypt and call them to Himself at Mt. Sinai where He declared them to be His people and declared Himself to be their God.

We as Lutherans believe, teach, and confess the same thing regarding how we came to be special children of God, His Church. It didn't happen to you because you made a decision to believe in Jesus. He came first to you and chose you. He chose to come down to earth and become a man, choosing to become your sacrifice to redeem you from slavery to sin, the devil, and eternal punishment. He chose to take all your sins to the cross and die to remove them from you forever. Then He chose to give this wonderful gift of grace to you personally in your baptism. It was there the Holy Spirit chose you to be a special child of God and the personal recipient of all that Jesus won for you: forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life. All these are gifts of love that He chose to give to you, unearned and undeserved, to you who did not and could not love Him first. Yet out of love He still chose you!

What should our response be to such great and precious gifts of love? How do we show love back to our Heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? By our acts of loving obedience to His Commandments. By our choosing not to indulge the desires of our sinful heart but instead do as He commands us.

Well easy enough, right? Done deal, right? I mean let's look at the first one Jesus discusses in our Gospel Lesson: You Shall Not Murder. No problem, right? I haven't murdered anyone lately, have you? But Jesus doesn't just leave it at that, does He? **Matthew 5:21-22** ²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. Breaking this commandment involves more than just 1st or 2nd degree murder. We break this commandment when we let anger rise up in our hearts and take up residence. We break

this commandment when we judge that someone has done us wrong and see it fitting to respond back in words of anger or actions of retribution. We break this commandment even when we say or do nothing to them but harbor angry vindictive thoughts against them. We break this commandment when we refuse to forgive them, even if they refuse to forgive us. We break this commandment when we fail to admit what it is that we pray in the Lord's Prayer. We pray "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us." But when we cannot forgive someone else, do we really want Jesus to pass on forgiving us too?

The same could be said about our failure to keep the other commandments Jesus talks about. "You shall not commit adultery" means more than cheating on your spouse. We break that commandment when impure thoughts cross our mind as we watch certain shows on TV, see certain scenes from movies, visit certain websites. "You shall not bear false witness" means more than do not lie in a court of law. As Jesus says in **Matthew 5:37** **Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.** What He is telling us is that when you promise to do something you'd better do it, and when you promise not to do something you better follow through on that too.

There was a man who needed a root canal done. The dentist gave him several shots to numb his gums around where he would be working. Then the dentist left the room to check on another patient while the shot took effect. When the dentist came back in he was surprised to see his patient removing surgical instruments from the tray and throwing them into the garbage. The dentist exclaimed, "Just what do you think you're doing?" The patient replied, "I decided to throw out all that stuff that I thought might hurt me." In a similar way we like to ignore and throw out those portions of the law that would hurt too much for us to follow. But in doing so we are heading down a road that could lead to choosing not life, but death in the eternal fires of hell.

Repentant Hearts Choose Life

Jesus is making the law a sharp instrument in the hands of the Holy Spirit, not to hurt us, but to help us. He is making sure that we have a repentant heart that desires to keep choosing obedience. Repentant hearts willingly look at the law and apply it to one's own heart and life situation. Repentant hearts realize how far short we all fall in obedience to Jesus. They realize all the ways we choose to walk in obedience to our own sinful heart instead of how Jesus calls us to live. Repentant hearts break over the ways we let our Savior down. But repentant hearts don't stay broken. They look to Jesus on the cross and hold by faith that His suffering and death forgives all our disobedience. They see Jesus' suffering and death as the greatest gift of love to save us from eternal suffering and separation. And they receive that love of Christ as the free gift of grace held by faith.

It is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through God's Word, through the means of grace to move us to see our sin, to see our Savior, and turn from sinful disobedience back to obedience to Jesus' command to love God and love one another. It is the Spirit who moves us to understand we best show that love when we live in obedience to God's commandments. We obey them not to be saved, but because we are saved. We obey them not to earn Jesus love, but as the means to share His unconditional and sacrificial love with those around us.

Conclusion

So how do you think our story of the man in the desert should end? We could have this ending: that the man decided that he was too thirsty to chance pouring the water out to prime a pump that wouldn't work. He decided it was much easier just to drink the water and try to make it to civilization, so that's what he did. He made it one more day and collapsed in the desert and died there.

Or we could have this ending. The man decided to use that half-gallon of water to prime the pump. He poured it all out as instructed and began to pump the handle. But nothing happened. He felt like giving up. But he prayed to the Lord to give him strength, and he kept pumping. He kept at it for what seemed like an eternity. And just when he was almost too exhausted to continue, cool clear water began to flow from the spigot. He sat and drank. He rested. He poured some of that water over himself to cool his body, drank, and rested some more. He eventually filled his two-gallon water bottle. And before he headed out he refilled that half-gallon jug and attached it back onto the pump handle where he found it along with the note of instruction. He did add one thing to that note: Listen to these instructions, they really do work and you'll get more than enough water. Then he signed his name to it.

In our life of faith, our will to obey our Lord's commands can run dry. We need to prime the pump of repentance by availing ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in God's Word. He turns us to see our sin, then to see our Savior. Through His work we draw from the deep and abundant well of God's grace through faith in Christ. And that water of baptismal grace that we draw out is what moves us to live out His call to love God, and love others. God's Word primes the pump of repentance, and it is always there to draw from whenever we find ourselves drying up. It flows with the baptismal water from the well of grace. And through that we have all that we need to choose life with our Savior now and eternal life to come. Amen