

6 Epiphany, Yr. A

February 16, 2020

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:20-37

This morning, I'd like us to consider the readings from Deuteronomy and Matthew starting with the last sentence from last week's reading, continuing into what we heard today. That last sentence had Jesus telling his disciples that their righteousness had to exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees. And that leads into all those challenges that Jesus then issues: it's said, don't kill, BUT I SAY TO YOU, don't even be angry. Or, it's said, don't commit adultery, BUT I SAY TO YOU, don't even be lustful. What's going on here?

You'll remember that righteousness meant acting in accord with the duties and responsibilities of a given relationship. Jesus is expanding that understanding here in two ways. First of all, he's expanding it from outward actions to inward intent. Or reminding his listeners that it's the spirit of the law, not necessarily the letter, that matters. Certainly the outward action matters, both to someone who would be the victim of murderous or lustful intent and to the kind of society that would result if those behaviors were permitted. So that matters. But Jesus knows that the spiritual health of the actor also matters. So harboring anger and resentment against someone can be harmful to the one seething with anger, even though they never act on it. They are being eaten up from within. The same with lust or lying. It's a question about sin – when is the harm committed? And here Jesus is moving it back from the action itself to the heart and mind of the one acting. A good example, I think, would be if I decided to rob a bank, got everything ready, but found that my getaway car had a

flat tire and wasn't going anywhere. Have I committed a wrong? Jesus would say yes.

He's expanding the demand for righteousness in another way as well – he's expanding the circle of those to whom we have a responsibility because of our relationship with them. Think about that for a minute. If every person is a child of God, then every person is my brother or sister and every person comes within the circle of relationship. So, Jesus is saying, BUT I SAY TO YOU wherever there's anger or contempt or selfishness or cruelty, or insults – true life, the life of God that I am offering you, is threatened. So he's both deepening and broadening what it means to be righteous. Ritual and outward behavior isn't enough. Jesus is talking about the choices we have to make if we want to live truly righteous lives.

And that's the tie to the Deuteronomy reading. This is part of Moses' farewell discourse, which goes on for quite some length. He's exhorting the Israelites to live righteous lives by following the commandments and obeying God's laws. Doing so, he tells them will bring life. You need to choose, he says. You can choose to love the Lord, to walk in his ways, to observe his commandments. And that way of living brings life. Just before these verses, he tells them that this isn't going to be that hard for them. "This law...is neither obscure for you nor beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you need to wonder, who will go up to heaven for us and bring it down to us, so that we can hear and practice it? Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you need to wonder, who will cross the sea for us and bring it back to us...No the word is very near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to put into practice." The alternative first reading is from Sirach who is

saying basically the same thing: IF YOU CHOOSE, YOU CAN KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS AND TO ACT FAITHFULLY IS A MATTER OF YOUR OWN CHOICE. ...BEFORE EACH PERSON ARE LIFE AND DEATH AND WHICHEVER ONE CHOOSES WILL BE GIVEN.

A surface reading would, I think, have us all nodding our heads in agreement. Yes, of course, we can choose.

Let's think about choice. I remember when the grandkids starting arriving, one of the moms told about an experiment. As I remember it, the baby had to be about one. You sat him or her down on the floor and put out three things: money, bread and a book. The idea was that whichever the child chose was a reliable indicator of what they would value and how they would live their lives. Sounds clever, doesn't it. But if you think about it, it depends, for instance, on whether the money was something shiny and attractive, or whether it was a ratty dollar bill. Or it depends on whether the baby was hungry at the moment in which case the bread would win. Or if the parents had already been reading to the child, so the book would be chosen. My point here is that choices are already somewhat constrained. And equally constrained are the conclusions that the parents could draw from the baby's action.

Steven Pinker has written a book called *The Better Angels of our Nature* in which he argues that humans have become less violent and that the better angels of our nature that Lincoln talked about are winning the battle over all those things that pull us in the other direction – things like fear or ignorance or the desire for revenge or dominance. But he's clear that we are indeed pulled in two directions. We have to choose. And that there are things that

make the choice for goodness and compassion and inclusion much harder. Humans, after all, as the psalmist says, are not angels...you have made us little lower than the angels is how it's phrased... but still somewhere below them, still somewhere between the animal and the angelic kingdoms. So choice.

Garrison Keillor, another Episcopalian, has a periodic column in which he muses about life. In a recent column he's thinking about the confession of sin in the service and about that Collect of Purity that says that to God all desires are already known. He is thinking about his friend who, he says, "lives in a majestic house overlooking the Pacific purchased with money he made from cranking out mindless TV shows in which unattractive people snarl at each other to the accompaniment of a laugh track. But all that money enables him to jet to Brazil and hike into the rain forest and have more fun and I do and so I entertain hopes that he will fall off a ledge into a slough and be bitten by poisonous fish and catch a rare fish-transmitted disease that leaves the victim feeling lethargic and for which the only cure seems to be fasting, chastity and immersion in cold water. I imagine visiting him to express my insincere sympathy. I confessed the sin of envy but as you can see it is a continuing problem."

He's honest enough to admit that envy would cloud his choices.

The Greeks felt that ignorance was the biggest problem humans faced. That we never have enough or complete knowledge and that, if we knew the good, we would choose the good. In line with that (from my Clearing class) the founders were convinced that Reason was the key to everything; that because humans were reasoning beings, they were capable of self-government. Given that, education was essential. So, envy and ignorance – big

obstacles to correct choice. I would add to that list that, by definition, when we choose, we think we are choosing the good. A LOT of money in the advertising industry goes into convincing us that we must choose this or that product or experience because it will bring us happiness – those products can masquerade as life-giving, as the good.

And then there's fear which is maybe the biggest obstacle to clear choice. Surely there's a reason that that line "Don't be afraid" occurs over and over again in Scripture. Fear can lead us to choose against the good – Edmund Burke, the great English conservative said: No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.

And then there's the failure to recognize, going back to Jesus, that truth that we are all interdependent, all brothers and sisters. If we could really get that, then we would be able to see that my well-being depends, at least in part, on everyone's well-being. Remember the story of the fellow in the boat filled with passengers drilling a hole under his seat and who said that it was his seat and he had a right to do whatever he chose? They pointed out that his actions would sink the boat and they would all perish. How can we come to see that interdependence?

As good contemporary example might be Israel and Palestine. They have been in the news a lot lately. As one commentator pointed out, there will be no ultimate security for Israel until there's peace and justice in the entire area. Until then, the best you can do is hold the lid on. It's that bumper sticker: IF YOU WANT PEACE, WORK FOR JUSTICE.

So choice, yes. But perhaps also a need to realize all those things that constrain our choices and the need to create that kind of society where more and freer choices are possible. I used Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of values in my class last week. You'll remember that he uses a triangle with five levels. On the bottom are the physiological needs: food, clothing, housing. Satisfying those needs come first. The next layer is about safety. Only after that is secured can the person move on to questions of love and belonging. And then to issues around esteem and only then, when all of that is satisfied, is the choice for self-actualization possible.

Moses and Sirach remind us that we must choose and indeed we must. But part of our choice needs to be to work to create that righteous society where everyone has a chance to flourish, where everyone has the basic needs, and the peace and the security which make meaningful and responsible choice possible. That would truly be movement toward the kingdom. Amen.