

“Choose Life”

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*Racial Justice*

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Matthew 5:21-37

*I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you.*

*Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live...*

*Deuteronomy 30:19<sup>b</sup>*

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for loving us as we are, yet challenging us  
to give up what is false and hurtful to us and to others.

Guide us we pray in how we make our choices  
that we might be more loving and joyful as live lives  
that are more authentic and enduring.

Amen

There's a scene in a book called Unconquered by Neil Swanson,  
that has been a source of inspiration for me through the years.

It involves a young girl who is standing trial for murder  
in the Old Bailey courthouse of London, England in the 1760s.

Though she was innocent, she was found guilty and sentenced to hang –  
but then... the judge offers her a choice:

to be an indentured slave in the American colonies for 7 years.

When he asks, “How do you choose?”, she answers, “Not to die, my lord.”  
or in another way of speaking, “To choose life.”

As long as you have life,

you have a chance to make it, you have a chance to turn things around,  
you have a chance to change...

How often, though,

do we settle for second best, continue in self-destructive habits,  
or simply avoid making a change?

Jesus often spoke of ‘eternal life’ which probably needs to be *qualified*  
and not simply *quantified*.

Jesus was about calling people forth into living authentic lives,  
and not simply to be concerned about “living forever”.

Jesus was about getting people to live now, in the moment,  
and not be worried about the future or stuck ashamed of the past  
or living only for the moment, without concern for the consequences.

He accepted us as the poor sinners that we human beings simply are  
and that we are to perfect ourselves... by becoming more ourselves,  
through love & forgiveness – not necessarily in that order.

Willard, p.2

We have to remember, Jesus was speaking to people like us who were  
just as stubborn and clueless, just as neurotic and close-minded,  
just as faithful and brave...

In the first third of the Sermon on the Mount,  
he re-examines some of the commandments,  
to break-up people's literal thinking – and get them to go deeper...

What makes for a successful life?

Jesus' perspective would be at odds with conventional wisdom.

It would seem to make sense that we should want to accumulate wealth,  
fill our lives with things, and lose ourselves in pleasure.

Yet Jesus calls us to find joy in life – by being who we really are,  
by being in relationship with God and in community with other people,  
and by living a purposeful life.

Strict adherence to the 10 Commandments and other Biblical laws  
is not enough to accomplish this.

However, if we reconsider that these laws are like the laws of nature,  
then they serve as a guide and not the walls of a prison.

For example, if you violate the Law of Gravity by stepping off the top of a ladder,  
you're going to get hurt!

So, we should take the Law of Gravity and the Commandments seriously.

Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Thou shalt not bear false witness – as in, “not breaking your word”.

All of these warn us about getting hurt in life  
and Jesus re-interprets each of them... by digging deeper.

It doesn't seem likely the world will go vegan anytime soon,  
so ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is more practically understood to mean,  
‘Thou shalt not murder.’

However, Jesus takes this idea further to mean that  
the same consequences for murder apply to those who nurse a grievance;  
and the consequences grow more severe  
as contempt becomes more casual and commonplace.

The spirit in which financial donations are given and  
court disputes that arise –presumably over commerce of some kind,  
find their way into this discussion, too,  
where Jesus calls for a willingness to negotiate and  
not to devolve into rancorous debate.

Sexual scandals tend to get more attention than financial scandals,  
which says something about the shell game of scapegoating.

Still Jesus addresses adultery as a problem of objectification  
and this applies regardless of gender.

Willard, p.3

Jesus uses hyperbole to emphasize self-restraint... or else,

though to 'pluck [one's eye] out and throw it away' more likely means,  
tear your attention away from ogling and just look away.

How we *look at* others, sizing them up and doing a kind of arithmetic  
can lead to prejudice as well as inappropriate behavior.

*Seeing* the humanity of others, thinking of them as a relative

like mother, father, sister, brother, could help short circuit bad behavior.

However, with St. Valentine's Day just around the corner

I don't believe Jesus would be a spoil sport

for a certain amount of lascivious looking as pre-requisite for a healthy  
romantic – and committed adult relationship, regardless of gender.

Jesus does speak out against divorce – and rather harshly,

but puts the responsibility on men not to take advantage of this option.

Jesus specifically mentions adultery as a legitimate reason for divorce,

but the real issue with adultery is about a breach of loyalty.

Regarding divorce, women were much more at risk of being outcast

in a traditional society – as well as children who are not even mentioned.

Jesus was having to deal with people who had these entrenched prejudices,

so he was focused on making his point with men to do the right thing;

For women's liberation had not been invented yet.

This helps explain why Jesus spoke about how marrying a divorced woman

was still adultery – which sounds less like something Jesus actually supported

and more like a widely held prejudice he was acknowledging –

and using, to protect vulnerable women and children.

Though similar, but not the same

as the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment against bearing false witness,

Jesus refers to passages from Leviticus 19:2, Numbers 30:2,

and Deuteronomy 23:21, when he says,

*'You shall not swear falsely,*

*but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn'...*

meaning, you better keep your word or better yet don't make solemn promises

you can't guarantee anyhow.

The best we can really do under the circumstances of whatever we face in life,

is best left to saying, 'yes' or 'no' about what we do know and what we did do –

and isn't that something we would like to hear more of

coming out of Washington, DC?

Hear now my interpretation of this text, Matthew 5:21-37

the beginning of Jesus' first teaching from the Sermon on the Mount:

Willard, p.4

“YOU HEARD IT WAS SAID TO THE ANCIENT ONES,  
‘THOU SHALT NOT MURDER’ AND  
‘MURDERERS WILL BE BROUGHT TO COURT’.  
BUT I SAY TO YOU, ANYONE WHO FESTERS WITH ANGER  
AGAINST SOMEONE WILL BE BROUGHT TO COURT.  
AND WHOEVER CALLS SOMEONE BY A DIRTY NAME  
WILL FIND THEMSELVES IN PRISON.  
AND WHOEVER CASUALLY SLIGHTS SOMEONE  
IS ALREADY IN HELL.  
SO, BEFORE YOU BRING AN OFFERING TO GOD  
WHILE YOU ARE NURSING A GRIEVANCE, LEAVE YOUR GIFT,  
RECONCILE YOURSELF WITH THAT PERSON,  
THEN RETURN TO PRESENT YOUR OFFERING.  
IF YOU GET INTO A BUSINESS DISPUTE,  
BE ON GOOD TERMS WITH YOUR ANTAGONIST,  
OTHERWISE YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF IN COURT,  
AND THE JUDGE HANDING YOU OVER TO THE SHERIFF  
AND DOING TIME IN PRISON.  
I AM TELLING YOU THE TRUTH,  
THE WORLD WON’T LET YOU GET AWAY  
WITHOUT PAYING OFF ALL THAT YOU OWE.

YOU HAVE HEARD IT SAID,  
‘THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’.  
BUT I SAY TO YOU THAT ANYONE WHO LOOKS UPON A PERSON WITH LUST  
HAS ALREADY COMMITTED ADULTERY  
AGAINST THAT PERSON IN ONE’S HEART.  
NOW, IF YOUR ‘RIGHTEOUS’ EYE CAUSES YOU TO SIN,  
TEAR IT AWAY AND CAST YOUR SIGHT DOWN.  
FOR IT IS BETTER NOT TO BE A SPECTATOR  
THAN TO BECOME A SPECTACLE YOURSELF.  
AND IF YOUR ‘RIGHTEOUS’ HAND CAUSES YOU TO SIN,  
PULL IT AWAY AND KEEP YOUR DISTANCE.  
FOR IT WOULD BE BETTER TO KEEP YOUR HANDS TO YOURSELF  
THAN FOR OTHERS TO SEIZE YOU.  
AND IT HAS BEEN SAID,  
‘WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE,  
LET HIM BE AUTHORIZED TO DO SO.’  
BUT I SAY TO YOU THAT, ANY MAN WHO DIVORCES HIS WIFE –  
EXCEPT FOR SEXUAL DISLOYALTY,  
PUTS THAT WOMAN AT RISK IN SOCIETY.  
FOR THERE IS UNFAIR SOCIAL PRESSURE  
AGAINST A DIVORCED WOMAN IN THIS WORLD.

Willard, p.5

AGAIN, YOU HAVE HEARD IT WAS SAID TO THE ANCIENT ONES,  
‘THOU SHALT NOT BREAK THY WORD’, AND  
‘THOU SHALT HONOR THY PLEDGE TO THE LORD.’  
BUT I SAY TO YOU,  
DON’T MAKE PROMISES AT ALL.  
NEITHER BY HEAVEN WHICH IS THE THRONE OF GOD,  
NOR BY EARTH WHICH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF GOD,  
NOT BY JERUSALEM THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING,  
NOR BY THE HAIRS OF YOUR OWN HEAD  
COULD YOU PRESUME TO PROMISE ANYTHING.  
FOR IT IS NOT YOU IN THE FIRST PLACE  
WHO COULD TURN EVEN A BLACK HAIR, WHITE.  
BUT SAY, ‘YES’ OR ‘NO’ ABOUT WHAT YOU DID DO;  
FOR BEYOND THIS, IT IS QUIBBLING.

The commandments of God are like the laws of nature –  
if we violate them, we can get hurt,  
but they serve to guide rather than imprison us.  
So Jesus calls us out of a life of being afraid of breaking the rules  
and into a life of choosing confrontation and negotiation over violence,  
choosing mutuality and respect over manipulation,  
and choosing to keep promises to a minimum,  
while keeping promises just the same  
with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ about what you did do.  
Amen

*Our lesson today from Deuteronomy 30:15-20 is a challenge to us  
to do the right thing and by so doing, we choose  
what it really means to be alive...*

[Moses said,]

<sup>15</sup> Look here! Today I've set before you life and what's good  
versus death and what's wrong.

<sup>16</sup> If you obey the LORD your God's commandments  
that I'm commanding you right now  
by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways,  
and by keeping his commandments, his regulations, and his case laws,  
then you will live and thrive,  
and the LORD your God will bless you  
in the land you are entering to possess.

<sup>17</sup> But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen,  
and so are misled, worshipping other gods and serving them,

<sup>18</sup> I'm telling you right now that you will definitely die.  
You will not prolong your life on the fertile land  
that you are crossing the Jordan River to enter and possess.

<sup>19</sup> I call heaven and earth as my witnesses against you right now:

I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you.

Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live—

<sup>20</sup> by loving the LORD your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him.

That's how you will survive and live long on the fertile land

the LORD swore to give to your ancestors: to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

*Let us be challenged and guided by these words...*

Matthew 5:21-37

[Jesus said,]

- <sup>21</sup> “You have heard that it was said to the men [and women] of old,  
‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’
- <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother [or sister]  
shall be liable to judgment;  
    whoever insults his brother [or sister]  
shall be liable to the council,  
    and whoever says, ‘You fool!’  
shall be liable to the hell of fire.
- <sup>23</sup> So if you are offering your gift at the altar,  
and there 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 [them], and then come and offer your gift.
- <sup>25</sup> Make friends quickly with your accuser,  
while you are going with [them] to court,  
    lest your accuser hand you over to the judge,  
and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison;  
<sup>26</sup> truly, I say to you, you will never get out till 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 every one who looks at a woman lustfully  
has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
- <sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away;  
it is better that you lose one of your members  
    than that your whole body 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 that you lose one of your members  
    than that your whole body 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 every one who divorces his wife,  
    except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress;  
    and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
- <sup>33</sup> “Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old,  
    ‘You shall not swear falsely,  
    but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’
- <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 what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’;  
    anything more than this comes from evil.