

“A Last and Lasting Word”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, February 16, 2014

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Holy Scriptures: Deuteronomy 30: 11-20 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9

Deuteronomy 30: 11-20 *Exhortation to Choose Life*

11 Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

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 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.

17 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.

19 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, 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.

1 Corinthians 3: 1-9

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? ⁴For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?

⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. ⁹For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

The time came to say, "Fare thee well."

Instead Moses said to the whole people of God:

*“Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,
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.”*

As farewell speeches go, this one by Moses is most unique.

Let's be honest here.

When we think of farewell speeches and songs and blessings,

“Choose life so that you and your descendants may live!”

may not be one that springs to mind.

We are much more likely to remember famous and familiar parting words...

(Speak up if you know who said it!):

“Old soldiers never die, they just fade away.”

--General Douglas MacArthur

"So long, farewell, auf Wiedersehen, goodbye. Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye."

--Von Trapp Family children in *The Sound of Music*

"Happy trails to you, until we meet again. Some trails are happy ones, Others are blue. It's the way you ride the trail that counts, Here's a happy one for you."

--written by Dale Evans and sung by Dale Evans and Roy Rogers

to say farewell at the end of their radio broadcast

"If I leave here tomorrow, will you still remember me?"

--Allen Collins and Ronnie Van Zant, "Free Bird,"

One More From the Road, 1973, performed by Lynyrd Skynyrd

"Be well, do good work, and keep in touch."

--Garrison Keillor

Remember Garrison Keillor's weekly farewell in *Prairie Home Companion*?

"And that's all the news from Lake Wobegon,

where all the women are strong,

the men are good looking,

and the children are above average."

Now that is more like it.

That is how you exit with flair and a flourish.

So what is with Moses and his final speech in Deuteronomy?

Moses was very near to the end of his life on earth.

He called together the second generation of the Exodus community of Hebrews.

The first generation had already passed on;

those who fled Egypt,

who chose to no longer be slaves,

who responded to the winds of freedom and the call to liberation,

who decided to depart with the spoils of the land

and just a step ahead of Pharaoh's army,

who sought a new home they could call their own,

who got frustrated with the wandering and the wondering

so they built a graven image and worshiped it,

that is the generation that passed away.

Moses was of that generation as well.

Moses was near to death,

and he knew that he would most likely not live to see the Promised Land.

Ah, my friends, you can well imagine his disappointment.

So close that he could almost taste it, yet it was not to be.

Sometimes we begin a project,
and we must trust the will and promise of God
that our life's work and joy will be completed in the by and by.

Moses rose to speak his farewell address.

He was not known as a public speaker; that's what Aaron was for!

But on that day, the Lord touched his tongue and gave him a voice.

The audience, the congregation, the gathered faithful

would have understood perfectly well

if Moses' words were bitter or expressed self-pity.

However, that's not what came forth.

Instead he rose to the occasion and shared words of wisdom.

He exhorted them to make a choice -- to choose life! –

and to set God's beacon of hope and meaning ever before them.

He expressed his deepest desire

that all those before him

would walk in the ways of the Lord.

Moses was an encourager right to the end,

and because of that gift of grace

his teachings resonate and resound to this day.

Moses stood and spoke before the Hebrew people; his words echo here today.

“Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,

loving the Lord your God,

obeying...and holding fast to [God].”

Choose now,

before you go one step further,

before you enter into the Promised Land,

before you make a decision that might have a calamitous effect.

Choose now between life and death, between good and evil.

Make the big choice first, now, here, forever,

and all the little choices you will need to make in the foreseeable future

will follow and fall into place.

Once you make the big choices in your life, everything else falls into place.

That is why the big choices matter so much.

Choose life. Choose goodness.

Choose to love the Lord your God.

Choose to obey and walk in God's ways.

Choose to keep the Lord's Commandments.

Do these things, encouraged Moses,

and you will walk with dignity and integrity into the Promised Land.

Choose life,

and you will live.

Choose goodness over evil,

and your life will have meaning.

Choose to follow the Lord's Commandments,

and your life will be justified, clarified and, by the grace of God, sanctified.

There is an absolutely hilarious, thought-provoking comedy routine

by the late George Carlin

in which he analyzes the Ten Commandments.

One by one George Carlin whittles away commandments

he thinks are superfluous or redundant or antiquated,

until he arrives at the conclusion that we only need two plus one,

the last being, *"Thou shall keep thy religion to thyself."*

We see reluctance to obey God's precepts every day, my friends.

We may see it in the mirror, and we may see it in our fair city.

Every day we are affected by such an attitude.

The problem with choosing to whittle away divine Law and Grace

until all that is left are what pleases oneself

is that we are left with a society in which folks think

that laws are written for others, and that we can pick and

choose which rules, if any, we are going to obey or neglect.

Such an approach to life is entirely self-serving and narcissistic,

yet ultimately foolhardy in terms of building a community

in which we seek to liberate and sustain one another,

in which the choices we make impact

not only ourselves and one another

but the whole of creation for years to come.

We fear that God will condemn us if we don't follow the commandments,

yet that is such a negative approach to the character of God.

God helps us to build the character required

to make good choices,

to walk in God's ways,

and to follow the Ten Commandments.

God's nature is to nurture us into blessed obedience and total engagement.

What you win people with is what you win them to.

While we may be tempted to whittle or whine,

God's love is molding and shaping us into movers and shakers.

A religion that is used as a weapon to bludgeon members and neighbors into submission

is cruel and shortsighted.

A religion that is kept to oneself is empty, expressionless, isolated, devoid of meaning and community.

A religion that is given away and shared, by the grace of God, has the capacity and commitment to liberate the oppressed, make the blind to see and the lame to walk,

to give care to widows and orphans,

to release the addicted,

and welcome home the lost, the last, and the least.

Chaplain Jeffery Murphy puts it this way:

*“God has placed before us today life and prosperity, death and adversity.
But we can't choose life and prosperity only for ourselves;
that would be seeking only fleeting things
and bowing down to things that are not of God.
Instead we are called to choose true life and abundance for all.
That requires that we combine our resources and gifts
so all may enjoy the blessings that God has placed before us.”*

(Jeffery Murphy, Chaplain at the University of Mississippi Medical Center,
Jackson, Mississippi.

Journal of Worship Resources, 2010-11)

To choose life and abundance for all requires
that we consider the impact of today's choices on tomorrow and down the
road.

You may have heard it said that some Native American tribes
would not make a decision until they had thoroughly considered
how their choice would impact people born 7 generations hence.

Look back 140 years and check out choices of life and death,
prosperity and adversity that were being made:

Reconstruction was taking root, and then repealed

Women's Suffrage Movement was taking root, and then catching fire

Baseball was taking root, and now spring training is almost here!

What choice are we making now whose long term impact needs to be considered?

What choices are you facing today?

What resources have you called upon?

Who needs your help to make a good decision?

With that I offer to you this morning the 3 "C"s of how to choose between life or death, prosperity or adversity, goodness or evil.

Consider the Consequences

How will the choices I make today impact people seven generations from now?

Is the choice I make in line with God's commandments?

We have a cultural tendency to make choices based on what other people have or reflect.

Oh, she looks happy; I want to be like her.

Oh, he has one of those; I want one, too.

Consider the consequences of your choices.

You may discover that you are less inclined toward selfishness or self-centered thinking, and more apt to walk in the ways of God.

Clarify your Choices

Articulate and fine tune what it is that you must decide upon.

Draw deep upon your spirituality; tap into your relationship with Jesus Christ.

Connect with a source of love and power that emboldens and deepens your decision-making.

Have you made poor or sinful choices in your past? Who here hasn't!

Christ receives your repentant soul, and He loves and forgives you into a new day, a new way to choose life and love above all else.

Consult and Seek Wise Advice

With whom do you consult and seek advice and counsel when faced with a decision?

Reach out to one you trust and who is trusted by other people that you also trust.

Draw deep upon your religious connections with the whole people of God.

The purpose of religion is to connect us with God and one another.

Trust and engage the Church in your process of making important choices.

Ask yourself whether the Church of Jesus Christ is something you go to for an hour or two a week, or is the Church a vital and vibrant partner in the process of helping you to grapple with important choices?

Is there a relationship between making good choices and associating with people who make good choices?

My wife and I dearly want our children – and your children! -- to be in

positive peer groups in school and church and across the city of God. There is a definite relationship between positive peer support and good decision making.

We know this is true because folks who wrestle with addictions or demons or inner turmoil and despair often find support and guidance in Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, Grief and Divorce Support Groups, and so forth.

We know this is true because our congregation is a source of healing and hope for folks wrestling with life's tough, gut-wrenching questions.

What do you think, what does your faith inform you about whether God's will is for us to be in community with Christ and each other as we move toward the Promised Land?

Does such a relationship require a choice on your part?

Moses could easily have said, *"So long! Good-bye! Fare thee well! Shalom!"*

Instead Moses started a movement, a way of living life into the abundance of God.

"Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,"

and you will be filled with all the power of the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!