

Hespeler, 8 September, 2019 © Scott McAndless

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 1, Philemon 1:1-21, Luke 14:25-33

In our reading this morning from the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses is speaking to the people of Israel as they prepare to enter into the Promised Land and he lays before them a stark choice. **“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today,”** he says, **“that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”**

And I know how people sometimes read that verse. It comes, after all, in the context of the law that Moses has just reviewed with the people – the Ten Commandments and all of the other requirements that God has placed on them. In that context, this verse can certainly come across as a threat. “Listen, deez are all the tings I want youse to do and you better do dem and do dem good or you’ll find yourself wearing cement overshoes and sleeping with the fishes if you know what I mean.” It might make God seem like a tyrant or mob boss who is only too happy to punish any form of disobedience with terror and murder.

But I do not think that that is the intention. The God that we meet in the Bible is not that kind of mean and vindictive God but rather a God of grace and love who pours out blessings not only on his own people but on the all the peoples of the earth regardless of whether or not they follow all of the precepts of the Law of Moses. So what we have here is not a threat but a promise. It is saying that God has shown to the people a better way to live through these laws and teachings and inviting them to follow them so that they might live long and prosper in the land that they are about to enter. It is more about a quality of life than it is about a quantity of life – about living a life that is filled with meaning and purpose.

But it is not always obvious to us what things are going to give us that kind of meaningful life. Sometimes what feels right is not what is going to be best for you in the long run. It might feel right to eat a bucket of chocolate every day, for example, but I do not think that that is a course of action that serves you well over the long term. So sometimes we need help to learn some of the non-obvious choices we need to make to live the better quality of life. Moses is saying that the law is there to help us to do that.

That is why I decided this month, based on the readings from the lectionary that are offered to us, to focus on how we – as Christians living in the modern world – could choose life. What are the non-obvious choices that we can make – not out of obligation



and obedience but out of faith and trust in God – that will lead to a life that is more abundant.

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus offers some rather surprising advice on how to choose life. Jesus suggests that choosing life might actually be costly, very costly. Now, that doesn't quite sound right, does it? Most of us approach life with the assumption that top quality life has to do with what you can get out of it, not with what you pay into it.

Jesus actually feels that this is so important that he puts it in stark and shocking terms. **“Whoever comes to me,”** he says, **“and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”** Now, what does he mean by that? Does he mean that everyone who decides to become a follower of Jesus is necessarily going to face being rejected by family members that they love or that every Christian will wind up being crucified by the Romans? Obviously not. Not everyone will pay that kind of ultimate price, of course, but he is saying that it will cost you something and it will be something meaningful – something that hurts in some way.

Now, I think it is important that I pause at this point and simply acknowledge that, just about every day that I am in the church, I have somebody tell me that Jesus was wrong about that – every single day. Just think, for a moment, about the things you hear people talking about in the church – any church. They talk about what they get out of it or, often enough, what they're *not* getting out of it. “Oh, I really felt good coming out of worship today. It really lifted me up,” they might say or alternatively they might say, “Ugh, I just didn't get what I needed out of worship today.” People evaluate sermons in the same way. They talk about how a sermon inspired them or comforted them or taught them something they wanted to know – or alternatively they remark on how it didn't do any of those things and was therefore obviously a bad sermon. People talk about whether or not they are affirmed in their Christian life, whether they are encouraged or loved or sometimes it just comes down to whether they get their way or not.

And I don't mean to imply for a moment that there are not benefits that come to people because they follow Christ or participate in the life of the church. There are. But every time we focus exclusively on these things and whether or not we are getting them, we are arguing against everything that Jesus is saying in this passage. When we are merely focused on what we can get out of Christianity, whether in this life or in the next, Jesus seems to be saying that we are actually missing the point of it. Jesus says that the only measure of a good Christian life is what you put into it.

This idea is rather problematic in the real world. In fact, I feel that I need to acknowledge that you really can't make it through this life if you just give and give and give and never take care of our own needs. If you find

yourself in a relationship where that is the equation – where you are *always* the giver and someone else is *always* the taker – I am sorry to say that you are likely in an abusive relationship and that it needs to change or you need to get out of it.

That goes for the life of the church as well. I know that there are some churches and some preachers who have used these words of Jesus and others like them to place unreasonable and unrealistic demands for obedience and service on the people who are in those churches and I know that that is also a kind of abuse and even demonic abuse in the worst cases.

And I believe that that is why Jesus doesn't simply say that you should give and give and give in your life of discipleship. What he does say is that you should count the cost. That is to say that you should think and plan for what it will cost you so that no one takes advantage of you but also so that you have what it takes to sustain you through to the end.

I think that Jesus recognized just how little sense this would make to people. He understood that people are usually far more focused on what they get out of the Christian life than on what they put into it. And so he gave us a couple of parables, images that we could keep in mind and remember what it is really all about. He said that following him is like when you build a tower and it's like when you send an army to fight a dangerous foe.

And so, to fix that idea in our minds, let's just take a moment to paint a picture of one of those images that Jesus used. Let us imagine our church as a tower. Our church actually is a tower in this community. And, no, I'm not referring to the tower that is part of our church building. That architectural feature is beautiful and, I think, appreciated by the community, but there are ways in which the church itself, by which I mean the community of people here, is a tower in this community. We have a long-standing, and in some ways growing, reputation for caring. People trust us and entrust their resources to us, even though they are not part of this congregation, as we reach out and offer food and clothing and other supports to people in need in and around Hesperer.

That good reputation is no small thing. It is one of the things that gives meaning to everything we do around here. And there is absolutely no way that that could have happened if people had merely been focused on what they got out of the life of this church. People regularly put in work and time. They have been willing, sometimes, to put up with inconvenience and clutter in this building that belongs to us for the sake of those continuing outreaches. People give sacrificially in order to maintain these outreaches and to support the structure of the church that makes them possible. We have built a tower in this community. And I don't know about you, but that makes me feel pretty good, but very few of us get anything out of being that tower except that good feeling. And that is how it should be.

That is but one way in which I see our church life together as a tower. Many of the other things we do together are tower like, but maybe not noticeable in the community in the same way. We lift up praise and worship to God together. We build up one another through teaching and mutual affirmation and we are commissioned and sent out into the world to be the hands and feet of Jesus. We teach the children and youth among us and seek to set them on a good path in life. These are all ways of building towers that are worthwhile.

Today we recognize the tower builders among us. We recognize the elders who take on those key leadership roles and seek to guide the whole church on a spiritual level. We recognize the deacons who care for the membership of the church and seek to support them through the ups and downs and trials of life. We recognize the teachers and leaders for children and youth and those who serve on various committees and who often take care of unseen and thankless tasks that just need to be done in order to keep the whole thing going. And, of course we acknowledge those who participate directly in our outreaches at Hope Clothing, Food Bank and food bank lunches, the Thursday Night Supper and Social and more.

In fact, there is a place for every single person to, in their own way, contribute to this tower that we have built and are building. But what Jesus is saying is absolutely true, if we're only focused on what we get out of this thing called church and whether *our* needs are met, we will not build a tower that stands. The foundation will rot away. So, I would encourage you all to think about what it means for you to be a follower of Jesus in this particular time and place. Let's give up on the notion that it doesn't cost anything to follow Jesus. The cost is great and you need to decide for yourself where you contribute and how. It is not for me to stand here and tell you that you must give in this way or in that way. But I pray that you listen to Jesus and count the cost of what it takes for you to follow him.