

Sixth Sunday After The Epiphany – Olivia Huber

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

When I was first asked to speak at St. Paul's I had two main concerns rattling around in my brain.

1. One: How in the heck do I craft a well-written sermon that, through examination of the lectionary texts, both engages the lovely congregants of St. Paul's applicably and stimulates them intellectually?
2. And two: Will they have a robe compact enough for someone who may or may not be 5 foot tall and/or will people be able to see me over the pulpit?

Well, question number one still has yet to be answered for me, but I am grateful to see that question number two has been resolved. Praise God for hobbit-sized robes, am I right? But then another concern arose. As a semi socially awkward, romantically impaired woman of 21, I didn't really understand when I was assigned this date to preach that I would be preaching on the one, the only, Valentine's Day weekend. As I let that sink in this week as I began writing my sermon, I inwardly moaned. Do I have to talk about love?? Is that what this means?? Or can I just take the Brian Hartley route and give graphic details about how St. Valentine was beaten, beheaded, buried, and disinterred by his followers? That would make for a rousing Valentine's Day sermon.

But, instead, I choose none of the above. I want to talk to you today about life. Of course, love is a part of life. They are intricately intertwined; to live well is to love well. But I don't want to explicitly focus on love, despite its relevance to this Valentine's Day weekend. I want to speak to you out of the encouraging and life giving passage of Deuteronomy. I find this Deuteronomy text fascinating, don't you? God lays it out for Israel and gives the Israelites a choice: Choose life or choose death. Choose blessings or curses. Choose prosperity or adversity. That seems pretty straightforward. I mean, I know what I would choose. But then I started thinking, what does it even mean to choose life? We are all living aren't we? I don't know about you, but life for me seems pretty autonomic. The life that God is offering to the Israelites, though, seems to be something different. Something substantial. It has a weight to it that surpasses the normalcy of autonomic functioning. It has depth and purpose and love and choice. God wants us to know that life. I want to know that life. I want you to know that life. So today the question I am addressing as we move forward is what does it mean to choose life over choosing death?

This choice does not merely concern existence. We are not talking about all of us ceasing to exist. "To be or not to be" is not really the essence of the question we are asking here. God's admonition to choose life, rather, is a culmination of the whole book of Deuteronomy. This call to life, as we find it in this passage, is defined rather clearly here within the context of the rest of the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy tends to answer the questions and concerns of religious practices regarding Israel's obedience to the law and the loyal worship of God by his people. These religious practices, reiterated throughout the book of Deuteronomy, help bring clarity to the readers and hearers of this book in what constitutes correct worship and a faithful lifestyle. In this book we learn

how to worship and live in a way that is obedient to God. Throughout this book, then, it is becoming clearer and clearer what all of life involves.

Not only does the answer to this question come through examining what God has previously said about living life well, but also through understanding God's covenantal nature. The covenant between God and God's people is of utmost importance to God. God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. The six verses of this Deuteronomy passage that we get to study today provide great insight into the covenant of God. I think we even get a quick summary of the major theological points of this covenant, including the central belief of this time that obedience brings blessings and life, while disobedience leads to curses and death.

In these six verses we are presented with two separate sequences of infinitives that speak into the relationship between the teachings of God, his covenant, and life. Here is the first triad of commands we receive in verse 16.

We are to love God, to walk in God's ways, and to keep God's commandments, statutes, and judgments.

Verse 20, as well, presents a variation of the same thing.

We are to love God, to hear God's voice, to cling to God.

I think these two triads of infinitives form a beautiful synopsis of what it means to live. And here we get to the meat of the question. What does it mean to choose life? I'd like to offer three components of choosing life to be considered.

First, choosing life involves loving God. Love. See I told you we would circle back to love. Unlike Valentine's Day sentiments, however, Deuteronomy presents this love as so much more than an emotion and certainly not as an infatuation. To love God is more than just intellectual pursuit or emotional experience. Loving God, instead, is depicted as a whole person experience; it is total, unconditional, deep.

I see this kind of love all over the place in this wonderful world. I see it in the way that people speak out against injustice, longing deeply for freedom for both the oppressed and the oppressors. I see it in the way that friends sit with each other in times of great grief, simply being with one another. I see it in parents who drive an hour and a half on a Sunday morning to see their daughter preach for like 12 minutes. I see it in St. Paul's as we worship our Creator, the author and orchestrator of good. Choosing life involves loving well. It is comprised of holistic commitment to love and to be and to do for the glory of God.

Second, choosing life involves walking in the ways of God and listening to the voice of God. Here we can see some general, biblical images of discipleship coming out in the text. The call to life as well as the call to discipleship demands obedience to the ethics of God. To know what God wants us to be obedient to we must, as his disciples, listen for

his voice, etch his words in our heart, and seek to understand his principles, morals, and passions. Often the word “obedience” gets a bad rep. It seems to be used most often as unexamined submission to authority or uncritical in nature. But the obedience that God calls us to, and the obedience that Deuteronomy envisions, is a responsive obedience to an evaluation of God’s covenant. Obedience here is understood as an active response to the words of God, it is walking, listening, being, and doing, all in the ways God wants us to walk, listen, be, and do. And obediently walking with and listening to God is us participating here and now in the Kingdom of Heaven. With our enactment of the ethics of God, we are bringing the Kingdom here, now, in the present. Our choices transform our world and our relationships. Choosing life is learning to walk in the ways of God while listening to his voice.

Third, choosing life involves keeping God’s commands and clinging to God above all else. This admonition reminds us that the Israelites were expected to act in appropriate ways towards each other and towards God. Here raises another point about living well, our actions affect others. We are not islands. Our choices have results, and the results of our choices affect the people around us. We see this so clearly in the Gospel passage for today, the reading from the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Jesus turns the known Jewish law on its head, infusing already known commandments with kingdom ethics and principles. Jesus had a knack for taking what was known and transforming it into something reflective of the personal, covenantal nature of God. All of the “you have heard this, but I tell you this” that happens in the Sermon on the Mount boils back down to love. Jesus is teaching us how to love right, to love well, to love others, to love God. Jesus, in Matthew 5, takes the principles of the Law concerning anger, adultery, divorce, and oaths, and takes them one step further. Anger is now equivalent to murder and lust now equals adultery. This may seem extreme, but Jesus is showing us that our actions affect others in ways we can’t even understand. Jesus exhorts us to love others through your actions, entering into right relationships with one another. Cling to God, devoting yourself to his ways and following him obediently in all you do. Loving others and God, and living well are intricately tied together. Therefore, keep God’s commands and cling to God in all that you do.

What does it mean to choose life?

Choosing life is to love God with our whole selves. To follow God’s voice as we walk in his ways. To cleave to God by keeping his commandments. To see God in the people we interact with, the creation we tend to, the life we live. This is the way to life, not death. So, St. Paul’s, I exhort you, choose life!