

Epiphany 6A
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood
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Choosing Life

Making choices.

From the time we're very young, we begin to make choices. Think back to the way our children clearly let us know when we've served food they don't like. I clearly remember the dinner table drama at our house, as our youngest daughter insisted she didn't like food she'd never tasted, because she heard her big brother say he didn't like it — or maybe it was actually because something simply looked too green.

As we grow, we try new things, and we keep making choices. We decide on our favorite sports and types of art, our preferred music, the best books and games. We decide who and what does and doesn't interest us. We learn to weigh alternatives, deciding what's acceptable and not, what's good and bad. We begin to develop into who we are.

But we don't make all those choices on our own. What we decide is influenced, both directly and indirectly, by many sources: from our own stubbed toes and disappointments, to what we learn from others at home, at school, and at church; from friends and families, and from the culture that surrounds us. And we come to realize over time, that some choices are more important than others.

Our lives revolve around decisions and today's lessons also hinge on choice: the choice to live a covenant life as a follower of Jesus in our day-to-day lives, or to be left to our own human devices, and the pain and suffering that can cause.

Our Old Testament reading starts us off with the renewal of the covenant between God and God's chosen people. After years of wandering in the wilderness, God's people are preparing to enter the promised land. Moses asks them to choose — to choose between life and God's blessing or death and destruction. It appears to be such an easy choice. But choosing life will come with responsibilities: to love God, to walk in God's ways, to keep God's commandments. And there's that pesky word *obey*. I'll admit, I twitch just a bit, when I hear that word. That word *obey* sparks warnings for me, triggering my own fear of unthinking obedience to authority.

But I've come to know that I need to slow down and listen, because Moses isn't talking about submissiveness. This isn't about subservient behavior, but about walking with God, about listening to God with all our heart, about loving God with our whole being. Obedience to God is about seeking life, not death. And yes, it's costly to choose life, for it means making changes and a willingness to be transformed.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds us how messy it is, when we focus on worldly ways, instead of God's ways. The people of Corinth, these new Christ-followers, are still "fleshy" people. They've decided to try to live their lives within the norms of their society, still using their culture to define their life's purpose as they try to navigate towards a wholehearted life.

Paul tells them that it's as if Christ hadn't made anything new, hadn't initiated a new creation. They had not yet made the tough decision, the choice to turn away from old habits. They were not yet ready to answer God's call to mercy, compassion, love, and justice — to shape their lives in the light of the cross. For when we choose to be servants of God, when we genuinely claim our identity as disciples of Christ, there are implications. It's costly to choose life, for it changes how we live in the world.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus gives us examples, life models, to help us gain a broader understanding of what it means to live in a covenant relationship with God and be obedient to God's law. Jesus goes to the root, the source of God's command and helps us to see beyond the letter of the law to the Spirit of the law, stepping away from traditional human interpretations and showing us the truth of their deeper meanings.

Jesus tells us that God cares about relationships. It's not enough to simply obey the command to not murder, for anger and verbal abuse are also destructive. God not only cares whether we kill one another, but also about whether we're hostile and abusive towards each other. Jesus points us to the better way, teaching us to urgently seek reconciliation and rebuild relationships in the spirit of love, to seize the opportunity to seek and give forgiveness, before it's too late.

Then Jesus speaks about the laws on adultery and divorce, and if you listen closely, you can understand why his words are so radical. It's important to remember that in the 1st century women were possessions — like cattle, land, and houses — and in situations of sexual impropriety, women were routinely considered the offending party, regardless of the circumstances. The Old Testament speaks of adultery as a married woman's involvement outside the marriage, a violation of the husband's exclusive rights to his wife, for she is his property. A woman who was raped brought shame on herself, as well as her family. Wives could be cast aside for little cause, including petty reasons, like burning bread.

Jesus words expand the interpretation of the law, for he knows this cultural imbalance and he's addressing this particular teaching towards men. And although our modern ears may not hear it, Jesus is recognizing the dignity of women and warning against a culture of male domination and privilege. Jesus expects women to be treated with respect and dignity, for they too are his followers, his disciples, and beloved by God. Our Redeemer calls all of us to respect the dignity of every human being, for people are not to be used, nor abandoned, nor discarded, but recognized as being created in God's own image.

In these life examples, and there are more in next week's lectionary, Jesus is teaching us to set aside those narrowly drawn and limited human interpretations of the law, and instead to hear God's law with ears attuned to God's own spirit of compassion, mercy, justice, and love.

Faithfulness to God is meant to foster human flourishing. God calls us to respect each other, to love each other. Following in Jesus' footsteps is choosing to defend the defenseless, to give voice to the voiceless, and to show compassion towards those at the margins: the poor and oppressed, the refugee and immigrant, the prisoner — it's choosing to treat all people with dignity, regardless of race, religion, creed, or sexual orientation — to see God within every other human being.

Choosing to be obedient to God, living in a covenant relationship with our Lord and Savior, is hard. It's costly, for it involves committing ourselves, with God's help, to moving beyond our "fleshiness," our natural inclinations to be fearful of others, to focus inward, to aligning ourselves with the cultural status quo. Choosing Christ is deciding to live lives that reflect Christ's love to all persons.

How is God calling each one of us to deepen our faith? What change in our day-to-day lives is the Spirit nudging us towards? What are we doing to open ourselves to hearing Christ's voice with the ears of our heart?

Following our Lord and Savior is about continually discovering how to reflect the love of God into a world that desperately needs it, by living into God's command to love our neighbor. What will we, as individuals and as a community, choose to do, beginning this week, to carry our love of God outside of these walls and into the world?

Amen.