

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

I'm going out of my norm today; I made a choice to preach on our Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy instead of the gospel reading from Luke. Deuteronomy as a whole is presented as a sermon by Moses to the people of Israel as they are camped on the far side of the Jordan River. They anticipate crossing the river and entering the promised land very soon. The people have never been in Canaan nor lived in any settled area. The generation that left Egypt at the time of the exodus has died in the wilderness, and these people Moses is addressing are their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, all born during the 40-year journey to Canaan. In today's passage from Deuteronomy Moses is speaking to the Israelites about the covenant he had received from God. He had no choice but to deliver a message that spoke life, the very survival of the people of Israel was at stake, and it was a message that was hard to hear. Moses said, "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;" Moses was giving the people the hard choice to stop worshipping the gods of the land and choose to worship the one God of heaven and earth.

As humans we make choices on a daily, if not hourly basis. What will I wear today? What will I eat, will it be healthy or just a quick snack to get me through?" Will I attend church this morning? Then there are those choices where we really can't be choosy. In rural Arizona, a man went to see the Hopi Indians perform ceremonial dances. It was a long, lonely drive to the reservation across secluded desert terrain, and the last 65 miles of it was over very rough roads. Late afternoon, after the dances, the man returned to his car only to discover he had a flat tire. To make matters worse, he had no spare in his trunk. But he remembered seeing the only service station in the area about 5 miles back down the road. After getting a ride to the service station, he found the elderly owner sitting in a chair drinking a soda. The stranded man asked, "Excuse me, sir, but do you fix flats?" The man said, "Yep." So the man asked, "How much do you charge?" The owner replied, "What difference does it make?" There really was no other choice.

If only all choices were that easy. That's why Moses' had to tell the Israelites to make a choice and try to convince them to make the right choice. If they chose wrong, they would lose God's promises, they would have to live with the consequences of their choice. One of the marks of maturity is the discovery that the choices we make have consequences. If I chose to go to a hockey game every Saturday night you would most likely fire me because I'd have no voice on Sunday morning! It would be a choice I would regret. We reap what we sow.

That is something that hasn't changed. When you sow a good life, a life of integrity, of kindness, of paying attention to your relationships with God and your neighbor, of taking care of your body, mind, and soul, the result is a good life of lasting friendships, better than average health, and a feeling of deep satisfaction. It may not bring you prosperity, God never promised those kinds of riches.

But what about when you do what God asks of you, you pray, you love your neighbor, you care for others, and yet God answers your prayers opposite of what you have asked for? We all prayed so very hard that Char would be healed. And yes, she was healed, she was perfectly healed, but that isn't what we wanted. We didn't want her taken from us. God sees things differently than what we see them. God's ways are not our ways. I wish I had a pat answer for why our prayers were answered in the way they were, but I don't. And it hurts. Even now we have choices we can make. We can be hurt and angry at God, and that's ok, God is big enough to hold our anger. We can become bitter and choose to turn away from God. Or we can accept and trust God, knowing that God is love and even though we don't understand it now, Char's death fits into God's perfect plan. It is God's will that we make choices that

will lead to life, a life filled with blessed friendships now and an eternal life with God and those who have chosen to follow God's commandments.

We do have the choice. Moses tells the people: one way is life and blessings, the other is death and curses. There's no doubt about which way Moses wants the Israelites to go. Choose to follow the Lord and be blessed with life, or choose not to and have no blessing, no growth. It's a clear-cut choice, there is no third option. The choice they make changes everything.

Later in the history of the people, King Josiah ordered a repair of the temple. While the work was being done a high priest found a scroll believed to be part, or possibly all, of Deuteronomy. When the king opened and read it he "tore his clothes", a common expression of grief in biblical times. He recognized how far his people had drifted away from the life of blessing that Deuteronomy described.

This text is that important. Moses declares there is the way of life and growth or the way of curses and stagnation. There is God's way and the other way. It is up to us to choose. This is not just an Old Testament decree. Jesus has said the same thing. We need to make wise choices, to put God above possessions. Even though there is truth in the statement, "Making good choices is a secret to a meaningful and happy life," there is more to it than that. It isn't just a suggestion for success. It's a call to decide, will we be God's people or not? That's the choice.

Moses tells the people that there are moral absolutes in life, that certain things are always right and other things are always wrong. There is clarity about the laws of God in this life that we sometimes don't want to admit. And, yes, there are some things about God's ways that are unclear to us. We do encounter some problems where the right direction is not altogether clear. But for the most part there is nothing ambiguous about God's way, compared to the way of the world. The message of Moses is strong and straight forward, Only one choice is the correct choice and the choice that will result in blessing.

And the way to make the correct choice is to love and obey. Moses links these two words with blessing. "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."

Obedience isn't very popular these days... we hear that in the phrase "rules were made to be broken". We like keeping our options open and having freedom. But the thing is, obedience and freedom are directly connected. Where there are no rules to follow there is trouble. I saw that when I was in the middle east... traffic had no set rules to follow other than staying on your own side of the road and it wreaked havoc, with accidents at every corner.

When we stay withing God's commandments we are free to live without moral guilt and free to make all kinds of personal choices that allow us to live a blessed life. When we head out over the desert without a spare tire we're going to possibly end up with a flat and pay whatever the owner of the service station wants to charge us because we have no other choice.

The other key word in the phrase is love. Moses says choosing life and blessing means to love God, walk in God's ways, and observe God's commandments. And it goes both ways. Moses uses the word love all through Deuteronomy. God deals with people with love. Love is both God's character and God's command. Love is not simply a feeling; it is an action. God's love in action delivered the Hebrew's from Egypt. Israel's love for God, and our love for God, is also active, demonstrated through our obedience to God's commandments.

So there are really only two choices: God's way, or the other way. Make the good choice. All glory be to God.