

## CHOOSE LIFE

**Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37**  
**The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (A)**  
**February 16, 2014**  
**All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia**

I was talking to a friend who has been widowed in the past year, and it was only after we had ended our conversation and hung up the telephone that I realized we had been talking about *choosing life*. Certainly her experience in a group of recent widows sharing their grief was painful for her, but as we talked it was clear that heading into her own pain was going to be the way through it for her. And while she might know pain, she would not be damaged. She was choosing *life*.

As we make our way through the seasons of our lives, much as we make our way through the seasons of the church calendar, there are going to be times of greater and lesser intensity in our commitments and our responses to life. I have found myself falling into routines in recent months and our snow days this week have shaken things up for me in some good ways, granting me some time to move my own personal agenda forward rather than somehow going through the motions of a life that can seem so dominated by routine. Get up, walk the dog, make lunches, do the school run, get to the gym, sit in traffic on Ponce and usually be here by 8:30 a.m. for a long and full day.

All of us get into these kinds of routines, but so too do all of us, when we fall into a routine, find it easy to forget that what we are is choosing *life* rather than *death*. In this community, we are about receiving and proclaiming and receiving again nothing less than God's saving grace. We can drift through some seasons in our lives forgetting that what we are about in this community is nothing less than salvation. We practice what really matters that we may be shaped by God for life. We practice worship. We practice generosity. We practice truth telling, service, justices, confession. We practice community. Every one of the things we do here are about claiming the promise of abundant life. This will not always mean intense feeling, nor will it always mean the absence of pain, —although both are possible. What we are about is choosing *life*.

I am told that “many people today” do not expect to find God in Church. I'm moderately suspicious of such blanket statements because they tend to be made by self appointed spokespeople for those unnamed “many people today”. And those spokespeople are, as often as not, church people trying to show how understanding they are so that those same “many people today” come to *their* meaningful and relevant church, rather than all those other boring ones. What you can expect *here*, as you engage the practices of faith along with others in community, is that you will find yourself living more courageously, more faithfully, more lovingly, more generously, more

hopefully, more compassionately, more justly and much else besides that makes for abundant life. Along the way, it is not uncommon for you to receive experiences of intimacy with God, although those are things that we cannot conjure or guarantee as they are *always* and by definition, gratuitous or gifts of grace.

As for my widowed friend, however, so for all of us: Choosing life is the harder road. There is no cheap grace on offer here. Let's talk about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The law says "You shall not murder." But I say to you that if you are angry or belittling or dismissive of another, then you are just as liable to judgment as that murderer. You know not to commit adultery, but if you men so much as flirt with a married woman, you will be undermining the very community that is life giving for all people and you will be liable to judgment. Let your word be your word, and live with the kind of integrity demanded by the spirit of the law and not the letter only.

Jesus knows full well that obedience to the law that had been given to Moses was the way of righteousness, the way of right relation with God, the Way of Life. But by his time, rather than the law being a graceful gift of identity and the assurance of justice for *all* the people of God including the poor and weak, the widowed, the wayfarer and the orphan, it had become a means of control of some by others. So Jesus came to

fulfill the law and the prophets, not overturn them.. From now on, he says, in effect: What you sought in the law you now find in real right relationship with me. “I am the Way of Life.”

The ethical demands of the Sermon on the Mount go way beyond the righteousness of the law. It is an ancient version of the modern saying “just because it is legal, does not mean that it is right.” Jesus expects his followers to be fully alive as we exhibit the kind of absolute integrity that he made manifest even as he went to his death. This can seem all but impossible, and in a sense it is. But first think about the person in this world whom you have loved best. That is the kind of love that calls you to be better than you are, when you will be your best self for that person, and in so being, you will be more fully the person you were created to be. And before we get disheartened by the real ethical demands of the gospel and the reality that there is no way we are likely to meet them in our own power, then we can remember the whole Sermon on the Mount. We can remember that even our integrity, such as it is, is a gift of divine grace. A scholar called Ulrich Luz of the University of Bern in Switzerland has identifies a structure to the Sermon on the Mount with the Lord’s Prayer at its heart, and all that precedes it forming a parallel or mirror image of all that follows. In this scheme, Jesus’ radical demands of righteousness are mirrored by a section the heart of which is

a reminder not to worry about so much, to consider the lilies of the field, because in the end, if we are in right relation with God we will be living with ever greater integrity, even as we are reminded that we are not God and do not have divine powers.

So one way we can hear Jesus' sermon in a particular way for this time in our common life is a prophetic call to wake up and to choose life again. Lent is almost upon us, a season for self-examination and combating the shadows. We often take on ascetic disciplines for this season and *askesis* originally meant 'shadow boxing'. Every one of us knows where it is in our lives we engage in deathly behaviors. It might not be belittling others or being lustful. It might be alcohol or computer games or escapist novels or movies. It might be any kind of compulsive behavior like worrying about money or security or cleanliness or how much we weigh or how we look. At any rate Lent is a season to 'step it up', to remember the depth of the truth that we are not God and to turn again toward the kind of life that is marked by integrity and both expected and made possible by Jesus. Lent is an opportunity for us to remember and renew the reality that we are here for nothing less than life-saving salvation, to renew our sure and certain knowledge of the power of God and to invite others to share with us in choosing life, like the widow facing into her own pain, the addict confessing her addiction, the

prisoner being released from prison, like anyone finding the spark of life being fanned into a flame that drives away the kingdom of death.

In our customary time of silence for prayer, allow something to come to mind that you know is your spiritual challenge in this season. As you look toward Lent remember that God has set before us a choice: Life and prosperity or death and adversity. In silence, in the assurance of grace that is costly, and in response to the gospel, let us pray...