

6th Sunday after Epiphany 12 Feb 2023
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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. Let's pray: . . .

The older I get the more I think about the choices I've made and their consequences. Sometimes I was sure about the choice I was making, at other times, not at all. Some choices I'd make again, others I definitely wouldn't.

We all have our reasons for the choices we make. Sometimes our choices are about gaining approval and acceptance, wanting to fit in and be liked. Sometimes our choices arise from a desire to be loved and accepted. We choose based upon the costs, benefits, and risks associated with our choices. Sometimes we've chosen to give up and others times to plough our way through. We've probably made choices that we hoped would create the identity we wanted. Sometimes we choose power, control, or security. Often our choices are about self-protection or making ourselves feel better and happy. Sometimes they've been about seeking revenge to get back at someone.

Our readings today suggest that God's statutes, commandments, ordinances, decrees – the Law, must feature prominently in our decision making, because it is tied directly to our salvation. In fact, Jesus goes hyperbolic in his portrayal of the Law in today's gospel by teasing out the extent to which the commandments impact our lives. It's not enough, Jesus says, to simply restrain from murdering someone. We'll be just as liable to judgement if we're angry with a brother or sister. There's absolutely no escape and there're no exceptions. St Paul confirms this: "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:22,23), and, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). So, how do we choose life? What, or should I ask; Who, is our way forward?

Friends, when Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said.... But I say to you...,” he’s expressing his love and concern for the well-being of humanity – his creation. Jesus wants everyone, those he loves, to understand the seriousness of the consequences of transgressing/going against God’s plan for our good. He hypes it up to show us how very much we are lost without him. Jesus wants us to know that we can do nothing, indeed are nothing, without him.

In his finest theological treatise, Luther* replies to Erasmus of Rotterdam on the subject of free will, asserting this:

‘Man, before he is created to be a man, does and endeavours nothing towards his being made a creature, and when he is made and created he does and endeavours nothing towards his continuance as a creature; both his creation and his continuance come to pass by the sole will of the omnipotent power and goodness of God, who creates and preserves us without ourselves. . . . So, too, I say that man, before he is renewed into the new creation of the Spirit’s kingdom, does and endeavours nothing to prepare himself for that new creation and kingdom, and when he is re-created he does and endeavours nothing towards his perseverance in that kingdom; but the Spirit alone works both blessings in us, regenerating us, and preserving us when regenerate, without ourselves. . . .’ [53,54].

I say again, we can do nothing, indeed are nothing, without Jesus.

I want to sound a warning here, about wolves in sheep’s clothing. There’re those who will try to convince you that in order to be saved you have to make a decision for Christ. That you, by some miraculous gift, have the power of human reason to choose Christ, to choose life, and only then be baptised because you have made this choice. They will tell you that your infant baptism is invalid because you weren’t able to make a conscious choice for Christ as an infant. But did St Paul say, “For by the power of human reason you have been saved through your own effort, . . . and this is your own doing; it is not the gift of God – but the result of your own works, so that Christ may not boast”? No! This is a load of clap-trap decision theology and as Lutherans we must totally reject such false teaching!

Honestly folks, Luther's resurrection of the Gospel from its thousand-year medieval grave, gives me a great sense of relief. It allows me to exhale and enjoy a peaceful and quiet conscience. After all, choosing life or death; blessing or curse; eternal light or darkness is something I feel totally unqualified, totally unprepared, and completely incapable of doing or understanding. Such a "choice" is way above my pay grade and station in life. The simple corrective to this conundrum for us is found in the Gospel of John where Jesus says, "You did not choose me but I chose you" [15:16].

In Judaism, prospective students seek rabbis to become their mentors; to train for the ministry, if you like. The greater the rabbi, the more students seek his assistance. Jesus, however, chose his own disciples.

There's great prestige in being apprenticed to a noted rabbi, so we'd assume that Jesus chose the best and brightest students. We'd be incorrect. Jesus' first disciples were hardly great scholars. At times, the Gospels portray them as a bit thick-headed, weak of faith, contradictory, doubtful, competitive – a lot like us. A few, such as Peter, James, and John, became prominent, but even they often wandered off course. Most of them remained obscure. One betrayed Jesus.

We wonder what Jesus was thinking when he chose this very ordinary group of disciples. And yet, the growth of the first-century church was explosive. These disciples did great things, not because they were great, but because Jesus who chose and empowered them is great.

Today, Jesus is fishing for more than mere compliance with the Law. He knows we can't meet God's perfect demands. Jesus knows that we can do nothing without him and that we need him. Jesus wants to transform our hearts. And transformation only occurs through the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit – "the letter [Law] kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). The Law's useful function is that it points the way to life. Jesus came to make us alive. He set us free from bondage to sin by fulfilling the Law's requirements within himself and "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The important lesson for us today is that God chooses whom God chooses. God empowers whom God empowers. Look around you. God hasn't chosen the best and brightest. God's mission is done by ordinary people distinguished by one characteristic—they have surrendered their heart to God. That should encourage all of us. Be encouraged, Saints. The star athlete or the most popular person might be too full of self to be of much heavenly good. The person who seems to have the least to offer can be the person whom God chooses to transform the world. God chooses whom God chooses for God's good purposes.

What Jesus wants each of you to hear today is this:

- I chose you. I picked you. I want you.
- I love you with the same love that the Father loves me. You have what I have.
- I give to you the joy that my Father and I share. You are a part of us.
- You are my joy, my life, and my purpose.
- I want your joy to be full, complete, whole, and perfect.
- You are my friend.
- I have told you everything. Nothing is held back or kept secret.
- I appointed, ordained, commissioned, and sent you to bear fruit, to love others. I trust and believe you can do this.
- I am the way, the true, and the life. Your life!

So, be consoled, God's beloved, that when you worry whether you've chosen life or death in any decision made, action taken, or word spoken, Jesus invites you to repent and be reassured that he forgives all of your sins. Jesus trumps all of your misunderstandings and misgivings by declaring, "I choose you. You will live because I have chosen you for life." Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*Martin Luther on "The Bondage of the Will": a new translation of *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525) by J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston, published by James Clarke & Co. Ltd. 1957.
