

Life

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
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6th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Deuteronomy 30:15-20



There are some laws out there that feel rather arbitrary. Back in the day, Mack Hatcher was a two-lane road with constant traffic snarls, and the speed limit was fifty-five. Now most of it is a beautiful four-lane highway that moves along quite nicely, and the speed limit is forty-five. Why? Because some people decided that's how things should be.

Frederick Buechner points out that there are other kinds of laws. You might call these, "just the way things are" laws. Take gravity, for instance. You can decide you don't like the law of gravity. You may even decide you don't believe in the law of gravity, but that will not make the law any less real if you slip on the side of a cliff high in the mountains. Gravity, whether we understand it or not, just is.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, our text comes at the end of a long speech given by Moses. In the context of the book, the people stand on the banks of the Jordan River, about to cross into the Promised Land. They have wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Moses will not cross with them. A generation has passed for them, and their long-awaited arrival has come. During the speech, Moses spells out the law.

The essence of the Law lies in the Ten Commandments. And all of them stem from the first one – "You shall have no other gods before me." God is one. The people are about to enter a land where there will be many gods on offer – fertility gods, agricultural gods, gods of war. They will have the ability to chase after any god that suits their perceived needs.

Moses reminds them that it is Yahweh who led them out of Egypt and Yahweh's laws that make for life. Keeping Sabbath in order to remember that God is the Creator and we are creatures, and that God does not need us to keep the world moving. Honoring father and mother, living peaceably with one another, free from coveting and stealing and lying. This is the good life. This is life, announces Moses. Choose life.

The law all boils down to these, which we spoke aloud this morning: love God, love your neighbor. Choose to live by these lights, and you will surely live. These laws Moses presents like they are the laws of gravity. To keep them is to recognize a deeper reality at the heart of all things, the keeping of which results in life; the denial of which is like stepping off a cliff.

Someone asked me the other day if I would define a disciple. We throw that term around a lot at my church, he said, What's the elevator speech version of what it is? Having been educated a few years ago on what an elevator speech is – selling your idea to the CEO on the elevator ride from the lobby to the top floor – I gave it my best shot.

“A disciple is a follower of Jesus Christ.” There, I thought. The elevator doors haven't even shut and you've got your answer.

“Well, then, the question remains. Define a follower of Jesus Christ.”

“Sure,” I said, “a follower of Jesus Christ is someone who follows Jesus Christ.” I thought it was a clever answer. Still haven't made it to the second floor.

He wasn't laughing at this point, so I tried to elaborate. “I believe a follower of Jesus lives by the Way of Jesus in the world and can be found among the people Jesus is found among.”

We were out of time, and I could tell my answers were still not satisfying. “I could ask you to define the Way of Jesus or just who exactly the people are Jesus is found among, but I know you need to go.”

I thanked him for the conversation and pushing me to clarify, but later – as is often the case – the answer came to me after he was gone, I mean the answer deep down. To know the Way of Jesus one has to read and hear the stories of Jesus; to know the people Jesus was found among, one would need to read and hear it some more. It seems to me that being a disciple is choosing to love God and love one's neighbor. Its goal is not going to heaven when you die, but *living* while you yet live. It is about love, and if you ask me to define love, well, then, I would say you will need to go back to those stories and read and hear some more. There's life, true and abundant and authentic, right there, in those stories, for you, for me.

Moses does not place Jesus before the people. But he does place this Law that Jesus says he has come to fulfill, the Law we are able to read through the lens of his life, death, and resurrection. The people will never have to wonder what makes for life – they

only need turn their hearts to the law. And at the heart of the Law is love for this gracious, liberating God, and love for our neighbors. To live this way means life while we yet live.

“The realization of that life that is good – indeed, that good life, which is God’s gift to God’s people – does not just happen automatically. The land given must also be a land taken; the life offered must be a life lived out.”

I will never forget the words of a preacher who wrote that there is a moment in life that is the holiest of all, holding the most potential for transformation. It’s that moment when someone holds out a gift to you. In that moment, you have to decide whether to take it. If you take it, if you receive, the bond is formed between giver and receiver, a covenant.

“The life offered must be the life lived out.” Choose life.

I see these posts on Facebook. Usually they are photos of folks on vacation at some beach, or enjoying a beverage, or sitting out next to a smoking grill on the deck.

#lifeisgood.

I try to always like those posts, because I want to affirm the search for the good life, and every approximation to it is worthy of a like. I also suspect, if pressed, most of these folks would say the beach is great, but it was the long walks and heart-felt conversation with the one I love that made the trip. And the cold beverage out on the deck with a grill smoking in the background is wonderful, but what made the space sacred was the easy laughter and mutual love with my son that made the evening sacred.

It is the embracing of those gifts – love of God, love of neighbor...love...that makes for the good life, for living while we yet live.

Today, like God did through Moses, God today offers a gift. Christ sets a table. It is a table for the poor and the rich, the sick and the well, the good choice makers and the bad, for all. And when we pray our thanksgiving at this table, we will the story of God with us in Jesus Christ. As we eat and drink, we are embracing the gift, choosing love, choosing life, embracing the story, embracing the law, which just is, thanks be to God. Amen.