

Choose Life, not Flexible Ethics Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37 E6/A
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; Trinity Episcopal Church, Sutter Creek, CA 2-12-17

The other day, I read a question on the internet from a young man seeking a job. He was perplexed about a listing that mentioned “flexible work ethics.” He wanted to know what that could mean when used in a job offer. Hmm...flexible work ethics! Sounds to me like a euphemism which probably means no ethics at all or at least no real commitment to an underlying principle that would guide one’s choices in the workplace.

Several folks responded to his question by advising him to stay away from such a company. Some warned that this listing was not main stream but unethical, perhaps dealing in pornography or weapon sales. One respondent thought flexible work ethics meant that an employee might be asked to do something that is technically legal but not ethical, like mining anonymous data to extract personal information about people. Still others were concerned that flexible work ethics would require a person to lie as part of the job.

Another phrase that also popped up on social media is the phrase, “alternate facts.” According to Webster’s dictionary, a fact is a piece of information presented as having an objective reality. While facts can be interpreted in different ways, stating a fact means that the information is real and has actually happened. There is no such thing as an alternate fact. Either it happened or it didn’t.

Back in 1949, George Orwell published his novel, 1984. It is a story about a dehumanizing and fearful future under an authoritarian regime. A devious Big Brother government spies on its citizens and forces them into “doublethink,” compelling them to simultaneously accept contradictory versions of the truth. Even the names of the four Ministries by which the people are governed are an intentional reversal of facts: “The ministry of Peace concerns itself with War. The Ministry of Truth with Lies; the Ministry of Love with Torture; and the Ministry of Plenty with Starvation. These contradictions are a deliberate attempt to confuse the people and lead them to a place of mental cheating.

It is into this context of mental cheating, flexible ethics, fake news, half-truths, media manipulation, ideological framing, fraud, scientific fabrication, false witness, and propaganda that Jesus tells his disciples: “Let your word be *Yes, Yes* or *No, No*; anything more than this comes from the evil one.” (Mt. 5) Let’s take a closer look at today’s biblical readings.

In our first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, the Hebrew people are about to cross over into the Promised Land. In preparation, Moses speaks the words which the Lord commanded him: “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, & holding fast to him.” (Deut. 30) Moses was speaking to a band of restless, escaped slaves from Egypt. Knowing that without a set of guidelines, without a focus of principles, without a firm grasp of ethics, they would be unable to create a civilized and thriving society. So, Moses insists that they worship one God, meaning they are to commit to one set of unifying and life-giving principles based on love of God and love of neighbor.

I am not sure the Hebrew people were very successful in worshipping one God. Some ended up worshipping money, others worshipped power, while still others placed themselves at the center of the universe. Instead of following the spirit of the law, many became legalistic and found ways to circumvent the commandments. For instance, the commandment “thou shalt not commit adultery” did not mean that a married man would be monogamous. He could have sexual relationships with a female slave without having any moral reservation. After all, she was a piece of property, not someone’s wife. The commandment, “thou shalt not kill” was also qualified. You were permitted to kill the enemy or an unfaithful wife, and in some cases, an insubordinate child.

Flexible ethics and loose interpretations of the law began to infect the people of God who originally were set aside to be holy. Whenever the moral code is manipulated to satisfy one’s desires, then society has begun its decline. So, Moses reminds the people: “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, & holding fast to him.” (Deut. 30)

In today's gospel story, Jesus continues this theme of choosing life. In his "Sermon on the Mount," he addresses some of the more contentious issues of his day: Anger, adultery, divorce, and the taking of oaths. These four themes deal with broken relationships. Jesus encourages his disciples to live God's commandments in a new way, not in legalistic terms but in a righteous way that comes from the heart. He makes a connection between thoughts, feelings, and actions, all of which are important in choosing life and creating healthy relationships. After all, thoughts and feelings do matter. Every emotion begins with a thought. Good thoughts bring good emotions; bad thoughts bring painful emotions. The words you mutter to yourself and the thoughts that you dwell on have the power to encourage or discourage, to motivate or deflate, to generate joy or generate sadness. Little by little, the conversations that you hold in the privacy of your mind and the feelings that occupy your life are determining your destiny. These thoughts and feelings can move us towards life or propel us downward towards adversity.

For instance, anger destroys relationships. Anger can trigger us to insult others while in extreme cases, can lead to acts of violence. Lustful thoughts can foster adultery of the heart which undermines the mutuality of marriage. Divorce is often the outcome when the sacredness of marriage is undermined, the ultimate broken relationship where both children and parents suffer.

At the end of today's passage, Jesus calls into question the taking of oaths. Why? His aim is to establish truthfulness as a critical value. When we are truthful, there is no need to take an oath or to place one's hand on the bible. Truth telling is its own validation. It can be tempting to tell a white lie, or to exaggerate one's abilities, to cheat on one's taxes, to leave out part of the story, or to fudge a little on the facts. However, this is deceitful. There is no room in God's kingdom for lies, flexible ethics, alternative facts, doublespeak, fake news, half-truths, media manipulation, ideological framing, false witness, scientific fabrication, fraud or propaganda. Jesus calls his disciples to act and speak with integrity, letting our "yes be yes and our no be no. Anything more, comes from the evil one." (Mt. 5)

Today, our country celebrates Abraham Lincoln's birthday. Born on February 12, 1809, he served as the 16th President of the United States until his assassination in April of 1865. "Lincoln led the United States through its Civil War, its bloodiest war and perhaps its greatest moral, constitutional, and political crisis. In doing so, he preserved the Union, abolished slavery, strengthened the federal government, and modernized the economy." (Wikipedia)

Above and beyond the Emancipation Proclamation, one of the events that stands out most for me regarding Lincoln's character and oratory skills was his Gettysburg Address. In 1863 at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg Pennsylvania, Edward Everett first gave a 13,607-word speech that lasted over two hours. His words are seldom read. However, after Everett's long address ended, President Lincoln spoke for only a few minutes. He was able to summarize his view of the war in just ten sentences beginning with: "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Lincoln ended his remarks by speaking of one nation, under God; a nation that "shall have a new birth of freedom-and that a government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Over 3000 years earlier, Moses also offered life-giving words to a people who were about to embark on creating a new nation, the nation of Israel. Jesus carried this same torch to his generation thousands of years later. It seems to me, that Lincoln, Jesus, and Moses "chose life" by loving God, walking in his ways, and observing God's commandments. In summary, they worshipped the same God.

So, the question for today is this: Do you?