

“Choosing Life”

Sermon on Sunday, February 16, 2020

Based on Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

"I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." These words from Deuteronomy 30 come to us three millennia after they were written. Today, as we explore that most fundamental of all choices, we will quickly realize that choosing life is not as easy as it sounds. Initially, it sounds too trivial to even preach about. Obviously we want life and not death! Obviously, life is a gift from God, although we sometimes take it for granted and fail to appreciate it. Yet, our psyches are much more complicated and irrational than that. Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology, taught that some people choose death unconsciously. And as observers of humanity we can attest to that truth. We have come to understand that human beings do not always make the best choices for themselves. They sometimes shoot themselves in the foot. They become destructive. They can't stay away from trouble. Why is that? I was reminded of the dubious psychology behind people's decision making when seeing the 1987 movie classic "Moonstruck" at the Ambler Theater last Thursday. Some of the lines of that movie have achieved cult status, as when Nicolas Cage, the impulsive, whacky young Italian, madly in love with this woman Loretta - played by Cher, belts out in the most melodramatic fashion: *"Love don't make things nice, it ruins everything. It breaks your heart, it makes things a mess. We aren't here to make things perfect... We are here to ruin ourselves and to break our hearts and love the wrong people and die."*

Happy Valentine's Day!

Oh, Dr. Freud would have a field day with Nicolas Cage's character Ronny, a young man who seems to be possessed by forces beyond his control, never sure whether he is choosing life or death at any given moment, a man like driftwood in a raging river. Our sermon today will not be quite as dramatic, definitely not as operatic and not quite as lunatic as the characters in Moonstruck. I just hope that we can shed a little bit of moonlight on this ancient passage from Deuteronomy and what it means to choose life for us. To paraphrase Nicolas Cage's character, Moses is essentially telling the Israelites, "We are not here to ruin ourselves. We are not here to break our hearts and love the wrong idols and die." But again, that is easier said than done!

So let us join the scene that Israel's great prophet occupied some 3,000 years ago when he uttered those words about choosing life, not death. His people had just conquered the desert, having traveled in that inhospitable landscape for 40 years. They are camping at the banks of the Jordan River, and are about to begin a new chapter in their lives. It is transition time for them, and we all know what transitions in life bring: important choices. Always! When your kid goes to college who will he or she become? When you start a new job, how will that impact your life and your quality of life? When you retire, are you still going to be as important as you used to be? Transitions bring choices and changes and sometimes identity crises, and Moses knew that as well as anyone. Who would the Israelites become in this new place? Would they make it?

Standing on the far side of the Jordan, waiting to cross over, Moses prepares to retire, to give his last sermon to his people, to pass on the baton to his successor Joshua. The old Moses is fading, making room for new life through a new leader, in a new generation.

On this momentous occasion, Moses preaches a fiery message to his people, ending with one of the best sermon lines of all time: "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." Very good advice indeed! Susan Sparks, a Baptist minister from New York suggests that it was probably less of a sermon line than a toast. She envisions Moses raising his glass and giving the great Jewish toast "l'chaim," which means "to life!" And she adds, "I also can imagine Moses mumbling an aside, 'And don't mess it up, people!'"

I was thinking, Moses must have felt like a minister who is officiating at a wedding. He doesn't want to spoil the beautiful day with dire warnings and gloomy predictions. He brings a toast instead, "To your life!" But Moses can also see clearer than most people what challenges lie ahead in that new place, sort of like a minister officiating at a wedding. He could see that his people, once freed from bondage and hardship, might indulge in the popular cults of the land of Canaan, thinking they are choosing life while in reality enslaving themselves over and over again. And so his toast at the beginning of this new chapter in the history of Israel comes at least with some qualifications: "Don't forget who you are! Always remember who bailed you out of Egypt! Don't be seduced by easy worship, easy money, easy fun. It usually has a darker backside that you can't immediately see!" Moses reminds them of the commandments, the covenant, the rules that have governed their lives thus far. Keep em and you will live, he says. Reject em and you will die. And I want to ask Moses, "But is it really that simple?" Can you hear me, Moses?

Here is an important lesson from that same movie Moontruck. 3,000 years after the Deuteronomy passage, superstitious Sicilians (who else?) shed light on Moses' words. The Loretta character in that movie wants to choose life, wants to marry the right guy, the man with a safe job and a low-risk personality, which means – no personality at all! "Do you love him?" her mother asks. "No," she says. "Good," her mother says, "than he can't hurt you." The Loretta character wants to do be safe, have the wedding in a church, do everything by the rules of her culture. But she doesn't love the man. Is she choosing life?

It appears to me that she is choosing death, giving up on a more meaningful and fulfilling relationship in exchange for one that seems to fulfill the requirements of the culture. And because she knows that deep inside, she ends up with a guy like Nicolas Cage. But here is a deeper insight that comes from that: choosing life is not simply achieved by playing by the rules and fulfilling expectations. The rules are important, but your heart must be in it. I believe that choosing life always carries a risk. Following your heart carries a risk. Following God carries a risk. Crossing that river Jordan carried a risk for the Israelites. For our church, following God and doing brave things in the world carries a risk. But if our heart is in it and we apply our values and our beliefs, our faith and our souls to those life choices, we will always be on our way to the Promised Land. Even if we make mistakes and have to apologize to someone along the way, if our heart is in it, and our values and our faith are honored, we will make our way to the Promised Land. So, choosing life is not nearly as easy as it sounds, but it is the ultimate reward. It will always feel right if you listen to your heart. So, with all of that being said, with all of that wonderful free advice coming from the pulpit of someone who sometimes tried to play it safe and didn't listen to his own heart, who learned the hard way sometimes himself, I have no other advice for you than the advice of Moses: "Choose life, so that you and your children may live!"

Amen.