

“The Life We Choose”

September 4, 2022

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 14:25-33

So, I keep remembering that line from the movie “Forest Gump.” You remember it: “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re going to get!” It’s a nice way of saying that life is random, I suppose. Something we all know from experience. But that’s not all there is to it from a biblical point of view. We’re not just drifting along, being carried from one situation to another without any sort of agency or choice. What the Israelites learn in the desert, what Moses is trying to help them embrace, is their response to life’s circumstances matters and needs to be rooted in a core set of values that God provides them through Torah.

Moses places a choice before them: Life or death, blessings or curses. It’s a pretty easy choice, really. If you’re given a choice between life and death, you choose...life! Of course, you do. Who wouldn’t want blessings instead of curses? But that doesn’t mean their life will be charmed, that only good things will happen to them. In fact, the real test of our convictions is how well we hold to our values when things get hard. When there’s a shortage or a disaster, for instance, do we do what’s needed to protect the most vulnerable first or do we allow the strongest to have priority at the expense of the weakest?

Crisis reveals our true values. And when Israel first heard or read these words of Moses, they were experiencing a crisis. They were in exile; they were defeated. Literally all they had left was their principles because everything they had built and worked so hard to keep had been taken away. So, Moses’ choice for the ancient Israelites in the desert was really meant for the later generation languishing in exile in Babylon. Do they give in to their circumstances and abandon their values or do they cling to those values and refuse to allow their situation to define them?

Suddenly it’s not that easy a choice after all. They’re living on a precipice. Yes, life is like a box of chocolates, but what they’re getting will destroy them if they let it.

Their entire identity is defined by the values they embrace in hardship. That seems true for every society. Who we are under stress, when things are going badly, reveals our deepest attachments. For the people of Israel those attachments are embodied in Torah which teaches love of God and love of neighbor as the highest priority. And they’re not different; you can’t truly love one without loving the other. When Jesus identifies love of God and love of neighbor as the most important commandment, he was agreeing with generations of rabbis who had long taught the same thing. If we allow the difficulties of our current circumstances to permit us to neglect our neighbors, which is the same as neglecting God, then we’re choosing death over life, curses over blessings.

Jesus' words sound pretty harsh to most of us. When he talks about "hating" mother and father, sister and brother, even life itself if we want to be his disciple, we may find it pretty confusing. Isn't hate the opposite of love? His words are shocking, and it may be they're intended to be shocking. They have a way of snapping us out of our illusion that he offers a simple and easy path. When he says we must hate these relationships I don't think he means we must eradicate or eliminate them or seek to do harm to the people in our lives. He's talking about attachments. If we're going to take the risk of carrying the cross he carries, then we need to let go of all those things in our lives that keep us bound.

Jesus lived in a perpetual state of crisis. His teachings were meant to open his listeners' eyes to that crisis, to help them understand that their choices matter, that they weren't just victims of circumstances beyond their control. How we respond to injustice, to poverty, to bigotry, to circumstances we haven't created but we're in the midst of nonetheless, in this moment, matters. And if our attachments prevent us from responding with compassion and justice, then what hope is there for any of us?

Some of you may be familiar with the series "Breaking Bad." It's very dark and violent, but amazingly well done. The main character, Walter White, goes from being a brilliant and enthusiastic teacher of high school chemistry to becoming a drug kingpin. All through the series he claims he only wants to take care of his family; he wants to be sure to leave them a legacy to provide for them when he dies. That claim gives him permission to do all sorts of horrible things to the people around him, including, in the end, to his own family. And of course throughout the series it's very clear he's really only serving his own ego while deluding himself. He represents an extreme example of what Jesus is warning against, how our attachments can drive us to do unthinkable things.

In his book *Falling Upward*, Franciscan priest Father Richard Rohr, describes what he calls the "first" and "second" halves of life. In the first half of life we learn the rules for functioning in society. We build the foundation for our careers and homes. Things are clear: right or wrong, yes or no. There are no nuances in the first half of life, no real critical thinking. And it's important to go through it. Without that education and foundation-building we'll have trouble making our way in the world. We need that stability in our lives to be healthy and secure. But it has a limit. And many of us reach that limit in a moment of crisis. We go through a terrible loss or have a life-threatening experience and discover the rules don't always make sense. In the Bible we find claims that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will fall into ruin; that's a first half of life way of reasoning. But we also find the story of Job and the musings of Ecclesiastes. We find a recognition that evil people sometimes prosper, often at the expense of righteous people. That's second half of life discovery.

If the rules no longer work, then what's left for us to base our lives on? Is there something deeper than just following the rules for their own sake? Are there higher principles we're called to follow even if it means we'll experience hardship as a result? The psalms are full of an awareness of those higher principles. Moses, in laying this choice before the Israelites, is

calling them to accept something more than just a set of regulations. Following Torah puts them in conversation with the Divine. Love of God and love of neighbor opens up a host of possibilities for practicing justice and compassion that a rigid adherence to following rules never could.

In a similar way Jesus is inviting his listeners to embrace their second half of life. In becoming his disciples they're no longer bound by the limitations and restrictions blindly following rules places on them. He embodies Torah for them and calls them to join him on that path.

And that means leaving everything else behind. For the Israelites it meant leaving behind their life in Egypt, which was harsh but predictable; it offered a certain security for them. They're called to leave it all behind and move forward into the uncertainty of the Promised Land, where anything was possible, where you never know what you're going to get. But where a commitment to the values of Torah would keep them aligned with God's desires for them no matter what challenges they might face.

Over and over in the stories of scripture we're taught that our choices matter. Who we are, who we become, depends on our willingness to respond to God's invitation to live with compassion and justice, to care for the vulnerable even at our own expense. Or in the words of Jesus, to take up our cross and walk the road of sacrifice with him. At every step we're given a choice: life or death, blessings or curses. The life we choose is up to us. Scripture teaches us we have everything we need to choose life and create blessing in the world. All that's needed is to let go of our illusions of security, and trust that so long as we cling to our values of compassion, generosity and justice, no matter what life gives us God will show us the way.

Amen