

Epiphany 6a 2020  
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC  
February 16, 2020  
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Psalm 119:1-8 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 Matthew 5:21-37

Moses has made it to the edge of the Promised Land; he will not live to enter the land, and today we hear him saying part of his farewell discourse, his final words before he dies. “Choose life!” Moses says; L’chaim! The words sound like a wedding toast, but it is said to all the people of Israel. “God’s people, choose life!”

Life, Moses continues, is for us and our descendants, and is found by “loving the Lord [our] God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.”

The psalmist echoes Moses’ instructions:

Happy are they ... who walk in the way of the Lord, who seek him with all their hearts... but apparently one is happy once one is blameless, observe God’s decrees, and never do any wrong.

The psalmist laments:

Oh, that my ways were made so direct that I might keep your statutes! Then I should not be ashamed.” We could lament, as well. If we were judged by our perfection, being blameless and never doing any wrong, not one of us would see the abundance of God’s Promised Land.

Then Jesus expands the law against murder. Few of us have murdered, but most of us have been very, maybe murderously, angry. We hate or despise other persons. We kill friends with gossip and lies. When an inventor on the television show “Shark Tank” refuses an offer from panelist Kevin O’Leary, Kevin often quips: “You are dead to me.” We have someone who is dead to us, worth nothing. Jesus is calling us to task: you have no right to kill one another in this way. Reconcile. Reconcile before you come to worship. Work on being blameless in the eyes of God by ending gossip, and working out your anger with another.

We work on reconciliation in human relationships in order to have a strong relationship with God. Reconciliation is hard work. We must examine our own faults and participation in the estrangement and muster up the courage to speak. We might need to say, “I’m sorry.” I recommend a strong grounding in prayer for

this work of reconciliation. In fact, the Book of Common Prayer offers a liturgy for reconciliation. I commend it as a meaningful Lenten, or Holy Week, practice.

Jesus then tackles adultery, divorce, and in making an oath. He expands existing Mosaic laws and their verbal midrash by calling us to be whole and honest “in thought, word, and deed.” Jesus sees our wandering eye, our stealing hands, and hears the lies that we tell. We know how to be polite and we say “I am just looking, I deserve this, and ... it’s just a little white lie.” Jesus expects us to look more deeply at ourselves: our actions, thoughts, and promises.

Sitting beside Jesus’ expansion of the ancient laws is the way in which Jesus overturns them. It is the person of Jesus who overturns Mosaic law. It is in and through the person of Jesus that we see God, and so the fulfillment of all law is in Jesus himself. Later in the gospel of Matthew we read the most important laws: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind. And to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. (On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.)

And so begins a lifetime of work. How do we look at someone with love instead of anger? Where do we find the courage to reach out to someone who has hurt us and work at some kind of reconciliation? Our answer, again, is in Jesus. The law that Jesus gives us is not a disembodied thought or a lightning bolt from the sky. Jesus embodies the law, sent to us in the person who emptied himself and was himself despised all the way to crucifixion. It is an unfathomable tragedy that telling the truth in love was and is considered a threat to life. In reality, being a follower of Jesus, no matter what our circumstance of power, wealth, soundness of mind and body, leads us to a life of abundance.

Abundance most likely will not mean endless finances; abundance is much richer than dollar bills. We have abundance in spirit, in our deep and rich relationships, in a family of faith that is centered not on the accumulation of “stuff,” but on God. God is at the center of everything that we do. Our challenge and our loving task is to look at all that we do and all that we are and function in the knowledge that God is with us.

Moses did not enter the Promised Land, but stood on its threshold and gazed upon it. God had been with him through slavery, freedom, and a forty year journey in the desert. Through his farewell speech, Moses’ words “not only empowered his people, but reach through the ages to inspire us today: “Be strong and bold...for

you will go with the people into their land; it is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; He will not fail you or forsake you.”

Thanks be to God! L’Chaim!