

Message for February 12, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passages: Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and Matthew 5:17-20

Choose life

In our world today the term “pro-life” has a narrow meaning. It starts at the beginning – conception – but doesn’t go much further. Limiting access to abortion may be one pro-life focus, but there is so much more to being truly, consistently, committedly pro-life for ourselves, our children, our communities and our world. The term is really much bigger and more comprehensive than we’ve allowed it to become. Being pro-life is, in fact, our calling as people of faith. God says to us, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

These words from Deuteronomy 30 are attributed to Moses. The people of Israel have come to the end of their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. They are ready to enter the promised land. Moses will not be going there with them; his death is imminent. But he sends them off with some powerful last words. As you move into this long-anticipated new phase of life, he tells them, remember who God is. Remember who you are as God’s people. Keep your focus on God and what God desires. Don’t be drawn into the worship of things that are not God or from God. Don’t choose the standards of the world over the standards of God. If you do, in the long-run things will fall apart. In the long-run you will be choosing death instead of life. Don’t let this happen. Be deliberate. Be faithful. In all things, choose life.

In the biblical narrative Moses gives this farewell address, these words of counsel and exhortation, and then the people of Israel are off to the next phase of their life as God’s people in the promised land. With them, we are full of hope and expectation.

Surely they will remember who they are. Surely they will choose life and all will be well. Isn't that the plan?

It is interesting, I think, to put things in perspective, biblically speaking. According to scholars, the book of Deuteronomy was written in the sixth century BCE. It was written as a history of the faith for a community which had gone through a lot. Yes, there were the glory years in the promised land. Mighty King David pieced together quite a kingdom. Wise and wealthy King Solomon built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem. There were lots of other kings, as well. But then everything fell apart. The kingdom was divided and conquered. The temple was destroyed. People were displaced. And now they were disoriented. What had happened? Why had it happened? They tried to understand. These words attributed to Moses helped: "But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess." Yes, these words had proven true.

However, in addition to offering an explanation for what had happened, the words attributed to Moses also provided hope of a new beginning. The people of Israel were in a bad place, but they were ready to change. They had learned from their mistakes. And according to these words, it was possible to start over; it was still possible to choose life. The promise was still valid. "If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you." This promise is always valid, even for us today.

So what does it mean to choose life, to be truly pro-life? We do have some basic instructions. The Ten Commandments, for instance. Now I know that it's easy to trivialize the Ten Commandments, to see them as old-fashioned, perhaps, or too didactic, but that's a misdirecting impulse we need to put in check. Instead, we need to take the Ten Commandments seriously. They are foundational. It is helpful to return often to these deep roots of our faith.

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” That means no idols, no small “g” gods to which you give allegiance. Be aware of how this happens, how it can creep in and begin to shape your life. Start with reverence: Don't make wrongful use of God's name. Don't make God out to be something you can manipulate or even fully understand. Instead, stand in awe of God in all God's glory. Take time to worship. Make this a priority. Structure your lives, your communities, your businesses around this so that you can be always reconnected, reenergized and renewed.

Honor your parents and care for them. Care for your family. Never take life; instead cherish, protect and encourage it. Build up your community by honoring your commitments. Be faithful to your spouse. Don't bad-mouth others. Respect them. Never let crass desire motivate your actions. Don't get caught up in keeping up with the Joneses. Instead, cultivate contentment. Be happy with and grateful for what you have.

These are the commandments we will observe if we choose life. These are the commandments to which Jesus refers in the passage we read from Matthew 5. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." By the time Jesus appeared on the scene, Jewish religious leaders had put a lot

of time and effort into explaining, articulating and codifying God's commandments. As a result, there were a lot of rules to follow. These rules are not bad, Jesus said. But it seems that they have become more important than the intent they are meant to convey. When that happens we get off track. In verses 21-48 of Matthew chapter 5, Jesus says over and over, "You have heard it said...but I say to you...." Jesus goes back to the ancient commandments and redefines them. He breathes new life into them. He connects them to heaven, to God's intent, and then he brings them down to earth.

This is still the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has just reminded his followers and those who were listening of the values of the kingdom of God through the Beatitudes. Everything he teaches, the way he interprets commandments, is informed by these values and reflects these values. Like the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes are key to understanding what it means to choose life.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those standing without pretense before God, stripped of all self-sufficiency, self-security and self-righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, those who lament the condition of the world, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, those who are powerless to defend their own claims, but who trust in God to intervene and break the grip of the oppressors, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who yearn for a deeper and right relationship with God, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, those who lack guile in their relationship with God and others, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus makes it clear that mercy, love, justice, honesty and right relationship with God are the weightier matters of the law by which the rest must be judged. If we are to choose life, if we are to be truly pro-life, these are the things that we will prioritize as well.

Sisters and brothers, as we decide how to interact with our world, our neighbors, our colleagues, our family members, let's remember our starting place: God is God and we are not. Hold that thought. Let it begin to sink in. Open up your heart. Allow the Holy Spirit to guide you into increased and deeper understanding. Let awe wash over you. The biblical story is one of God's people consistently not grasping the greatness of God's power. That's our story, too. We seek a right relationship with God but in order for that to happen, we have to let go of our need to make God smaller than God is, to put God in a box. God is much too big, too creative, too interactive, too marvelous to fit in any box. We are called to let go of our small preconceived ideas and worship the One who brings us and the world out of darkness and bondage and into freedom and light.

True worship will move us toward a life of deeply rooted care and respect. Choosing life means we will care for our families and we will love our neighbors. We will honor our commitments. We will not be mean or vindictive but instead will look for the best in others. We will cultivate contentment with what we have and a spirit of generosity as we relate to others. These are the life-giving choices that grow out of a deep relationship with God.

Jesus' values will be our values. We will not disdain those who have been stripped of their self-sufficiency or those who are powerless to defend their claims. Instead we will stand with them in their weakness. We will not close our eyes to the pain

of the world, but will instead lament when we see injustice and suffering. We will come together with others who are seeking to know what it means to follow Jesus. We will opt for mercy over judgement, trusting God to sort things out. We will be honest in our dealings with God and with others, even when it might make us look naïve or foolish. We will enter into situations of conflict, leaving behind our pre-conceived ideas about who's right and who's wrong, in order to build relationships that will lead to true peace. We will do this even though it might get very uncomfortable and even dangerous.

This is what it means – according to Jesus – to enter the kingdom of heaven, to see God's face, to be called the children of God, to be blessed. This is what it means to choose life, to be pro-life. May we have the courage of our convictions.

Left: We will not bow down to serve other gods: the gods of war, the gods of greed, the gods who destroy the earth.

Right: We will not bow down to the gods of racism, to gods who make us feel either inferior or superior, to gods who do not love us, but demand our devotion.

All: *We choose life!*

Left: We choose to serve the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of Sarah and Rebecca, of Mary and of Jesus.

Right: We choose to serve the God of our ancestors in faith.

All: *We choose life! We will hold fast to the Lord, the God of life.*

Amen.