

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 5:21-37

BEING FULLY ALIVE

In one of the closing scenes of the movie Gandhi, a Hindu leader comes to the bedside of Gandhi, pleading with him to end his long fast. Gandhi reaffirms that he will end his fast only when the Hindus and Muslims stop fighting. The Hindu, with hatred for the Muslims burning in his eyes, says he will continue fighting. To justify his resolve he tells how Muslims took his little boy and crushed his head. He, in turn, captured a Muslim boy and killed him the same way. Then he added, sorrowfully, "I have been living in hell." Gandhi reflects on this a moment and then says softly, "I think I know a way out of hell." And with the Hindu hanging on his words, Gandhi tells him, "Go and find a boy similar to the son the Muslims killed, take him into your home as your son, and raise him as a Muslim."

The scripture lesson(s) and the sermon today are about the choices we make and then how we live with the consequences of our decisions. On the one hand, there are certain factors in life we don't, we can't, have a choice or have a say-so in the matter. We do not choose to be born. We do not choose our parents or our families. We do not choose the historical time or the country in which we were born. And, at the end of life, most of us do not choose to die; nor do we choose the time or the conditions of our death. On the other hand, in between our births and our deaths, we make a myriad of choices about how we shall live, how we shall invest and spend our time here on earth.

In the Old Testament text from Deuteronomy (chapter 30), Moses was nearing the end of his long list of instructions to the Israelites as they had finally made their way through the wilderness, and were now camped on the east side of the Jordan River, ready to cross over into the Promised Land that the Lord swore to give to their ancestors. Moses was summarizing what was most important for the people (Yahweh's covenant people) to know as they stepped foot into this unconquered territory without him. In today's lesson, Moses instructed the people to "Choose life." Choose to live fully, which was what Gandhi was telling the Hindu father. Choose life over death. Take heaven over hell. Decide on a life of blessing over a life that is a curse.

Moses gave these former Hebrew slaves a choice: "I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity... 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, and holding fast to him; for that means life and length of days..."

Israel was faced with a clear choice. They could follow the God-given commandments and trust Yahweh or they could yield to the gods and the culture of the Canaanites. The first option led to fullness of life, and the latter led to "death," which wasn't physical extermination but an existence that lacked joy, well-being, security, and abundance; this death was the complete opposite of God's shalom. But, if the Israelites chose faithful obedience to God's laws,

they would become fully alive for they would know the love of God and experience the best life had to offer in relationship with others.

In the New Testament lesson from Matthew's gospel, Jesus was teaching his disciples about what it takes to be citizens within God's kingdom. It helps to remember from last week that Jesus came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. Jesus then showed the disciples what the "fulfilled" life looks like. He informed all would-be disciples, then and now, that whoever seeks to follow him must choose to go further than merely keeping the letter of the law (as did the scribes and Pharisees). His disciples must also keep the spirit and the intention of the Law. If they do that, they will be fully alive to both God and others.

Jesus raised the bar by taking several of God's commandments and saying, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..." It's not enough to refrain from murder; Jesus' disciples are warned against unresolved anger and are sent to make peace and be reconciled with another. Who is right or wrong seems beside the point. At issue are the broken relationship and the need for healing within the two parties.

The act of adultery is wrong; but, whether or not one actually commits the sinful act, the lust that occurs within a person's heart is also a violation of the holy covenant for God desires a relationship of wholeness between males and females. The lust that looks on a person as a sexual object to be exploited is prohibited in favor of a godly love that sees another person as a child of God (a sister or brother), who is also made in God's image. For the Christian, sexual responsibility is mandatory in attitude as well as in action.

Jesus' words about divorce are not to be turned into a new restriction that forever keeps broken marriages bound together despite the brokenness. At the same time, Jesus doesn't want his disciples to marry hastily or to take the marriage covenant lightly. Instead, Jesus wants to affirm the sanctity of marriage, to warn those men who use women like throw-away toys without regard for their welfare after the divorce, and to encourage a reconciled relationship between husband and wife if at all possible.

Jesus' prohibition of oaths is absolute. The taking of an oath to guarantee one's word implies that otherwise a person's word cannot be trusted. What Jesus calls for is that we be honest in all of our dealings. Honesty is the outward expression of an inner integrity. As Christians, our character and inner motives are to be so shaped by God that backing up our word of promise by taking an oath becomes unnecessary. It's a high standard but truthfulness and faithfulness are characteristics of the life lived under the rule of God.

We see in Jesus' teachings that God does not want us only to avoid committing wrongs. Even more, God wants us to love our neighbors and one another from the innermost affection of our hearts. God wants us to love others based on the way God loves us. We are to live our lives from the inside out as we recognize that we are created in God's image (as are all others); therefore, the divine stamp upon us must influence how we think, how we feel, and how we act. This isn't about "being good" but being alive in the fullest sense. Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly." Joy and a great sense of fulfillment come from keeping God's Law for, when we do so, we are intimately related to God and others, and we are

fully alive.

We have no qualms with what Jesus has taught. We agree with it in theory, but, in practice, we have failed. We know what it is to be angry and to harbor a grudge, to live with lust, and/or to swear and make promises we don't always keep. Has Jesus set too high a bar, one that we cannot reach even on our best days?

Some have said that Jesus told us to do these things, knowing that no human being could ever do any of this. Thus, our failure shows us what weak sinners we are. We are stripped of any notion of righteousness based on our own merits, and we are driven into the hands of a loving and compassionate God, who will forgive us.

While that is certainly true, I think there's more to this lesson than just that. Since Jesus has called us to be his disciples, citizens of the kingdom of God, people of faith are expected to move toward the goal of living righteous lives inside and out. We are to act, behave, talk, and walk differently as followers of Jesus Christ. With Jesus at the center of our lives, it is possible for us to have the ability and the power to relate to others in a gracious and loving manner.

We are not left to our own devices. Besides Jesus as our teacher and example, we have the guidance of the scriptures. We have the power of the Holy Spirit within us since baptism, and that's no small thing! The Spirit helps us to grow in holiness and to become more fully alive. We have the gift of prayer, which enables us to turn to the Lord for the necessary strength to say "No" to sin and sinful desires and "Yes" to our Lord and the path God wants us to walk. And, we have the community of faith, the Church. I know for certain that we are better Christian disciples because we belong to this community of faith; we represent each other and we are accountable to one another.

We are better persons than we would have been if Jesus had not called us. Because of him, we have taken our faithfulness beyond merely avoiding certain behaviors and have moved on to disciplining ourselves in the manner of Jesus, inclining our hearts and minds in the way that God wants us to go, in the things that God wants us to do. By the grace of God, we can choose to be and do better.

The Rev. Peter Heinrichs writes about being influenced in his early days of ministry by the Catholic priest in town. I was young and full of ideals for the work of the church. But I still had lessons to learn about charity. One lesson I learned from Father Tim. He ministered to shut-ins, to the mentally ill recently released from the state hospitals, and to the poor in our busy, wealthy town. I went to a hidden part of town – an area occupied by single mothers, children running about, many fathers in and out with drugs and weapons, mentally ill persons, old people struggling to make ends meet day to day. I quickly noticed how suspicious people were and how reluctant they were to open the door to me. I also noticed that wherever he went, doors opened to Father Tim. One day I asked Father Tim what key opened doors to him. He smiled, looked down at the sidewalk, and said, "I don't lock the door of my car when I visit. You see, they know I'm not afraid of them." Can you imagine?

Some time later, the day came for Father Tim to retire. A mass was planned at which he would be honored. The hour of the mass came, and so did people. Hundreds of them. Black and

white. Some in diapers and some with walkers. Some in Armani suits and some in Rummage specials. They filled the church and the side aisles. After the sermon and some congratulatory words of tribute, Father Tim was invited to say a few words of farewell. Father Tim looked out at the congregation for a moment, and then he spoke. He said, “Be a little kinder to one another. We are so cruel to one another. Try to be a little kinder.” He stopped and then stepped away toward the altar to assist in his final public Eucharist in our town. The church was still. His words had cut us. I don’t know how others felt. I felt ashamed. I also felt loved. (Biblical Preaching Journal, Winter 1999, p. 20)

Jesus asks us not to merely follow the Law, but to fulfill it with love for God and all others. He asks us to live as generously and graciously as God has loved us. That’s our motivation, and that’s our empowerment to do so. When we live and love from the inside out, it is precisely then that we will come fully alive – in the truest and best sense of the word – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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