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“Choose Life”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

February 5, 2017

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-26

This week, I took my son, Tyler, to visit Presbyterian College in South Carolina. He is a senior and still trying to decide where he wants to spend his next four years. The time for his transition to college is closer than I am ready to admit, and though I do not know where he will end up yet, I do know that wherever he goes, my hopes and dreams for him are big:

- Like any parent, I hope he will be happy, not in a superficial way, but happy in a way that brings deep fulfillment and joy.
- I hope he will have a strong sense of self, that he will know who he is and that he will like who he is.
- I hope his heart and spirit will not be damaged by those who try to build themselves up by breaking him down.
- I hope he will find his passion for life and work and grow in his love of learning and his desire to make a difference in the world with his life and gifts.
- I hope that he will find good, faithful, kind, and thoughtful friends who will love him for who he is and support him in the ups and downs of life.
- I hope that he will *be* a good friend, also—kind, faithful, and supportive of his friends and willing to lend a compassionate, wise, trustworthy, and listening ear to those who need him.
- I also hope that he will make good choices. Choices that lead to fullness of life and love, not to fear, anger, insecurity, or loss of self.

I try not to think too much about what I will be feeling this summer, standing at the car, everything finally unloaded, hugs and kisses and goodbyes already lasting longer than they should. Those of you who have been through this know. You stand back and look at you child, who is no longer a child and is about to enter a whole new world without you, and you hope that all that you have taught him or her over the years will stick, will be remembered. And you hope that your child, who is no longer a child, will make choices that lead to life. As you turn to leave, you point to the new land where they are going alone and say, “Goodbye! Have fun! I love you!” and what you really mean is, “Goodbye! I love you! Make good choices! Choose life.” And then you get in the car and drive away and hope and pray that your child, who is no longer a child, does choose life.

Though it is a bit of a leap, I imagine Moses must have felt a little bit like this as he stood at the edge of the promised land with the Israelites and gave his farewell speech to God’s people. After all, they had been on a life-long journey together. Moses, now at the ripe old age of one hundred and twenty, had been with these people since the time they were slaves in Egypt. Following God’s call, Moses had led them out of slavery, through the waters of the Red Sea and into the wilderness. When they cried to him in hunger and thirst, he went to God, and God provided manna and water. When they grumbled and complained, he reminded them of God’s promises. Moses brought God’s commandments down from the mountain and urged the people toward a right relationship with God and one another. Moses loved these people and had given his life to teach them how to live as God’s children. Now he stood with them, looking into the promised land, and he said farewell, knowing his own death was near.

As he spoke to these people who were about to venture into a new world without him, Moses, like a parent who sends a child into a new world, called out to them, “Goodbye! I love you! Make good choices! Choose life.”

In fact, Moses lets the people know that as they go, they face the biggest choice of their lives: “See, I have set before you today life and all that is good, or death and all that is bad . . . Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.” Choose life by loving the Lord, walking in God’s ways, and observing all that God has taught you about

how to live together. It would be, Moses knew, the most significant choice they would make, this choice between life and death, and they would make it anew every day as they chose either to orient themselves toward God and God's abundant love and grace, or toward the world and its enticing but false promises that lead to death.

Like the Israelites, we, too, are given the choice every day to choose life or death—to choose to keep covenant with God by loving God and loving one another, or to choose the temptations of the world which promise life, but result in death. How many in our world believe that money is the key to happiness and life, but find themselves enslaved to its pursuit, or enslaved to a job that holds no meaning, or enslaved to the mentality that more is better and that accumulation brings life?

The choices, [writes Brett Younger], are not usually labeled “life” and “death.” Most of our decisions do not seem important, but life and death are before us every day. We choose death when we ignore God and choose anything inferior. Death is the slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter. Modern life is impoverished with a lack of purpose. We rush to meet deadlines that are insignificant and bow before ideas that are not worthy.¹

Our smaller daily choices either grow out of major choice to be in our covenant relationship with God and lead to love, joy, hope, peace, humility, patience, generosity, kindness, gentleness, and care for the least of these, or our smaller daily choices grow out of our major choice of the idolatry of self, money, power, and position and lead to pride, greed, anger, hatred, belittling the other, impatience, self-pity, jealousy and power-mongering. One choice leads to life. The other leads to death.

I am reminded of the beautiful and magical film-turned-Broadway show, *The Lion King*. In this show, the opening number is called “The Circle of Life,” and it is a celebration of life in all its diversity, vitality, and energy. In the Broadway version, creatures of every shape and size come down the theater aisles and move up onto

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 1, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 343.

the stage, dancing and swaying in peace and harmony. The land, as displayed in the stage scenery, is verdant, flourishing and teeming with life. Everything is as it should in this circle of life. The king, Mufasa, rules justly and with care for all. He considers the needs of all the animals, from the greatest to the least, and maintains the balance required for all to thrive. All is well. But if you know the story, all does not remain well, all does not remain peaceful and balanced. Evil comes in the form of the king's jealous brother, Scar, who wants power for himself, who lies, cheats, manipulates others, and lives with a dark hatred. In the end, Scar orchestrates the death of his brother, the king, and the disappearance of Simba, the king's son, leaving Scar as the next in line to the throne.

Scar does not care for the needs of the creatures of his new kingdom. Scar only cares for himself. Soon the land begins to reflect Scar's selfishness. The green grass turns brown and then black. The creatures grow thin and gaunt. The herds leave to find food in other places, or they stay and die. The landscape, as Scar looks out, is void of any life whatsoever. Scar has made his choice. In turning his back on the needs of others and the needs of the world, he has chosen death. He has broken the circle of life.

To the relief of all creatures in that land, Simba eventually restores life back to his father's kingdom. This young lion embodies his father's care for all of creation—his choice for life that extends to every creature and to every blade of grass. This powerful story moves from life, to death, and back to life again, clearly guided by the choices of the kingdom leaders.

Now I know our passage from Moses is a far cry from this Broadway show, but *The Lion King* demonstrates the difference between what choosing life and choosing death looks like in this African Pride land and helps us think through the contrast between our own choices of life and death each day.

This leads us, of course, to ask what it means in our own situations to choose life. If we learn from Moses' teaching and preaching, we know that choosing life means loving God with all our heart, soul, strength and might. Choosing life means loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Choosing life also means living for the good of all creation, not just for the good of self. Choosing life means feeding the hungry, working for justice, caring for the weak, sharing our resources with the poor, treating others with dignity and respect, welcoming the stranger, recognizing the image of God in every human, and caring for the gift of creation around us.

This text invites us to live fully into the gift of life we have been given by God's grace. This text invites us to embrace the world with all its beauty and joy, rejecting the idols of greed, pride, anger, hatred, and jealousy. Brett Younger shares a list of the "myriad of sacred possibilities" this text gives us for ways to choose life and live into the grace God has given all creation. He writes:

Learn things you have told yourselves you could never learn. Enjoy simple things. Play with children. Laugh often, long, and loud. Cry when it is time to cry. Be patient with your own imperfections as well as the imperfections of others . . . surround yourself with what you love—whether it is family, friends, pets, music, nature, or silence.

Walk around the block. Turn off the television. Get together with your friends. Invite a stranger to lunch or dinner. Clean out a drawer. Read a book of poetry. Quit doing what is not worth your time. Do something so someone else will not have to. Give money to a cause you care about. Stop arguing. Apologize to someone, even if it was mostly his fault. Forgive someone, even if she does not deserve it. Have patience. Stop having patience when it is time to tell the truth. Figure out what you hope for and live with hope.

Worship with all your heart. Pray genuinely. Love your church. Believe that God loves you. Share God's love . . . See that all of life is holy. Open your heart to the Spirit. Search for something deeper and better than your own comfort. Live in the joy beneath it all.²

² *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 1, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 343.

As Moses looked out at the Israelites and spoke his final words to them, his heart must have been full. Just as parents only want the best for their children, Moses only wanted the best for God’s people and he knew that the way to life in all its beauty and fullness was through a covenant relationship with God which led to love for God and love for all.

“Today,” Moses told the Israelites, and we hear for ourselves on this February 12, 2017, “Today I set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life.”

Choose life, my friends. Choose life.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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