

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Sirach 15: 15-20
Matthew 5: 17-26

You Have Heard It Said....
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According to *National Geographic*, the average U.S. consumer spent somewhere around \$103 on gifts, meals, and entertainment for Valentine's Day. Imagine if that average expenditure turned up in offering plates on a February Sunday! 55% of Americans ran out to buy and send greeting cards while only about 25-40% claim weekly or almost weekly church attendance. In Vermont, the least churched state in the Union, less than 22% of the population attend worship services regularly. Back to Valentine's Day: about \$1 billion was spent on candy by 47% of U.S. Consumers, and eight billion little candy hearts were exchanged. By comparison, the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Association (FAO) estimates that \$30 billion would solve global food insecurity.

"Choose Life!" says Moses. Well, we love freedom of choice. We can choose how we will spend Valentine's Day and many other days of our lives. We can even follow all the "rules," all the US laws, and all biblical commandments, and still buy a billion dollars worth of candy. What's to stop us? Who's to stop us?

I am not here to preach a fire-and-brimstone sermons about people who like sweets, or people who have sweethearts. But I do want to take note of how our choice-driven culture has, in some ways, un-rooted us, unmoored us, from any sense of proportion. Another example: I heard a story on NPR about a new dating app people can download onto their smartphones. It's called Tinder. You have probably heard of dating web sites with names like eharmony, match.com, OKCupid, and ChristianMingle – or maybe you haven't –but these have been around for a long time. The Tinder app is so much faster and more convenient. You don't have to read as much about a person. One user said: "And this is just so quick and instant," she says. "It is a little bit like a video game because you can kind of be like yes, yes, no, no." The app lets you say yes or no to profile photos. If you swipe left, it's goodbye. Swipe right and it's hello. Tinder is also free. One user describes the experience as "dating on steroids." Of course, many people who use this app are not looking for a relationship, but something more fleeting. But: freedom of choice! Choose Life! What's to stop us? Who's to stop us? Are there rules that govern our behavior today, or at least point us in the direction of life, blessing, and prosperity.

Back when the book of Deuteronomy was written, the author pictures a scene where Moses has led the Hebrew people to the border of the Promised Land, to the crucial brink of their new lives. The previous chapters have set forth the commandments in some detail, but now Moses is in preaching mode, asking his people for a renewed and heart-felt commitment to the God who has saved them, again and again. This is a decision moment, a time of a choice freely offered, the ever-present opportunity of covenant with the Holy One. Moses speaks in hyperbole to highlight the contrasting choices. He does not list commandments: he talks about the human side of the commitment. In two sequences of three verbs each, he puts it out there:

to love God,
to walk in God's ways,
to keep God's commandments, statutes, judgments. And then,
to love God,
to hear God's voice,
to cling to God.

Notice that all this begins with and is rooted in, love. Love leads us to blessing.

Perhaps it would be nice if the book of Deuteronomy ended there and this was the end of the story. We would know the commandments, we would feel the love, we would hear the voice, we would walk the walk. The end. Life, blessing and prosperity. But that does not seem to be the way that human nature, human history, or human culture plays out. We are not nomads in a desert, at the brink of entry into a settled country. Their choices may have been varied, but today we are confronted with a slightly different scenario. We are on the brink of something else.

There is an author named Phyllis Trible who loves the quote (from someone else) that says: "about every five hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale." It's an interesting approach to religious history. I am not sure I can completely buy it, but it's one lens with which to look backwards and forwards. I think she takes it back into the Jewish tradition, saying that around 500 years before Christ, the Babylonian Exile precipitated big changes in Jewish theology, as did Jesus in the first century, and then Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th century and the split between Eastern and Western Christianity around 1000, then the Reformation around 1500. It's a little too neat, but, as I say it is thought provoking. And you know where Phyllis Trible is going with this. What century are we in now? That's right. **We** are fortunate enough to live near the year 2000. We are living in a rummage sale, sorting through the basement and the attic, deciding what is worth keeping and what can go out to the driveway. Talk about choices!

Our Gospel reading today gives us a glimpse into Jesus' sorting process, as described by Matthew. Matthew is eager to let his Jewish-Christian readers know that Jesus was a good Jew. Rabbi Jesus did not plan to throw out the baby with the bathwater. He is keeping the ancient covenant. But he is also depicted as a new Moses, teaching not from Mount Sinai, but on a mountainside in Galilee. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' law-giving moment, Jesus' "choose life" moment.

Our reading starts with solidarity with Moses: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." To Jesus "fulfilling" seems to mean more than keeping the ancient rules. "Fulfilling" is about a kind of righteousness that runs deeper than the practices of scribes and Pharisees, those so well educated in the details of law.

Then we get the first of five expositions and elaborations of the commandments, each beginning with "You have heard it said..." Jesus starts with "You shall not murder": with something that is truly a choice between life and death. How does one "fulfill" this commandment? Or, we might say, how does one internalize this commandment, because Jesus first turns us inward, to examine our feelings of anger. This brings up another interesting question: is anger a choice? Then, we go to anger in more expressive, outward form: the insult. Turns out that this also bears examination and judgment. These are hard teachings. Are they just setting us up for failure, and a sense of guilt? I think I can choose not to murder, but never to be angry, never to make a snarky comment... Jesus, tell me where to go with this.

I think that with this spirituality rummage sale, Jesus is actually dusting off those laws and making them shine for all they are worth, so that they can not only be internalized, but suffuse and infiltrate all our relationships. It is a guide or encouragement to the development of a new level of morality. We do not follow a law for fear of punishment or out of habit, but because repeated and thoughtful attempts to apply it to changing circumstances changes us. Jesus is exploring how ancient laws can build up a healthier community. What will bring life to a community? Do I choose to speak words in a moment of anger that will kill my brother's spirit? Do I choose to use a language that will give life to a sister's broken spirit? Perhaps my anger can be channeled away from my brothers and sisters entirely and better employed as anger against injustice or destruction. We are free to do this. We have been given a tradition that gives us choice.

The right to choose is part of our congregational heritage. Our tradition values the individual working in community, the right and responsibility to learn and to vote and to decide. And especially here, we elevate individual choice in a freedom of belief that is really quite broad. We value this hope that the Spirit will work in each of us, in various ways: that all will find their pathway to the divine. Which is wonderful. The challenge for us is: our communal choices. Our rummage sales, if you will. Can we follow example of Jesus, who held each nugget of wisdom from the past up to the light, and turned it around to see the facets of truth and life-giving power there? Or perhaps it is simpler to just load all the nuggets into a crate, for storage, or for someone else to buy. Perhaps it is simpler to buy and give candy hearts and hope for love. Perhaps it is simpler to get the quick and instant app for our phone and hope for love.

Moses and Jesus show us a different way, a different choice. They take us to a deeper understanding of human need and divine grace. And they say that we actually have the tools we need to choose life. Moses said, "It" ...is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" ¹Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." Jesus would put it, "The kingdom of heaven is within you." It is within us to choose to love the sweetheart and the hungry neighbor. It is within us to choose take time and care to develop relationships. It is within us to choose life.