

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
February 12, 2023
Year A, Epiphany 6
Cake or Life or Death

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 119:1-8
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“You can’t hold extreme points of view in the Church of England,” says one British comedian. Anglicans are too polite. So something like the Spanish Inquisition could never happen in the Church of England. It’d be more along the lines of “Your choice: Cake or death.” And that’s a pretty easy choice. Cake or death: everyone’s gonna go for the cake.

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity... life and death, blessings and curses” says God to the Israelites in Deuteronomy. Let’s go with life, prosperity and blessings over death, adversity and curses, I’d say. Given the option of cake or death – we’re going with cake. Life or death – we’re gonna go for life every time, right? It’s an easy one.

But it turns out choosing life is more easily said than done, in both Old and New Testaments. In this portion of Deuteronomy, God speaks to the people of Israel through Moses before they enter the Promised Land, and despite Moses’ encouragement to “choose life” by “loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances,” the Israelites will, again and again, do the opposite. Not so easy.

And Jesus’ description in the Gospel of Matthew of what it means to choose life, to obey God’s commandments, makes it even harder! “You have heard it said,” Jesus says and then quotes a commandment given to the people of Israel in the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, one of those “decrees” or “ordinances” of God, God’s law. Only Jesus seems not content to leave it there but makes it more difficult. “You have heard that it was said... ‘You shall not murder.’” OK. That’s doable. But he goes on, “But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister... if you insult [him or her]” or “if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” Wee bit harder.

And then there’s the rest of it: You’ve heard “Don’t commit adultery,” but I say, if you look at someone with lust, it’d be better for you to tear out your eye. You’ve heard “Let’s limit divorce,” but I say, “Anyone who divorces is committing adultery” – and then we’re back to that whole eye-tearing thing. You’ve heard “You shouldn’t lie,” but I say, “Don’t swear at all – truthfully or otherwise.” For Jesus, choosing life, God’s law, isn’t so easy a choice as “Cake or Death.”

The question for us as Christians, then, is this: If what Jesus describes is true discipleship, true obedience, will we still *choose* this life? For ourselves and our families? As Jesus paints the picture, this life of faith sounds like a harsh religion of impossible righteousness and hard laws.

But remember where this speech is in Matthew’s Gospel. We’re about a third of the way through Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the same sermon which he starts off by saying “Blessed are the meek” and the pure of heart and the merciful and the peacemakers. The same sermon where he teaches his disciples the Lord’s Prayer. The same sermon where, just a few verses ahead of this passage, he says, “I have not come to abolish but to fulfill [the law].”

And that's what Jesus is doing in today's verses. He's describing what it means to fulfill God's law, to live into the law in such a way that you're not just following the rules but obeying the very heart of what it means to live a godly life. The Psalmist in Psalm 119 calls it "*walk[ing]* in the law of the Lord." In our general confession we put it slightly differently, praying that we might delight in God's will and walk in God's ways.

Because that's what God's law is – the Way of God – the ways of God's kingdom enacted here on earth. We tend to think of the law as an Old Testament word. Many of us grew up with the idea that God's law is something only Jewish people care about, and that we Christians are somehow different. But Jesus – here and elsewhere – is careful to make clear that he is all about the Law of God. And that sounds a little scary to us. We prefer thinking of God's love over God's law.

But it's less scary if we think about what is meant by God's law. Usually, we think of laws as mostly-arbitrary rules that we must follow or face consequences: you obey the speed limit or get a ticket, that sort of thing. But what if we think of the Law of God more in the way that we think of, say, the law of gravity. Now, law isn't an arbitrary set of rules but a description of the way things work, the way things function in our lives and in our world. And that better describes God's law, too. It is a description of the way in which we human beings best function in God's good creation – the owners' manual for human life that teaches us how to fulfill God's plans for our flourishing.

And when we live fully into God's law, as Jesus describes it, when we walk in the ways of the Lord, in every detail of our lives, to the best of our ability, not only will we avoid hurting others, but we will *flourish* in the abundant life of God. We are baptized into the life of Christ, but when we *live up* to our Baptism, when we grow up into maturity in that life, we become people of integrity, compassion and honesty. We become people who love others instead of judging them, who honor commitments and strive for right relationships, whose "yes" means "yes" and whose "no" means "no." People you can count on. People God can use to fulfill God's mission in the world.

And, ultimately, that's what Jesus is talking about, the law he describes in this passage in Matthew. For Jesus, God's law is all about the relationships we establish with one another, with the creation around us, and with God. When we walk in God's ways, we have grown-up, mature relationships, *right* relationships, righteousness.

Because, the truth is, the choice between life and death has already been made for us. God has already chosen us for life. Our baptisms are a reflection of that. We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. We belong to God. And nothing we choose or don't choose can change that.

So the question is not "cake or death?" or even "life or death?" but whether and how we will respond to the abundant grace offered to us in this life in Christ. We are, all of us, "infants in Christ." "Happy are they whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! Happy are they who observe his decrees and seek him with all their hearts!" When we do these things, we will surely grow up and grow into abundant life in Christ. And even then, it is "God who gives the growth." Amen.