Choose Life

In the Hebrew Bible the title for the book of Deuteronomy is taken from its opening phrase: “These are the words.” It’s an appropriate title, for the book of Deuteronomy is filled with words attributed to Moses, the great leader who ushers the people out of slavery in Egypt and leads them toward a new land. Preaching and encouragement, teaching and admonition, instruction and commandments—these fill the book of Deuteronomy from beginning to end. Moses reminds the people, as they prepare to enter the Promised Land, of the Ten Commandments, the covenant provided on Mount Sinai, and then moves on to consider at length how the people are to live in the light of that law. As Deuteronomy nears its conclusion, Moses offers the people a fresh opportunity to renew covenant with the God who has redeemed and guided them. Today’s lesson, from chapter 30, concludes the covenant-renewal ceremony, with Moses, speaking for God, asserting that the people face a fundamental choice in life: “Look here! Today I’ve set before you life and what’s good versus death and what’s wrong . . . . Now choose life” (Dt. 30:15, 19 CEB).

Choose life. Is this not the critical plea of the Scriptures, this call to choose what the apostle Paul once labeled “the life that really is life” (1 Timothy 6:19)? Life abundant; life reflecting the character and nature of our God, whose deepest passion is that all humanity,
all creation, might experience blessing and grace and hope; life in which we, in turn, offer blessing and grace and hope to one another and to the world around us. Surely this is what it means to choose life rather than death, to base our living upon what’s good and right rather than that which only leads to greater brokenness and division, increased self-centeredness and suspicion, more intense injustice and hostility and fear.

The writer and theologian Frederick Buechner once defined God’s call as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Buechner’s words remind us of this fundamental challenge of moving beyond self-absorption, finding our meaning instead in a purpose far greater than our own. Choose life: does this not remain, yet today, the essential challenge of the life of faith? Yet the good news of the gospel is that we do not choose life on our own strength alone. The noted biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us of the promise at the heart of Scripture. “Do not lose heart,” asserts Brueggemann. “God has not quit, and will not, until our life is joyously reflective of God's own life” (The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann, p. 69).

Perhaps this is why Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, can offer such incredible words of challenge—words that cause us to stretch, again and again, well beyond our customary patterns, our usual modes of living and acting in the world. Today’s reading from Matthew 5 follows on the heels of Jesus asserting, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). And yet, it soon becomes clear that Jesus fulfills the law, not by softening its challenge, but rather, to
the contrary, by adding to the challenge. Jesus urges us to move beyond the law to an even higher righteousness. Jesus defines God’s will in radical and surprising ways.

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, Jesus will repeat some six times in Matthew 5, each time pointing to some aspect of ancient law. Yet each time Jesus then follows with an alternative, But I say to you. In today’s lesson the focus is on anger and its potential for causing deep divisions and rifts within the human community. It is not that Jesus is urging us to swallow all anger, but instead, whether we will use that anger to spur us toward healing and reconciliation, or only toward greater brokenness and division. Challenging words, indeed, for who among us has not been convinced that we were wronged by another and therefore justified in our animosity? But Jesus reminds us that our goal in life ought to be far more than proving ourselves right; rather, our goal is to focus upon the seeking of healing and reconciliation. We are called to do all that we can to restore relationships to wholeness. While the ancient law asserted, “You shall not murder,” the new righteousness reminds us of the dangerous use of anger; even the labeling and dismissing of another as a “fool” can lead to our own judgment.

These words of Jesus call each one of us up short, don’t they? Jesus dismisses our acts of worship as empty if we do not first seek reconciliation with a sister or brother from whom we are alienated. “When you are offering your gift at the altar,” Jesus asserts, “if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).
Tough choices are demanded of us, when we grapple with God’s call upon our lives, when we ponder what it means to choose life and to take it as our task to live lives of integrity and conviction, lives that reflect God’s justice and compassion, lives that link heart and action, thinking and doing, praying and responding. How do we take this risky step of choosing life again and again, when it soon becomes apparent that the irony of faithful living is that the deeper we move in the spiritual life, the more is actually demanded of us?

The Benedictine sister Joan Chittister, so noted for her writings about the spiritual life and her passion for justice and peace, has a recent book entitled *Following the Path: The Search for a Life of Passion, Purpose, and Joy*, in which she reminds us that God's call is not reserved for an elite few; instead, asserts Joan Chittister, each of us is called to something special, something unique. “A call, we have come to understand, commits us,” writes Chittister. “Each of us. All of us. Individually. We come to realize that whatever gifts we may each have, however difficult it is for me to give myself to it, the giving of it is exactly what I have been born to do. When those two things—when individual gifts and the human thirst for them—come together for me, that is a call. Not my job. My call.”

In my earlier years, I resisted this sense of call in my life. I come from a long line of preachers and leaders in the Church of the Brethren, with an ordained minister in six of the preceding seven generations of Klines; and my Grandfather Kline, who was not ordained, nevertheless displayed the kind of spirit I find myself wanting to emulate yet today. Through the years ministry has been for me, not merely a job to be done or a task to be performed, but a calling to be embraced and lived out. Despite my early resistance, it became clear to
me that following that call of God linked my own deep gladness, my times of genuine satisfaction, with the world’s profound hunger. Pastoral ministry became my way of responding to Christ’s call to love God with all my heart and soul, and to serve neighbor in the compassionate spirit of Jesus.

This morning we are licensing Don Fecher to the ministry. In the aftermath of the death of Sheri, Don’s first wife, Don and I spent a significant amount of time together, linked by our experiences of grief. Over time, it began to become apparent that Don’s journey through grief was leading him into a new chapter of life—a new calling, if you will. It was the calling to assist others as they journey through illness and/or grief. It is not that God brought pain and loss and grief to Don’s life, in order to make him a better or more faithful person. Rather, through the difficult experiences of Don’s life, God was guiding Don into new avenues of service. God seemed to be calling Don—in the words of Henri Nouwen—to be a wounded healer.

Ours is a God who may well use even our experiences of pain and loss and grief to help us clarify our calling. Pain and suffering can soften the heart, reminding us of our need for the grace of God and the encouragement of one another—or pain and suffering can lead us in the opposite direction, turning our hearts to stone. The difference is in the choices we make, whether we choose life and what’s good, or death and that which only leads us to greater loneliness, grief, and pain. You may remember the writings of Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist who endured the horrors of life in the Nazi concentration camps. In his noted book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl reminds us:
Everything can be taken away but one thing, the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances . . . . Fundamentally, even in the worst of circumstances, we can decide what we shall become of ourselves mentally and spiritually, retaining our human dignity even in a concentration camp.

Centuries and centuries ago Moses heard God placing a similar choice before the wandering Israelites, “See, I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity . . . . Choose life, that you and your descendants may live” (Dt. 30:15, 19). Moses was talking specifically to a band of wandering Israelites ready to enter a new land, but his words carry power, even now, as we consider our own life and calling. A similar choice is ever before us. Will we choose those things that only lead us further down the pathway of fear, division, brokenness, and hostility, or will we choose life—reconciling, redeeming, healing, abundant life? Will we embrace the life that really is life, trusting the promise that God never gives up on us, but rather, all throughout our days, invites us to consider how our unique gifts intersect with the world's deep needs, so that we might respond with compassion and with care. This is indeed our calling—and our life! Thanks be to God. Amen.