

Deut. 30: Making Choices/Breaking Laws

Choices...we live in a world full of choices...from the simplest to the most complex...from the trivial to the crucial. It still catches me by surprise when I go shopping at the amazing variety of things I have to choose from in almost possible item that might be on my list. Now, this abundance of variety applies not only to the items you might want to purchase, but now also to where and how you will shop, including the option to not leave your home. Of course not everyone is able to do this, but even in the smallest store in this country there will be more than one possibility for a particular purchase. In general, we have come to assume that this abundance of options is a good thing—something that we actually deserve—and we expect this spectrum of choice in our all aspects of our lives. We also live in a world full of laws and regulations. Our reaction to that fact is quite different. We don't like rules and regulations—anything which we view as limiting our choices. We don't mind those that limit the choices of others if their choices follow an alternative path to the one we like or feel is proper. But in general, we desire to be able to pick and choose products and actions according to our own internal preferences. Both of the texts which I read this morning have to do with those things which govern our actions and the choices we make; the decisions we come to about how we are conducting or should be conducting our lives. When you first read them, they seem to reinforce a certain picture that we have of God—the image that God makes and enforces rules—God is a law-giver. We then tend to picture God who created the world—including us—as one sitting in heaven with a perpetual—eternal eye watching, a hand raised in warning or a finger pointing in accusation—sort of like the song about Santa Claus which goes: “He knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you're awake. He knows when you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!” After all in the book of Deuteronomy there are a large number of do's and don'ts given along with some specific consequences. Most of these are actually repetitions of those found in Exodus, not additions. In the Hebrew text before us today, it seems that Moses is presenting those in his audience with a very restricted list of options. In fact, it seems to be an either/or choice. Moses says in our first verse, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” He essentially repeats this statement in verse 19 & 20: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that 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 to you” Various translations are always interesting to me when they present a verse differently. This is probably because I feel that after being required to learn Hebrew there must be a reason. Sometimes we need to go back and think about the original words used in the text. A close translation of verse 15 would read more like this: “See, I have set before you today life and good, and death and evil.”¹ Notice in Hebrew the pairing is not of life and prosperity, but of life and good which is then set in opposition to death and evil. A simple choice—still the choice is between life and death either way. Choosing good means life itself. When we first look at that choice we often see an ultimatum; choose this and this is the result,

¹ Young's Literal Translation

choose the other and the opposite happens.—and if we don't care for rules and regulations, we positively can't stand ultimatums. Perhaps it is because the Israelites viewed what they had received this way that they had so much trouble with the covenant relationship. When viewed as an ultimatum, those things given by God at Mount Sinai became known as the Law to be obeyed instead of instructions or guidance about how to live well in community. They treated what they had received at Sinai as a set of legal rules—restrictions. And often we have the same approach. There was and is a tendency within people to choose those things which were evil—with evil being those things which harm to others. This tendency is still alive and well today because of our attachment to self over everything else. The issue becomes somewhat unclear because we focus on the letter of the laws as we interpret them and forget the intent behind them. As the psalmists point out again and again when they praise the Torah, the Torah was itself a gift, a blessing from God. What God provided was meant to be instructions—a guide to a way of living with one another—a model for the formation of community. The positive alternative presented is to choose good and to then receive all the blessings that come with life within a community based on God's commandments; that community is the path to life abundant. This passage present two separate sequences which describe the relationship between life, the covenant and the teachings of God with the choices made. If you listen carefully what you find is not an ultimatum but a description of the consequences of the choices made. Verse 16 puts it this way: life is equated with loving God, walking in God's ways and keeping God's commandments, statutes and judgments. Verse 20 rephrases the choice as loving God, hearing God's voice and holding fast to God. If this is the choice, then what is given to us in these passages is the gift of relationship—covenant relationship with God and each other. The first passages after the creation story in Genesis speaks of God coming to the Garden and walking there with the human beings created in God's image. God's desire is for relationship so the first choice which is to be made is to love God and desire that relationship. What was given at Mount Sinai of which Moses speaks here--that covenant in which God claimed them as God's people—is not a legal contract but a guide for that relationship. Tuesday will be Valentine's Day and despite all the talk of love which accompanies the advertisements about symbols of love, neither God's love for humankind nor the act of loving God is a roses and candy once a year type of love. In the Hebrew language and usage, loving God describes a relationship which demands all of one's energies. It is not an emotional nor an intellectual relationship alone but one which demands total commitment of self. In verse 20 the Hebrew describes holding on to God with the same word used in marriage vows where it is described as cleaving—a relationship above others not to be broken. Where most English translation used give us “for that means life to you”, the Hebrew word is

כי which is better understood as a causative— and then sentence then this becomes “because he is your life”. This love not only presupposes a concrete inner disposition but also includes a conscious act in behalf of the one who is loved.² In other words choosing life is a commitment to be and to do in a relationship with God. Choosing life is to make a commitment to obedience that is not a passive submission but an active act of response to God and God's love

² Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, vol.1 pg.99

and care. In Deuteronomy, this choosing is envisioned as seeking God, listening to God as you walk through life and encounter different situations. Choosing life involves keeping God's commandments and cleaving to God which keeps you on the path of an abundant and good life. These God given commandments are based on establishing good relationships. A good relationship with God then leads to good relationships with others because God's commandments establish good relationships—good and strong relationships with God and with others. We often think of commandments or rules as being burdensome and difficult but those God gave to us are not meant to be that. Instead, they are meant to be ways to remain faithful and respond to God's initiative to be in relationship with us. Although it sounds like it when we read that passage, the choice Moses laid out for the Israelites isn't a onetime choice. It is actually an invitation to a way of life which would bring blessings because living in a community according to these commandments would bring peace and harmony. Living according to the ways which God laid out for people from the beginning creates a community where justice prevails. There would be not oppression or corruption. Mankind didn't then and still doesn't do a good job of following the path God established for us. The choices we most often make break those laws in some manner. Most of us often condense God's ways to be contained in the Ten Commandments, presented as a concise do or don't. We then can check them off as accomplished, especially if we list commandments about murder, theft, and adultery as evidence of our obedience to God's ways. We often don't include in our thoughts that one about coveting or falsehoods, or if we do, then those form the basis for our confessions—those things we do that cause the need to ask for forgiveness. Again our second reading comes from Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount. At the conclusion of last week's text from Matthew Jesus said he had not come to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them. Today's text opens with Jesus giving a reprise of the Ten Commandments. He addresses the intent of three of them in this passage. He interprets them for the disciples and us in a way that seems radically different. But if you continue looking at them through the lens that the commandments were given as a gift to create a community based on love—love of God and love of each other—then what Jesus says is exactly the intent and desire of God for us. For example, Jesus makes additions to the simple statements—He says “you have heard it said, but I say to you.” As the preface to how the teachings were meant to guide us. What Jesus says expands the meanings. Why was this necessary? Two possibilities are usually given. First, by doing this Jesus was urging us to take the law more seriously than before. This could make it more burdensome or it could lead us to see that it was meant to build community. The other thought is that by doing this it becomes obvious that we cannot fulfill the law on our own. If we cannot fulfill the law then we must depend upon God's mercy for forgiveness of our transgressions. What we discover from both of the texts is that the Torah and the Sermon on the Mount are about the same thing—the desire of God for covenant relationship with us. It is not about keeping the laws and commandments for their own sake, but about honoring other people as those truly blessed and beloved of God. For example, Jesus says it is not enough to avoid murder, you also have to treat each other with respect because to do less diminishes and demeans one of God's children. There is always a legal aspect to the Law, all laws in fact because they hold us accountable for our actions toward one another. But that is a by-product, not the purpose of the commandments God gave us. God's intent was for them to guide us in

the such a way that we would honor, respect and care for one another. If we view the Law primarily in legal terms it is too easy to make a check list. I committed no murder today. Check. I didn't steal anything today; another check mark for me. This tends to lead to self-vindication and self-righteousness. But did I lose my temper and say something unkind? Did I look at someone else and feel disdain for them because of their appearance? Did I fail to offer a kind word? How many checks would appear on a list of those things, should I make it? Jesus wants more from us than a self-justifying check list. What is desired of us is that we regard each other as God regards us and then treat each other accordingly—as beloved members of a family. We are to be concerned about the life and health of our neighbors—to make the internal as well as the external actions of our lives in accordance with God's desire for us to live life abundantly in community with each other. Jesus asks us to look at ourselves and see the anger, derision, slander, false generosity, arrogance, lust, coveting, greed, alienation in our speech and actions. Jesus asks us to recognize the ways in which these things harm others—and also ourselves—as they separate us from living the life which is good. Although the instructions Moses gave may seem like the choice was a onetime offer; one which we often have made the wrong choice, it is indeed an invitation which echoes again and again. Although we may fail to keep the intent of the Law many times and in many ways, God is always faithful to that commitment God made humanity to be in relationship with us. The offer is always open to us through the grace and love of God as shown throughout Scripture and most clearly in the life and ministry of his Son our Lord. Thanks be to God.