

Matthew 5, Deuteronomy 30-choices February 12, 2017

So, did you watch any of the Super Bowl last Sunday? It really was quite a game, wasn't it? I was rooting for the Falcons, and things were really going their way until the final quarter when superstar quarterback Tom Brady of the Patriots led the comeback to end all comebacks, tied up the game, and won it in sudden death in overtime. I have to admit, Tom Brady is a little bit talented, even if I was rooting for the other team. In the aftermath of the game, I found myself recognizing yet one more reason that I could never be a professional athlete or coach of any kind; the unrelenting scrutiny and pressure. Particularly, I noticed that the choice of plays made by the Falcon's for their offense and defense the second half of the game came under fire. And here's the thing; those choices were seen live by millions of people, are recorded for posterity forever, and can be dissected by critics and armchair coaches and quarterbacks ad infinitum. To have my every choice bear that kind of pressure and produce that kind of consequence would crush me.

Our lessons today are about choices. How we make them, whom they impact, and what kind of consequences they have. Let's think about choices for a moment. They come in sizes large to small, don't they, with varying degrees of importance and consequence? One of my favorite poems is by Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken". I'm sure you're all in the mood for a little poetry.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair, And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear; Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

This poem depicts a moment of choice, right? On one level it's a choice many of us have faced when hiking through the woods. Which path shall we take? The one that looks more heavily traveled or the one that looks less so? And although we might tell ourselves that we'll try the one path today, and some other day come back and try the other, we also know that we may not be in this stretch of woods again for some time. The poet decides to try the less traveled path. A choice of *less* than epic proportions.

Yet on another level, this poem also depicts a metaphorical life choice we make, but on a more significant plane. We come to a crossroads in our lives and must choose: try the more familiar path or strike out more boldly in a less familiar path? This might relate to career, lifestyle, relationships, purchasing a home, or what have you. One might imagine that the poet chose between a more pragmatic career and a life of writing poetry; certainly the latter would be the "road less traveled" and in the case of Robert Frost, it definitely was a choice that made all the difference; a hugely positive difference for himself and American culture. This represents a choice of greater importance than choosing a hiking trail.

Our lives, as near as I can tell, are a combination of just such choices as these, large and small. Fortunately, most of us won't have our choices broadcast to millions

live and then painfully analyzed for years and decades to come, or even set into a poem, most likely. And yet, they are still significant for us, and they determine how we live. In some senses, life is a series of choices, of paths to be determined, on a daily, weekly, even hourly level. And sometimes the big choices are easier than you'd think, and the small choices are more difficult than they should be. I found choosing to get married to Phil quite easy, but I'm still second guessing my choice of wedding gown. And while many of our choices impact primarily us, like my wedding gown, that's definitely not true of all of our choices. And that's the truth our lessons hold up for us today. We are not lone wolves. It's not all about us. How we choose to think, believe, and act will impact others around us, often quite significantly. And our choices will either honor God and serve our neighbor's good, or they will not. Both the Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy and the Gospel lesson from Matthew are reliant upon *these* basic assumptions: God created us to live in community, and our choices impact that community. And some choices better serve God and our neighbor than others. Those are important assumptions, because while they are Biblical, they are not necessarily cultural. Our culture loves the idea of independence, of claiming our rights, and how often do we hear, "I can do as I please. It's a free country. I'm not hurting anyone"? Moreover, our culture has increasingly made ethics so much a matter of individual context, that we can easily delude ourselves into thinking that really, what we choose doesn't matter to God or those around us.

This is *not* the Biblical view. Both of these lessons, and all of Scripture for that matter, claim that our choices matter to God and to those around us. They also claim that not all choices are always equally valid; some are more life giving and promote the

common good better than others. Admittedly, these are texts that may seem headache inducing, particularly the Gospel lesson, where Jesus doesn't mince words about anger, lust, faithlessness, or dishonesty. Let's look at *his* words first, which are more specific, and then look at Deuteronomy, which sets out a more general ethic.

Our text from Matthew is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, his first public teaching. It began quite nicely two weeks ago with the beatitudes, the "blessed are"--- we like those. Last week, we were still on a roll, as Jesus named us "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world". But today we come to a part of his teaching that is much harder to take. We have a series of four legal topics that were relevant to Jews: murder, adultery, divorce, and lying. All of these subjects are covered in the 10 Commandments and in many other places within the Scripture of the Old Testament, to which good Jews, including Jesus, adhered. Jesus begins his teaching on each of these topics with the same phrase, "You have heard that it was said...", "but I say to you". In other words, he first makes reference to the Old Testament teaching on the subject at hand, and *then* he expands on it from His own perspective. Here's the kicker, though: he doesn't make any of the laws easier. He doesn't say that any of them don't matter or shouldn't be followed. Instead, he actually raises the bar in each instance; he makes them *harder*. It's not just, for example, that we shouldn't murder another human being; most of us can meet that level of righteousness. But rather, we shouldn't even harbor grudges and anger against another human being, because that's the intent that lies behind so many murders. Very few of us can meet that level of righteousness. Holding a grudge is such a human, commonplace, miserable but somehow satisfying thing to do, and most of us do it.

The same logic is applied to the other topics of adultery and lying. It's not just enough to avoid adultery; we are to avoid lust period. It's not just enough to honor the vows we made with our hands on a stack of Bibles; we are to keep our word, period, without needing to resort to such drama queen tactics to prove our truthfulness.

But wait, I left out the really tough one, the teaching on divorce. That's because this is the kind of passage that requires a little deeper look. Particularly since many of us here today have divorced and remarried, often into a much better relationship, and so we feel targeted by this teaching. Now, ironically, we should all feel targeted by the other teachings on anger, lust, and lying, but somehow those aren't as publicly obvious and we can figure out ways to shrug them off. The divorce teaching carries no more weight than those others, but it's a public choice that carries more public stigma. We need to ask ourselves this: what lies *behind* each of these teachings of Jesus? The answer is: Jesus is looking at the intent of the law, the *spirit* of the law, rather than merely the letter of the law. And the law is always about protecting human community and relationships. So, while not murdering each other is an excellent start to healthy community, Jesus sees the *intent* of the law: that we not harbor anger, but that we find ways to deal with conflict constructively, so that human community does not erupt into violence and is truly blest and healthy.

This holds true on this teaching about divorce, too. We need to know that Scripture speaks of marriage in a way that evolves throughout the writing of the Scriptures. Which makes sense, because after all, the Scriptures were written over a period exceeding 1000 years. In the Old Testament, for example, polygamy was a common practice. It was a man's world, and a fortunate man might have many wives. Or

he might have relations with other women who were not wives, maybe some of the maidservants within his home perhaps, in order to bear children. This was considered socially, morally, and legally acceptable. Furthermore, although marriage was taken seriously, the dissolving of a marriage, at the *husband's* request, was allowable, sometimes for reasons as significant as infidelity or as ridiculous as the wife burning a meal. The stipulation, handed down by Moses and referred to in our gospel lesson, was that if a man divorced his wife, he had to give her a certificate of dismissal. This certificate of dismissal actually *bettered* the situation for women in Moses' day, a point we could easily overlook. Women in the days of Moses had no legal rights, so only men could institute divorce. The divorced woman was then left in literally a no-man's land. She didn't have the option in those days of supporting herself through paid employment and she was not free to re-marry, so she was destined to a life of poverty. Moses insisted that such women be given certificates of dismissal so that they were legally free to re-marry, and thus might escape poverty. This law about divorce, given through Moses, was not an indication that marriage didn't matter; it was a way God inspired the people of that time to value women and protect women and children from poverty.

In the New Testament, Jesus regarded marriage as part of God's intentions for human companionship and intimacy. He also took marriage very seriously; so seriously that he forbids divorce. In other Gospel passages, Jesus speaks against relations outside of marriage as well, both adultery and living together without marriage. Speaking the truth, because we are in church where the truth should be spoken, both divorce and cohabitation are rampant in our society, so we are way out of step with these views of Christ. Now it seems from this text that Jesus *also* gave some

thought to protecting the position of women in his society, as had happened in the giving of the law in the time of Moses. For Moses, the legal recognition of divorce that allowed a woman to re-marry was a step forward. But, Jesus saw things differently. He saw that living in fear of divorce and abandonment at the whim of a husband was not a happy state for many women in the 1st Century. The giving of the certificate of divorce had deteriorated into making the dissolving of a marriage—again at the choice of the man only---a convenient out for any dissatisfied husband. So rather than making divorce easier, he makes it harder. Jesus, in our text today, is both affirming the sacred and lasting nature of the marriage covenant, and also shoring up the position and value of women. Women should not be casually thrown aside in a divorce, just because it was legal. That's certainly part of what Jesus is about in these verses. But, it's not *all* that Jesus was about-- he *also* took seriously the understanding that marriage is a covenant, a vow, made before God, and that faithfulness to that covenant was important. And even those of us who are divorced can appreciate, I believe, God's viewpoint in this matter. Divorce is never a casual matter of convenience; it is a significant brokenness and it impacts not just the couple, but a whole lot of family and community members around them. Do we really wish that Jesus had lowered the bar when it comes to marriage? I think it's good to know that God takes marriage seriously, that God honors marriage and expects us to do the same. Even if we should fail, and we well may, we still need to acknowledge this God-given standard. God's dream for us is to be loved and secure in our human relationships. God wishes for us no less than the best. That's the ideal Jesus upholds. The health of individuals and the community matter, and our actions impact both.

All of this falls beneath the over arching theme of our lesson from Deuteronomy. If Jesus in Matthew is painfully specific, the lesson from Deuteronomy is surprisingly general. “See,” God says through Moses, “I set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity. I have set before you life and death; blessings and curses. Choose life.” Which seems simple, until we start getting into capital punishment, and war, and abortion, and euthanasia. It also seems so obvious...given the choice between life and death, wouldn't we all choose life? Unless, of course, we're referring to over eating, or consuming too much alcohol, or being too sedentary, or smoking, or holding on to our anger, or remaining in abusive circumstances, or any number of little self destructive choices we make all the time without a thought. Maybe it's a part of original sin; we do not, by any means, always make life-giving choices. But this morning, that is the challenge God lays before us. Our choices matter. They impact those around us, because it's all about community. They either honor God or they do not. They serve our neighbor or they do not. Is forgiveness available, are second chances always possible with God? Of course. And we all, everyone of us, need both forgiveness and second chances in abundance. But, making life-giving, wise, faithful choices is absolutely the calling of every person of faith; because we are always called to honor God and serve our neighbor. Amen.