

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 The Great Decision
Matthew 5:21-37
February 16, 2020

I hope everything went very well last week while I was away. Samuel and Grace are married. Everyone agreed that it was a wonderful and meaningful ceremony. I think my favorite part was the foot washing. They washed one another's feet after the example of Christ, to symbolize servanthood, and putting each other's well-being ahead of their own. Grace's sister's boyfriend sang, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing, accompanied on the acoustic guitar. Thank you all very much for the time off and for all the prayers.

The Sermon on the Mount is up for grabs this year in the Season After Epiphany, at least, part of it. The season is cut a little short by the mid to early Easter. Some of the great Sermon on the Mount passages are left for when there is a late Easter in a Year A, when there are more Sundays to explore it. Today, there are two issues addressed in the portion of the Sermon read before us, the very demanding interpretation of marriage and divorce, and prohibition against the swearing of oaths. I will mention them each a little later.

Deuteronomy

It is, however, the text from Deuteronomy that is our focus today. It is summed up by the following sentence found in verse 19 of chapter 30;

"This day I call heaven and earth against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children will live."

The general idea is that in the giving of Torah, Law, Commandment, Teaching (for it may be thought of in each of these ways), God has given Israel, and thus the whole of the human race a stark contrast between good and evil, life and death. It is a choice.

"For I command you today to love the Lord your God, and to live in God's ways, and keep God's commands . . . Then you will live and increase, and be blessed." But, on the other hand, "if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, you will be destroyed."

Nowadays, most people would say that things are not so simple, that we live under the cloud of moral ambiguities and "lesser of two evils" choices, and that the human imagination is capable of envisioning a greater good that it can attain, and attain a greater evil than it can imagine. It has been said that neither in Deuteronomy or in the Sermon on the Mount is there much grace.

I myself think there is all kinds of Grace in them because the giving of the commands, and the deepening of them, *are, in fact, Grace*. They are part of God's self-revelation, of that which we could not know without God's gracious intervention. Yet what to

do with this choice, and with the simple stridency of the commands?

Divorce

The two examples from the Sermon on the Mount are helpful. The one about marriage seems very demanding. It forbids divorce except in the case of infidelity. In Mark, it is even more strident, there is no exception at all. Yet we live in a world replete with an extravagant divorce rate which seems to some to represent disobedience to biblical demands.

I, myself, who am divorced, and can claim the exception related here, I believe that most of our conversations on this topic, either on the part of those who are willing to be gracious and make exceptions or those who are more strict, even my now taking of the exception, simply miss the point. The point becomes clear given the consideration of the context.

In bible times, a man was free to divorce his wife for any reason, and when he did he was threatening her very life and well-being, separating her from her only means of support. Jesus was speaking to the men and telling them *not* to be so uncaring, to expose their wives to destitution, and often death.

Our times are quite different. In our society women as well as men are legally autonomous, they can provide for their own needs, they have jobs and cars and credit cards and a measure of freedom to decide things for themselves. The point of the teaching is that

we should be concerned for the moral and physical well-being of the other person, even when trouble has diminished our devotion to them. The point of the sermon is that we should deepen our understanding of the rules, make them a part of our inner life, and genuinely care about one another.

Oaths

The question of oaths has a similar meaning. We live in a world of lying, so much that one often does not know what to believe. I think that is why conspiracies theories proliferate, which are almost never true. The more someone emphasizes something, the more doubt arises. And “begging the question” enters the mind, causing one to wonder why someone is being so emphatic.

It must have been the same among those in the Jesus crowd. Swearing of oaths implies the same kind of over stressing something. “Just say “yes” and “no,” and that is enough. Another way of looking at it is to see that in the interests of a greater humanity and a better harmony of relationships, we might all tone down the rhetoric and speak in terms of a much more simple honesty.

The Decision

In Deuteronomy, there is not really a deepening of the rules. There is only a choice; life, death, blessings, curses. And there is nothing in the presentation of Moses as teacher and lawgiver that implies a decision

for life and blessings is inevitable, or even that it is a once-and-for-all decision. The choice is made in different contexts and is made anew every time a new context is entered.

Sometimes the new context differs so greatly from the previous, that one decides to abandon or disregard the clear demands of the previous contexts, like when Christians abandoned animal sacrifices or polygamy or slavery or the rights of the firstborn, the divine right of kings. This re-thinking of things is done to preserve the principle underneath the commands.

For those of you who are young, you are about to change contexts. You are in the transition between the context of childhood and the context of adulthood. One of the features of this change involves gray areas, moral and ethical ambiguity.

The other great change of contexts involves modernity and science, and industrialism. We are all trying to cope with the moral demands of a complex world of technological systems that defy explanation; that do much good, but that also have the potential for evil.

Largely in terms of relationships, we are presented with a choice, and must decide. We are inclined to decide in favor of our own well-being at the expense of others. I suppose that tendency represents a pretty good understanding of what sin is, what evil is, even what death is. It is what Moses was talking to his people about. It is what Jesus was talking to the people about in the sermon. It is a lot to think about.

Let me put this question and these considerations in the terms of a previously well-known theologian, who asks;

“Why is it that human beings are prompted and tempted to claim a dignity and eminence which no person ought to possess; and to affirm a finality for their convictions no relative human judgement deserves? Why do people have both the capacity and the inclination to claim divinity for themselves and infallibility for their opinions, the very inclination which Christianity defines as sin?

In other words, why do people, confronted with so simple a choice, choose death and curses instead of life and blessings? I am not impressed by the idea that we should answer this question too quickly.

And we consider it today in the bleak month of February, before spring, before Lent and Passion, and we let it work on us for awhile without too quickly jumping ahead to Easter and summer when we can speak of grace and forgiveness and mercy.

We know about the grace and the forgiveness and the mercy, but let us set them aside for the time being, and I believe the answer we will discover is that the invitation to accept Christ, which offers a way of making this great decision, is a call to remove the self from the center of our lives and put Christ there, and that means to consider others in all we do.

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