

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Let Us Be . . .
Matthew 5:21-37
February 12, 2023

It has been nearly 25 years since the story I am about to relate happened. I was new in the church in Staunton, Illinois, and there was a young girl, perhaps about 13 years old, who had expressed the desire to accept Christ as her savior, and receive baptism. Her grandparents invited me over to talk to her about it, and I asked her, “Why do you desire this decision?”

Sometimes the best expressions of faith come from people who are young, and don’t know any theology, or the meaning of all our religious words. They couldn’t talk about the Trinity or the Incarnation or the Atonement if they wanted. They don’t know the things Christians have been arguing about these last 2,000 years. This was one of those times. She said, “I know that I want God in my life.”

She did not say anything about wanting to go to heaven, when the time came, or that she was afraid of going to hell. There was little hint of any anticipation of reward or fear of punishment. There didn’t seem to be any anxiety involved. She just wanted to be in relation to God. It was as simply stated and sincere as a statement of faith can be, a free expression in her own words of what was in her heart and her mind.

Of course, as for all of us, so for her, things would get complicated somewhat down the line, when life happens and adulthood messes things up so that the

word, “simple,” no longer adequately describes the life of faith.

Our two readings today, the one from Deuteronomy and the one from the Sermon on the Mount in St. Matthew’s Gospel, illustrate the same idea; the simplicity and complexity of things. In Deuteronomy we read that the people of Israel had entered the land of promise after long centuries of waiting, and they are offered what seems like a simple choice,

“This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses . . . now choose life so that you and your children may live, and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord *is* your life . . .”

Centuries later Jesus came along preaching and teaching, addressing whatever the situation is that doesn’t seem simple, offering a set of antitheses to illustrate the point, referring both specifically and generally to the Ten Commandments, which had been given to the people of Israel just before they entered the land and were given the great choice.

Mentioning murder and adultery, divorce and the swearing of oaths, which has to do with speaking truth, he says, “you have heard that it has been said,” . . . and then, “but I say to you . . .” and the idea is that there is no way to make this choice easy by placing it on the surface of our lives. It matters what is in the heart. There is no way to externalize, but not

internalize, the commands of God, the faithful response.

The Sermon on the Mount is hard and demanding. We know that it speaks truth to us, but few take it literally, like when it suggests that we cut off our hands and pluck out our eyes. Clearly what Jesus is teaching is that we are responsible for our inner disposition as well as our actions.

You have heard that actions speak louder than words, but they do not speak louder than the heart. Our actions not only reflect our inner life, but flow out from it. The spiritual life is the makeover of the heart, the renewal of the mind, before it is the changing of behavior.

Despite the difficulties involved in having a pure and sincere heart, and apart from any consideration of the Sermon on the Mount's assertions; cut off your hand if it causes you to sin; don't swear oaths; love your enemies; have no anxiety; do unto others as you would have them do unto you; build your house on the rock; things like that, there is a feature of the life of faith that is brought out well by the Deuteronomy text.

That feature is freedom, for one can not be sincere without being free. The good news message of the bible is that God does not present life to us as a demand to be obeyed grudgingly; but as a gift to be accepted enthusiastically.

By calling for the resolution of inner confusion, and grudging self-concern, God invites us to accept life willingly, voluntarily, without being cajoled, harassed, threatened, shamed, or in any other way deprived of our selfhood.

Jesus offers an opportunity for wholeness that can't be achieved on the surface of our lives. Paul said as much when he wrote to Timothy these words;

"The goal of the command is love, which comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith," 1 Timothy 1:5 which means, from a healthy inner life.

At times, representatives of Christianity have used, "hard sell," tactics to bring people to a faith commitment. Sometimes this method has worked, but I would say, in spite of the pressure, not because of it. Perhaps that is why I was moved by the faith of the young girl, knowing that it would be tested in time. It was not under pressure, rather, it was an expression of her true desire in the matter. It came from beneath the surface.

There is a liberation that accompanies the offer of a choice, it means God does not *make* anyone have faith, but lets them; or obey any command, but lets them. in the words of Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman, "God lets us be . . ." Not in the sense of leaving us alone, but with the series of periods that indicate there is more to the sentence.

Let us be, almost sounds like.”Let It Be,” which is more than the title of one of the last great Beatles songs, it is also a literal rendering of the word that ends our prayers . . . amen, “Let it be so . . .

There is aspiration in it, there is freedom in it, there is resolution in it. Let us be wholehearted in devotion to the God who created us in love and redeemed us in sacrifice,

Let us be good,
Let us be strong
Let us be courageous
Let us be honest, merciful and kind
Let us be patient
Let us be happy. Let us be hopeful,

So that when we encounter people; family, neighbors, enemies, it can be with goodwill, and voluntarily, in the freedom that comes with choosing.

It is when the divine, “Let there be . . . Let them be . . . meets the human, “I know that I want God in my life,” that the power of God’s transforming love is manifest. The renewal of the whole person happens not only on the surface, but in the depths of a person’s life.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not so much demand the transformation of the inner life, as proclaim it, promise it, allowing us to finish the sentence:

So let us *be* . . . with faith.

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