

“Let the Children Come”

2/12/23

(Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 18:1-8) Rev. J. Koyama

Today’s Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy contains some very stern, but promising advice. The reading is about what our choices in this life are and how important it is to be decisive. The person giving this advice is Moses, and his words come from a speech he gave near the end of the wandering in the wilderness, shortly before his death and before the entry into the promised land.

Moses lays before the people the opportunity to choose between two options, between accepting or rejecting the Commandments God delivered to him on the Holy Mountain. And he makes it clear to them that this is a choice between life and prosperity or adversity and death. And he urges them to choose life.

You and I are aware of these Commandments, because they make up the religious and moral core that undergirded the people of Israel and then Western Civilization for nearly three thousand years. It is an orientation to life that Jesus said in his own words that he came, “not to replace”, but “to fulfill”.

It is the orientation to life that you learned about in Sunday school, when your Sunday School teacher told you about how Moses went up the mountain and got the 10 Commandments from God. Perhaps a copy of those Commandments were on the wall of your Sunday school classroom.

You shall have no other Gods before me
You shall not make for yourselves an idol
You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God
Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy
Honor your father and your mother
You shall not murder
You shall not commit adultery
You shall not steal
You shall not give false testimony
You shall not covet

At first these guidelines may not seem very remarkable. They may even seem like a bit of a strait-jacket; rules and more rules to be imprisoned by! But when they are lived with over time, it becomes clear that they are quite the opposite.

Far from being a prison of rules, they are actually basic guidelines that, if followed, will steer a person's life away from many hazards and pitfalls, give to that person's life a basic integrity and even give that person the best opportunity to enjoy the free and joyfully life that each one of us hopes to live. At the same time, ignoring or transgressing

these Commandments invariably sets a person up for a tragic fall and for adversity and death.

And so, Moses lays this choice before the people and before us in a straightforward way. I'd like you to hear it again, because there is no better way to say it. He says:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Therefore, 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 and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors...

American Society Today

I don't think there is any mystery why the world we are living in today is so troubled and the outlook seems so pessimistic. Ours is a society that has become untethered from the wisdom and experience of the past, including the powerful wisdom encapsulated in our scriptures. The 10 Commandments hang forlornly, unseen. Bibles sit quietly on shelves gathering dust in empty Sunday school classrooms.

We can speculate about the reasons for why such a decisive break in the handing down of our spiritual traditions from one generation to the next has occurred. Some will say that the mass media has replaced us as parents to our children. Some will say that it is secularized education

or the separation of church and state. Some will turn it the other way and say that the church itself has been out of touch with the times and has failed to speak with relevance to our times. I'm sure that the causes are complicated.

What is clear is that, as much as in any other time in history people living today need more than just what a secular education can provide. They need more than reading, writing and arithmetic. They need the kind of moral and spiritual formation that will ensure that their lives don't spiral into tragedy. A healthy and happy society can't exist where there is a shortage of people with moral character and spiritual depth.

Our Potential Contribution

I cannot speak for the Spiritual leaders in other traditions. But I can say that, for those of us who have roots in the Christian faith, we have a profound legacy. We have roots in a religious tradition that can provide that sorely needed foundation in this troubled world.

The scriptures and traditions of the Christian faith contain the kinds of insights that make it possible for us to understand more clearly, the choices that lie before us and their consequences. We can choose not to go over the cliff with the rest of the herd, because our faith sets the right option before us.

And so it is good when children are fortunate enough to have been born into a family with good parents. It is even better, when those parents are part of a larger community of faith that seeks to support them in their efforts to raise their children well. And best of all, when the children are able to grow in an environment where they can receive the support of the whole community of faith.

And for those of us who are not currently parenting, there is the added joy of knowing that we too can play a role in ensuring that the next generation may share in the joys of a faithful life and avoid the tragic pitfalls that overcome those who are sent out into the world without a moral or spiritual compass.

The Annual Meeting

One of the exciting things that came out of the Annual Meeting was a discussion about putting energy and resources into starting a Sunday School again. When there was a vote to put some of the cash carved out from other areas into paying for a teacher, it seems to me that we had a decision before us and in the moment, and we “chose life.” I mean that literally, because, as one person commented, “If we don’t do this, there will be no church after us.”

The life we live, consciously seeking to be the hands and feet of Christ, supporting each other in community, inspired by the example of dedicated saints in our own parent's generation; these all represent a reliable moral and spiritual compass that is tragically being replaced by the shallow messaging from facebook, twitter, popular movies and political propaganda on platforms that are ultimately guided by no value other than providing whatever content will reap the biggest windfall for their shareholders.

If we want to be a part of providing children with the caring relationships and defenses they will need in order to negotiate this spiritually troubled environment, then let's start talking about how we can make it happen.

We are not a large congregation and the reality is that we are not able to add many new things to our plate. We need to avoid the folly of doing too many things poorly and stick with the wisdom of doing a few things well. We can do this, but it will mean making it a priority for the year, seeking and do it in a timely way.

Cut it out

But first I would like to briefly address the darker material at the end of the Gospel reading. The first half is well and good. Jesus puts a child on

his knee and says, “Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” And he adds that “whoever welcomes one such child, welcomes me”.

But then his words grow ominous. Let me read the three verses in their entirety because they add an important dose of reality to what we are considering. He says,

If anyone causes one of these little ones... to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. ⁷Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble!

And then he says,

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.

I'd like to oversimplify what I think Jesus is saying, for the sake of connecting it with what we have already discussed, that is: choosing life by creating a suitable environment for children in our congregation.

First I think he is telling us that, if we want to provide an environment for kids, we had better be sure that we make it one that really does ensure their wellbeing and doesn't somehow do the opposite, in other words, “cause them to stumble.” What we provide really has to be for their benefit and not just for ours. It is one thing to enjoy having kids

around for our own enjoyment. It's another thing to be doing what it takes to make sure we are giving them what they need.

And secondly, I think Jesus is warning us that welcoming children is something that will not come without sacrifices, more specifically he is asking us whether we are willing to cut off and discard things that have incredibly high value in our eyes. The examples he uses are hands and eyeballs. But there are many other things that we highly value that we would not like to be separated from; things that can come on the chopping block at some point, if that is what is necessary to being a church that genuinely reaches out to younger people.

It seems that one way or the other, choosing life always involves accepting a burden or cross of some sort. And if we choose to truly embrace and welcome more children, then one of the crosses we will be accepting some disruption to normal practices.

There is something very tidy and comfortable about the homes of "empty nesters" like me, whose children have grown and left the house. When you clean up the house two seconds later, its still not a mess! There is no longer any need to tell someone to turn down the stereo or to stop running in the house." There is instead, an empty silence that can be heavenly, but it can also contains a certain sadness.

I confess that I was both happy and sad, to become an empty nester. It was more peaceful and crisis free and that made me happy. It was not that hard for me to accept that a meaningful phase of my life was now in the past. But I also knew I had lost something that I would never have again that made me sad. What was missing in the silence was a “commotion” a hustle and bustle in the house that had kept me on my toes, sometimes been pretty annoying, but had made me feel connected and given me many great memories.

So I guess my point is that “choosing life” is not about choosing the easy way. The “commotion” that young people bring will not always be easy to accommodate. It requires energy. And it may be that more children will come and it may be that they don’t. But if we have the will to do it, we might as well give it our best shot and see what happens.

If we are faithful servants and can provide a few youngsters with a loving community built on sound religious and spiritual foundations, we will have given them what I believe they will one day look back on as one of the most important formative experiences in their lives. We will have helped provide them with the compass they need to navigate and steer clear of many tragic pitfalls in this morally and spiritually confused world, and thrive. What could be more worth our energy and patience than that?