

Sermon 2007 Pentecost 15, Proper 18

Text: Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Theme: "Life or Death, Good or Evil, Your Choice Really"

A few weeks ago I received a note that was very critical of me and frankly, pretty condescending. I wanted to fire back with all my cannons. None of you have ever experienced my temper because as I have grown in faith, I have been given the ability to control it, but I will tell you that at one time in my ministry I wrote letters and e-mails that blistered ears. I am trained in debate and persuasive communication and winning was always my goal. I feel sorry for some of the Christian people who wandered into my sights. I am certain that people have heard about that horrible pastor who was so mean to them. Now, most of them completely deserved to be fired upon. But that is not the point. Regardless of what a person did or did not do, it is not my place to exact vengeance. Nor is it my responsibility to correct their behavior or fix the consequences of their choices; and as my faith has grown, I have been able to give up that control and although I still can get drawn into the fray occasionally, I am much better at not blasting away with a Howitzer when a BB gun will do fine.

Now I tell you that not because I want all of you to be impressed with my faith growth, but because that particular weakness of mine has helped me to understand how God's grace works in our lives. Moses lines the Hebrews up before they enter the Promised Land and says:

"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

It is the same for us. We are saved by the blood of Jesus. We are God's holy people. BUT! We always have the choice of how to live. We are never his puppets on a string. We can choose life or death, good or evil, and the only reason that we have the POWER to choose is because we ARE already saved. If we were not saved and the Holy Spirit did not reside within us, then we would have no such power.

Sometimes people live lives that are not in line with the will of God. They focus on themselves. They place work and money over God and family. They treat their spouses with contempt and disdain and either ignore their children or smother them by controlling them to the bitter end. They rage at and intimidate anyone who opposes them and demean those with different ideas. Then they wonder aloud why their lives are so miserable. When I come across that person in the nursing home who has all kinds of family and yet never receives a visitor, it is usually because that person destroyed every relationship he had and now no one is left except those he hires to care for him.

It is hard not to roll your eyes when such people muse about their dilemma. It's like a 400 lb. three-pack-a-day smoker who never gets any exercise and refuses to have his cholesterol checked whining about having heart disease. Well what were you expecting?

God blesses us by giving us the power to choose life, to choose good, to follow him. Jesus makes it clear that it is no easy choice to follow him. Estimate the cost folks. When you choose to follow Jesus you will be leaving behind many things, primarily all the things that your sinful flesh values and they won't be the same things for any two people.

Maybe you value fairness and equality – walk away from it, Jesus says the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Maybe you value power and control – walk away from it, God says my ways are higher than your ways, my thoughts higher than your thoughts. Maybe you value safety and security, walk away from it, Jesus says the gate is narrow and lies at the far end of the valley of the shadow of death. Maybe you value your friends and

family, walk away from them, Jesus says we have to be ready to put everyone after him.

If you choose Jesus, you will have to deny yourself and likewise if you choose yourself, you will have to deny Jesus. It is one or the other. BUT, if you choose Jesus...if you use the power God has given you to deny yourself and all your sinful wants and urges, if you use the power God has given you to walk away from everything that does not glorify him...your life will be better. By choosing good, you choose life.

This weekend we celebrate Rally Day, the day we traditionally kick off all the new Bible classes for the year. Every single one of us needs to be in Bible Study. Not one of us is so wise and so intelligent that we know everything the Bible has to offer...but even if you were an amazing genius who knew everything there is to know about God...still the word of God has power in and of itself. Reading and studying the Word of God and receiving the sacrament is where you get the power to choose good...to choose life!

For me, the road to becoming more patient and more even-temper was not through anger management and "how to" books. The road was the Word of God and the Sacrament. Constant exposure to his Word and Sacrament empowers us to do all things which is why St. Paul says that very thing... "all things are possible for me."

So we know that it is no easy road following Jesus. We know that while life and death are the choices before us, it is no easy thing to choose life. So today, make sure that your kids are in Sunday school and confirmation and then get into a Bible Study. Not just a book club, not just a social time, but serious Bible Study where you open God's Word and listen for him to speak to you. He will. And you will be filled with power from him and you will choose life. Amen.