

**Texts: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37**

**We are a nation of choosers, and we love it. Paper or plastic? Regular or super-size? Organic or conventionally grown? Having a choice has become part of the American Dream. Amazon has changed the way we shop by offering us a zillion choices and the chance to get what we want almost immediately. Political agendas on all sides are sold on a platform of choice – everything from school vouchers to health care reform. We are encouraged on all sides to “Have it your way!” not just when we order a burger, but in almost every aspect of our lives.**

**The book of Deuteronomy is the 5<sup>th</sup> book of the Torah, the Law of Moses, and this passage that we read today is found in the 30<sup>th</sup> of 33 chapters. Moses has led the Hebrew people through the wilderness for 40 years. He has put up with their grumbling, raged at their worship of the golden calf, pleaded with God on their behalf, and finally brought them to the bank of the Jordan River. God’s people are about to cross into the land that God has promised to give them. Moses knows that he will not make the journey with them. So he gives the people instructions for how they are to live in community with God and in community with each other. You could call this Moses’ own “Sermon on the Mount.”**

**You have a choice before you, Moses says, a stark choice between life and death. The choice of life is found in verse 16: loving the Lord your God, walking in God’s ways and observing God’s commandments, decrees and ordinances. The choice of death is found in the next verse: turning your heart away from God, not listening to God’s voice, and bowing down to other gods to serve them.**

**Moses' words here in chapter 30 echo his words from way back in chapter 6 – words that observant Jews still recite as their statement of faith: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”**

**Here it is laid out in no uncertain terms – life and prosperity or death and adversity. Or as one translation puts it, life and what's good vs. death and what's wrong. Who doesn't want to live?**

**Life is a journey, whether actual or metaphorical. The biblical writers spoke of walking in God's way over and over. Here it is in Deuteronomy. This morning's Psalm lays it out as well: Happy are they who walk in the law of the Lord...who do no wrong, but walk in his way. You do have a choice – you can walk in God's direction, in God's path, or you can turn and walk away from God, in your own direction. You know the joke, right? LOOK - SQUIRREL! There are so many distractions that keep you from concentrating on the task at hand. There are so many detours that take you down the path of least resistance. There are so many “ooh-shiny!” idols that each of us reaches out to grasp.**

**Moses urges the people of Israel to choose to walk with God. And a big part of making that choice means choosing to keep the laws that God has given.**

**Thousands of years after Moses, Jesus Christ, God's own word-made-flesh, also preached from on top of a mountain. Last week we heard him say these words: “I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.” And this morning we hear Jesus commenting on those ancient commandments of Moses. You have heard it said you shall not murder. You have heard it said you shall not commit adultery. You have heard it said you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God. We know these commandments.**

**They pertain to us. They are the basis for many of the laws that govern this nation and other nations.**

**But Jesus is not talking about American constitutional democracy. Jesus is not talking about the Ten Commandments as they are displayed in front of city hall or on the wall of a courtroom. Jesus is talking about life in the kingdom of heaven. Life under God's rule. Life lived walking in God's direction. This life is not simply about obeying the rules that we have been handed. Jesus interprets these ancient commandments in a new way:**

- It's not enough just to refrain from murder. Choosing life in the kingdom means that we treat each other with respect. It means not speaking hateful words or epithets. It means making peace with the person you are mad at before you come before God in worship.**
- It is not enough to avoid physically committing adultery. Choosing life in the kingdom means not making another person into a means to satisfy your lust.**
- It is not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce. Choosing life in the kingdom means not treating other people as disposable. It means making sure that the most vulnerable people are provided for – and in our day as well as Jesus' day that often means women and children.**
- It is not enough to keep ourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others. Choosing life in the kingdom means speaking and acting truthfully in all of our dealings so that you don't need to swear an oath at all.**

**Life in the kingdom is not simply a matter of obeying the rules, says Jesus. He goes to the heart of what those rules mean. It's what is in your heart. Choosing life in the**

**kingdom means listening to the voice of God and walking in the ways of God. Life in God's kingdom demands something of us – it demands that we move past being onlookers to becoming disciples.**

**Sometimes we Lutherans are resistant to Bible passages such as these because we are afraid that it is all up to us, that we have to be the first ones to make the move toward God. Like those ancient Hebrews, we forget that God has been with us all along, providing us with what we need to sustain our lives and our community. So let's go back once again to Jesus words that we heard in last week's Gospel: "Whoever breaks one of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Uh-oh, we think. It's either or. But think about this – whether you keep the Law or break it you are still in the kingdom. So maybe the Law isn't the way that we earn or achieve a place in the kingdom. Jesus brought God's reign to earth. The kingdom of heaven has drawn near to you. The kingdom of heaven is here and now. The law is the gift that God gives to us, like a loving parent sets rules and boundaries for beloved children, urging them to treat each other well.**

**This morning I invite you to try something in the coming week. Each day for the next seven days, call to mind someone in your life who is important to you. Think of a relationship that is healthy and whole and good and that sustains you. Think about what makes this a good relationship, and why it's so important to you. I invite you to write that person's name down on a piece of paper and carry it with you in your pocket or your pocketbook. And each time you think of that person during the coming week, stop for a minute and give thanks to God for him or her and for the relationship that you share.**

**Now think of someone else who is important to you but your relationship with that person has suffered some damage. You can write their name down as well. Don't try to figure out who was to blame for the hurt, but in the coming week, each time you think about that person, stop for a minute and hold that person in prayer. Offer that broken relationship to God as an offering and as an arena of God's help and healing. And imagine what first step you might take toward reconciliation with that person, and ask for God's help to take that step.**

**Life in God's kingdom does involve a choice. Life as disciples does have repercussions. You can choose to listen to God's voice, to walk in God's path. Or not. You can choose to love the Lord our God with your entire being, heart and soul, mind and strength. Or not. But here is the good news: when you make the choice to walk with God, the Holy Spirit will give you the grace and power to take the first step and the next and the next. When you make the choice to walk with God, you can live in the trust that God walks with you, every step of the way.**