

Not Perfect But Faithful

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, February 12, 2023

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37;

Sermon text: I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.

Later this morning I will baptize Blake, recently born. Yesterday I said prayers at the funeral service of his grandmother Patricia, who died last week. Beginning and end, joy and sorrow are rarely so closely connected. But it is the middle of life that I want to talk about this morning.

First let me talk about the Torah.

The passage from chapter 30 in the book of Deuteronomy is supposed to be the conclusion of Moses' final address—his valedictory summing up of the law, or Torah, and appeal to the people to follow it faithfully. The people are the descendants of Abraham, and those who have joined them in their escape from bondage in Egypt. For forty years they have been stuck in the wilderness of Sinai—camped out like refugees in a UN refugee camp in which the original generation has given way to a new one. Now Moses, ancient in years and aware he will soon die, speaks to his people from a ridge overlooking the Jordan River. He can look over and see the promised land of Canaan. The people will cross over, but he will not. His successor will lead the people—a story told in the following book of the Bible, Joshua, followed by stories of the age of tribal leaders, Judges, the story of Ruth, and then the history of the kings of Judah and Israel, beginning with David and Solomon.

It is not giving away the plot to tell you the people are not always good and faithful. They will suffer civil war, division of the kingdom into two, conquest by foreign powers, a seventy year exile in Babylon and then a return under very limited self-rule, under the hegemony of empires of Persia, Alexander and Rome—the situation at the time of Jesus and the New Testament.

In our passage today Moses has finished warning the people of what will happen if they are disobedient to the word of God—how they will be besieged, reduced to famine, even cannibalism, (28:52-57), driven into exile and scattered among the nations (28:64). Yet if and when they repent and return to worship of the one true God and return to the covenant, God will bring them home, restore their land, and even “circumcise” their heart so that they will love the Lord God with all their heart and soul and strength (30:1-6). Then the commandments will not seem like a foreign object or imposed rule but a law within their own heart—as he says, “the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (30:14). Paul later cites this hope as fulfilled in the Spirit of Christ grasped in faith.

So two things to say: one, the choice seems clear. Choose life and blessings, not death and curses. Yet, on the other hand, if the experience of the Hebrew people and the experience of every generation of humanity before and since is any indication, this choice is not as easy to do as it would appear. Even grasped in faith, the word of God encounters an ineradicable “evil inclination in the heart”—as scripture puts it in the story of Noah (Genesis 6:5; 8:21)—and of course the story of Adam and Eve turns on the original sin of coveting a forbidden fruit, of being tempted to be as gods, of making the wrong choice—even when the word of God is clear and the consequence is death.

So here we are, about to baptize a young child, an act which theologically is a cleansing from sin through a symbolic death by water and rebirth by Spirit into a new life in which one commits to a new law—the baptismal covenant. Promises are made to follow Jesus. The sins of the world are renounced—not only those personal sins that draw us from the love of God but also, astoundingly, the cosmic evil which goes by the name of Satan and the sins of the world and history that have implicated all of us in systems of injustice and war. As we say in one of our liturgical confessions, “We repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf.”

But that soul cleansing, like our daily hot shower (what a modern luxury!), does not keep us clean forever. We must confess and repent daily, weekly, endlessly. which sounds even more tiresome than daily bodily hygiene.

The reality is that each day presents us with new choices between life and death, blessings and curses, new opportunities to help others and ourselves, and new temptations to turn from what is good in ourselves and others and take a bite from the big sweet looking apple of sin.

On the personal sin front, this would seem to be the sort of thing that Jesus is teaching about in the Sermon on the Mount, part of which we have also heard this morning—and not the easy part about blessed are the poor and grieving. Hard teachings, even a call to be perfect as God is perfect.

Now the Torah Moses handed down forbids murder, adultery, false witness, and regulates divorce, revenge and enmity among neighbors. But Jesus takes aim at a deeper level of human sinfulness, our inclination to anger and jealousy and to harbor grudges and seek revenge. Our inclination to lust which leads to adultery and all kinds of sexual immorality. Our shallow fidelity which leads to abandonment of covenanted relationships. Our tendency to make shallow promises—though we swear on God to keep them—and then not prove true to our word. By all these things we demonstrate daily we do not really fear or respect the God who created us, gave us law and morality and who will judge us in the end. We seek revenge and not justice, self-satisfaction and personal gain, not community and common wealth. We love—sometimes—those who are lovable, but we hate our enemies and don’t care much about the rest. We do not follow the law of love that Jesus taught.

This law is often summed up in the idea that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. But another way to put it is we should respect the dignity of every human being, and indeed of all creatures and the earth itself.

And mutual respect and dignity, of care leading to healing, is the way we build beloved community, not just find personal salvation and well-being—though it is the way to that because we will thrive together or not at all, as Dr King never tired of teaching. By respecting the dignity of all, by seeing in their face the face of Christ, by treating others as you have them treat you. Not complicated, and not easy.

Not that we will be perfect in following the law of love and the teaching of Jesus, but that we will try, always aiming for the better choice, always reflecting on how we have fallen short—the original meaning for both the Hebrew and Greek words for sin comes from missing the target, aiming wrong or falling short. In other words we can be better, if not perfect, by choosing life not death. So, bottom line, if you can't be perfect—and none of us can—be faithful. Try, and try again. Aim higher, pull stronger, don't give up on yourself.

We have between birth and death to work on it. We start with baptism. We rest in peace. In between we fight the good fight, make the right as best we see it, see even those we oppose as friends and neighbors, brothers and sisters. Because we are.

We are humans together, siblings. Pilgrims, not exiles. Disciples not heroic saints. Humans not angels. Not perfect but faithful.

And the question Catherine Meeks, director of Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing in Atlanta, put to the congregation gathered for the Absalom Jones service yesterday at the Cathedral of St John the Divine was just this: Ask yourself. am I going to be faithful today? Or will I just go home and forget all about it? and have a piece of cake. Stay focussed and be faithful. That is all.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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