

Feb 12, 2023

Pr. Steve

Texts: Deuteronomy 30: 15-20, 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9, Matthew 5: 21-37

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is why we come to church. You aren't going to hear this anywhere else--
"Choose Life!"

Moses, standing at the edge of the Promised Land, begging his people for 40 years--'Choose Life!' I get the sense of him standing there, just howling for 10 minutes. Just that--'Choose Life!' So, I thought maybe I would do that today, for 10 minutes, just... and then I decided, *'No, we're all going to go out to the corner, and we're going to howl 'Choose Life!' at all the traffic driving by'*, because that's basically the way we feel these days, isn't it?

'I was blind, but now I see,' says that great hymn, "Amazing Grace". *'I was blind--now I see.'* And in Charlene's profound text this morning, that same longing and howling. When will we see? When will we see through to choose life--together. What does it take?

The grace of God is never neutral, it is never static. Grace is the energy by which the blind come to see, where the dead come to life. It's the energy of healing and transformation which pivots people's lives and commitments. To live by the love of God, is to become alive, to bless life, to seek life, to become lively. Grace teaches us either to say yes, or no. Yes, to life. Or no, to the culture of death.

One simple little example here. Did you know that we spend two trillion dollars a year on arms? Two trillion a year. [The]United States spends half of that money. And the world spends 3 billion dollars a year on United Nations peacekeeping. So, we spend a nickel on peace, and 500 million dollars on arms and war. Which do you think is going to get the emphasis--can it get clearer?

Valentine's Day. This Tuesday marks the fifth anniversary--as Charlene shared--of the Parkland shootings. The parents, families, community never forget....we do. Who chose those kids deaths? Gunmen, sure. Gun makers, yes. Lawmakers who do nothing, yes.

In that Deuteronomy text today, God says, *'I call upon heaven and earth to witness against you. I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse. You must choose.'* Faith is never about avoiding the choices before us. Faith will not save us from making choices.

God has chosen--God chose to give us the Creation, God has chosen to give us Life, God has chosen to make blessings possible. And in Christ, God has chosen to give us God's own self--at the most costly price there is--in order that we might reconcile.

There is nothing more important for God than our making peace. If you and a brother or sister have offended each other, first go get out of the church and reconcile--and then come back to the meal, because that's what this is all about. (I'm just quoting the Bible--don't blame me!)

What do we choose? Life--or that most dangerous, and traditional, and seemingly eternal temptation--to simply, you know, fit in. *'We're just guilty bystanders here. Inequality, what can you do about it? We're just tax-paying consumers, like they used to say, you know, 'Good Germans'.'* Do we have a choice? Do we have a choice? Is that for other people?

Jesus goes deeper. *"You've heard it said, 'Don't kill or murder'.* I say, *'If you get angry, if you insult another, if you call somebody a fool, you're facing the hellfires.'"* Whoo! He's probing the Source. Where does all this come from? Right here. [The heart] He's looking into that will that motivates each of us, all of us. Until this is healed, that's not going to change. Reconciling, making peace, has to be nurtured here.

You've heard it said about adultery, I tell you *'If you just cast a glance, welcome to the hellfire. Better to pluck your eye out. Cut your hand off.'* Yes, this is the language of hyperbole. Where does it come from? What's at stake? He's talking about the use and the abuse of others, turning them into things. It starts here. [Heart]

You've heard it said, *'Keep your oaths.'* I say, *'Don't swear. Let the truth be secured by the integrity of who you are.'* Isn't that beautiful? *'Let the truth be secured by your integrity. That's enough. More than enough. Just say, 'Yes, or no.' Say what you mean. Mean what you say.*

But Jesus is unmasking us, and we don't like it. But he wants to encourage is that we live and speak with a simple heart, with a clear heart, with a pure heart. But we can't do that. It's too painful. If our inner and outer selves were actually in harmony, we'd lose control of what other people think of us, because we're working constantly to have people match the image we have of ourselves. And that's going to take a lot more words than just yes or no, and the integrity of my being. It's an unmasking process to give us a pure heart. It's embarrassing. It defeats us. We can't do it. We can't.

And the Gospel is [saying], we don't need to do it. As Jesus says, *'I've not come for the righteous. I've come for the wounded, and the broken, and the vulnerable, and the folks who are struggling with their integrity.*

Knowing that we need mercy, that infinite tenderness of God allows us to rest and relax. We can't do it. We don't need to do it. We get to live into the love and the grace, with God's presence and comfort. Can we share a communal sigh? Ahhh.

The game's over. It's just failure, what's the big deal? We do it all the time, we compromise, we give way, we forget. We hurt each other, we hurt ourselves. Okay.

Grace says, 'Start over. You're loved for who you are. Nothing you've done in your past will assault you on your way to heaven. Nothing. Nothing. And that's the hardest part of grace. 'That can't be true! I'm going to work myself out of my box.' Again, this pointless box. I keep going around and round and round inside of right proving how much I can improve, knowing that some weeks it's worse than ever.

No need. We've been loved into being. We're being sustained by a love we cannot fathom. Rest and relax in the ocean of all-pervading compassion.

Here's a little exercise for this next week. I'm only asking you to do it for one week and then we'll stop it, okay? Maybe some of you will report back next Sunday, but I promise we won't go any further than that.

When you speak this week, would you make sure that you only speak words that build up or encourage other people or the community? That's it. Do not open your mouth unless you're going to encourage somebody else. Okay. I see a lot of heads nodding-- 'yes, I'm looking forward to this.' It's crystal clear already, isn't it? We will talk much less--and we will say much more. One week. That's the limit. Anybody going to try this?

Jesus opposed all formalisms and all formulas. What he wants is an authentic relationship with God, that inner spirit, the inner heart, union with the Holy One--clarity, purity, connection. And it was his opposition to religious forms and externalisms that got him killed.

Religion killed Jesus. Christianity is not a religion, it's not. It's about this vital relationship, and everything that nourishes it, and it can't be confined, captured, turned into a program. That's silly. This way of living that he invites for us is more demanding than religion, not less. It's more demanding. Just remember that the very first disciples didn't get it either. 'Okay, how can this be? What is he talking about? '

To live, to become lively, to bless life. *L'Chaim!*
To worship in spirit and truth.
That is how we choose life. Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.