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Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

### God Chooses Life!

Let us pray: God of life, God of all creation, You who thought it was wise to give us free will, break open our minds, our hearts, and our spirits so we may be open to Your word. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all these gathered hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer.

So, here's the thing about this newest section of the Sermon on the Mount we heard this morning: it sounds a little intense.

Gone are the blessings and the "stay salty, salt!" pep talk.

Perhaps this section made you squirm in your seat a little this morning. If you didn't, you probably were zoned out – this text should make us uncomfortable. It's supposed to!

No doubt, it made the disciples gathered around Jesus squirm in their seats.

This is the fire and brimstone version of Jesus – full of hellfire and judgment and good old eye-tearing out.

And then you pair it with Deuteronomy 30?

A God offering us a choice of life OR death, blessing OR all kinds curses??

It all comes together sounding pretty bleak.

Where's the grace?

Where's the God who loves us no matter what? Who knows we're imperfect and loves us in spite of, or maybe BECAUSE of, all those flaws?

Where's that God? That Jesus?

They're here. I promise.

God's love and mercy and grace live right alongside and within God's laws.

But we should remember there are **613(!)** laws in the Torah – the first five books of the Bible.

And with that many laws, it can be a little hard to know exactly what God is getting at with them. It can be a little hard for even for most stickler-minded of us to follow each one to the letter. Not to mention all those I disagree with.

So, what to do with that?

One very wise Hebrew Scriptures professor tells us – when attempting to interpret laws, the most important question to consider is always this:

What is God's underlying concern?

And time and time again, God's underlying concern is life. Abundant life for all.

Life for me, life for you, for all members of our community, for all of our neighbors, for all of creation:

God chooses life.

And that's what keeping many of these laws are all about. They about protecting and nurturing abundant life for ALL people and ALL creation.

And if a law isn't about that, if a law is about keeping people subjugated, then I don't believe it's God's law.

I didn't grow up knowing much about the 10 commandments. Even now, I might struggle to list them all right off the top of my head. But since seminary, I've learned a deep appreciation, even a love for them.

The law is what keeps us in right relationship with God, with other people, and with creation. The law is what keeps us accountable to the future.

And today, perhaps more than ever, we need to remember that we are accountable to the future.

And being in right relationship with God and the rest of creation is the only thing that's going to keep us on the path of life.

God chooses life.

God's laws are about helping us choose life as well.

So, how do we get from this understandably less-quoted section of Jesus' famous sermon to the promise that laws are about God choosing life?

How do we get from not calling people fools, and adultery and the cutting off of hands – not to mention an exposition on divorce laws to abundant life?

I'm glad you asked!

Because Jesus is all about choosing life in this sermon, even if he's using a fiery hellscape as deterrent.

So, the first title of this sermon was "Jesus Says: Smash the Patriarchy!"

But given my emphasis on vaginas already last week – I thought it might be better to go with a slightly gentler version. Even though, in the sermon on the mount, Jesus does kinda say, smash the patriarchy!

You'll notice when discussing adultery, Jesus doesn't bring up how a woman dresses or make a caveat for when she's "is asking for it." Nope, if a man experiences a lustful thought? Tear out the eyeball, chop off the hand!

No dress codes, or purity laws here. If a man's lust is getting in the way of a woman's right to live her life – well then, the man should carry the burden.

And in a time when it was acceptable to divorce a woman largely without cause, thus forcing her to remarry or be destitute – Jesus' next lines were a sharp reprimand to any man who considering divorce.

I think that made more than a few men listening squirm a bit.

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus over and over again critiques systems and individuals who prevent, oppress and stamp out the life of others.

Because God always chooses life.

Now, this doesn't move us past the rather harsh picture Jesus paints.

One colleague told me that this section of the Sermon on the Mount is really a lesson in Biblical interpretation right from the God-source.

In his reinterpretation of scripture, of laws which are found no way in scripture and yet make it into human canon, we see that Jesus doesn't take Scripture literally.

It is a source of authority, of guidance, of knowledge – but it is a human-influenced source. Full of markers of the culture and time, in which it was written. It needs interpretation.

A strict following of the letter of the law won't get us much of anywhere if it's not accompanied by a transformed heart and a will to follow God.

“You have heard it said, You shall not murder.” But I say to you, that even if you are JUST angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.”

Jesus comes not to do away with God's law, but to intensify it.

Keeping the law is not enough, if we only do it on the surface. Then it becomes just another tool for keeping humans in line – not life-giving at all.

God chooses life. And if our keeping of the law isn't about also choosing life for ourselves and others, then it becomes not at all what God is asking of us.

Here's where that grace part comes in.

I don't know about you, but it's pretty hard for me to not call people idiots when driving in Portland traffic. I mean, it doesn't even take Portland traffic – this happens at the four-way stop in downtown Hood River!

My ability to keep this law as Jesus lays it out is tested every single day. Anger, impatience, resentment – they creep in.

Many days, I fail to keep God's law.

And yet, God STILL chooses life for me.

Not punishment, not hellfire, but another chance, another opportunity to choose life.

That's what this text from Deuteronomy boils down to.

It's up to us. We have the choice to choose life or to choose death.

And not just as individuals.

The entire book of Deuteronomy is Moses farewell speech to the gathered Israelites right before they cross the Jordan River into the promised land.

Moses can see the promised land across the water, but he won't live to see it.

Instead he offers these parting words to his people, his community.

These aren't words spoken just to individuals – as though we could all make our own separate choice for life or death.

Your choice affects me.

My choice affects generations to come.

Our choices affect our communities, this planet, and the future we must be accountable to.

Moses does not lay out this choice to each separate Israelite – this is a choice they must make as a collective.

And for us today, we have choices we must make as a collective.

Every day on this planet, it becomes more and more apparent that the choice between life and death lies before us as a collective.

Our ability to choose life may feel as though it's at risk.

But our ability to choose life, to nurture communities of justice and peace for all right in our own backgrounds is as real as ever.

This is a time and these are texts that remind us to ground ourselves in our very real, very important local communities.

Start here. Start getting in right relationship with your next-door neighbor.

Reconcile with those you need to reconcile with.

Stand up against systems of injustice and examine how your choices perpetrate them.

Find opportunities to choose life – not just for yourself but for your whole community.

Jesus condemns adultery and divorce because these actions prevented a whole subset of society – i.e. women – from experiencing abundant life.

When we are at odds with our neighbors, when we are lashing out in anger – we are putting our chance at abundant life at jeopardy right along with theirs.

When we make false pledges and oaths – we are making hollow promises that get in the way of life-giving action that we so desperately need.

Some days we're not going to get it right. A lot of days we will fail.

A few steps forward to be lost in one exhausted, frustrated day.

But the good news? God's right there alongside you – choosing life. Loving you.

Wanting what is best for you – because if it's best for you, it will also be best for your neighbor.

And for this beloved, vulnerable planet of ours.

God didn't create a bunch of law-abiding robots. God created imperfect, beautiful, human beings who some days get it wrong, and some days, miraculously get it incredibly right.

God's law is all about staying in right relationship with God, ourselves, our neighbor, and all of creation.

Not just the creation of today, but the creation of the future.

God's law is about life. About creating, protecting and nurturing life abundant.

God chooses life. Always. Every day. Many times a day.

So, then the question falls to us: what are we going to choose?