

Today we hear part of Moses' "farewell discourse," arguably one of the most poignant passages in the Hebrew scripture. We've known Moses since he was a tiny baby, found by Pharaoh's daughter in a basket on the river, placed in the bulrushes by his mother after Pharaoh called for all male Hebrew children to be killed. But being raised with privilege and honor as an Egyptian prince gives him no advantage when he's sentenced to death for killing an Egyptian soldier who beat a Hebrew slave. Running away from his punishment brings him back to his Hebrew roots, and he becomes the leader of the Israelites. Year after year, Moses guides them, through the struggles of life in exile, intervening with God on their behalf, mediating their disagreements with each other and with God, always reminding them of God's promise of a new land where they will prosper and grow. Finally, with the Promised Land in sight, and knowing that he will not go there with them, Moses recalls all that has happened under his leadership, praises God, and then passes his authority to Joshua, who will be the one to deliver them to the Promised Land.

We could easily summarize this passage in just two of the words spoken by Moses: "choose life." These days we associate those words with the anti-abortion movement, so let's very intentionally name that and put it out of our minds for the moment. The life Moses offers is a life of obedience and surrender to the will of God, lived by one who loves God, who walks in God's ways, and observes God's commandments, decrees, and ordinances. Moses' understands this is a matter of life and death. If you choose life, living as God commands the Israelites—and as God commands *us* through our Lord Jesus Christ—you will prosper and be blessed. "But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish." Moses' words leave no doubt about their meaning. There's no time left for him to plead or cajole or convince. This is the last chance he'll have to remind them of God's laws, instituted as a requirement of their relationship with God.

Paul's situation with the Church at Corinth and those who are part of it is a bit different than Moses'. Today's passage comes from the third chapter of his first letter to them. There are still another thirteen chapters in this letter and thirteen more to follow in his second letter. Paul is just beginning to share the convictions of his heart and his faith with the young Church, and to teach its members both the conditions and benefits of following Jesus Christ. In today's passage he returns once more to the Corinthian church's issues of favoritism for the ones who baptized them, "servants," as he names them, through whom those who were baptized came to believe. Calling the Corinthians "people of the flesh, infants in Christ," he reminds them that their "human inclinations" have interfered in their lives of faith, preventing them from becoming spiritual people who work together as servants of God. Paul's concern for them and for the young church is that they will become divided by their quarrels and jealousy, rather than being united in their purpose, which is to serve Christ and his Gospel. Although he doesn't say it as plainly as Moses does, Paul puts before them two options for their focus and their future. As with the Israelites, the choice is theirs.

Finally, and the Word of our Lord is always final, we hear today another passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard him state emphatically that he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law, reminding his followers that whoever breaks even the least of the law's commandments will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Today, using very specific examples, he makes his point again, naming just as specifically the consequences for those who disobey the law. Let's note that the examples he gives take us right back to Moses and the Israelites who learned the hard way just what God expected of them.

When we hear these words spoken by Jesus today, how do we receive them? All of us, as far as I know, may be excused from the judgment that follows murder, and perhaps from adultery as well. Sadly, some of us know all too well the effects of divorce. If there are any among us who can say they have never been angry, *please* teach the rest of us! And lust? An old-fashioned concept, perhaps, unless we consider the words of C.S. Lewis, who wrote "He that but looketh on a plate of ham and eggs to lust after it hath already committed breakfast with it in his heart." Like it or not,

there are implications in these laws for every one of us, especially considering that Christ came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, and according to his teachings, to add more to it.

Today's lessons share a common theme by stating what is required by God of those who seek to follow God's commandments and to live in right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The lesson from this theme is simple. It all comes down to choice. As Jesus speaks today, "Let your word be 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no;,' anything more than this comes from the evil one." It should be simple, but of course it is not; never has been, never will be. G. K. Chesterton, an early twentieth century lay theologian and author of the Father Brown stories, wrote that "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." That hasn't changed. In our age and culture of anger, division, and hatred, it's become hard just to live out the principles of our faith, even harder to speak of them.

Yet that is what we are commanded to do as followers of Christ. Our patron, St. Francis, is credited for saying "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words," yet there is *no* evidence he actually said that. In his own time Francis was known just as well for his preaching as for the way he lived. In *our* own time, that quote is often used as an "out," an excuse to avoid speaking about our faith. Speaking out loud about our faith requires no small amount of courage these days, even though that is a large part of the mission of the Church and the ministry of its members, as the Catechism reminds us. Yet, in these days, preaching the Gospel can be difficult even for those of us who have been called by God to do exactly that. Religious beliefs have become so attached to self-interest and political beliefs that it's hard to know where the two stop and the one begins.

A colleague found this to be true just last Sunday, when he spoke in his sermon about the "Prevention of Potential Terrorists Executive Order," the "Muslim Ban," as it is more accurately called, and how the ban creates tension with our Christian faith. At one service, his words were met with agreement and encouragement; but at the other, two individuals walked out, one of them yelling as he went that he "was tired of hearing the liberal agenda from the pulpit." My colleague's wife responded, just as loudly as the man who walked out, saying that he should know her husband has been a registered Republican for his entire life. She didn't mention that he served our country for thirty-plus years before he was ordained. For my friend, this is not an issue of allegiance and patriotism, but an issue of faith, as it is for me. I applaud his courage to preach the truth of the Gospel. Until this very moment, I've hesitated, struggling to find the courage to do the same, just as I've struggled to speak out against the hatred for Muslims shown by some in our parish, the dislike of homosexuals, Black people, Latinos, and others, who despite their differences from us, are also God's children and our neighbors. Despite my beliefs and convictions, I've struggled to answer God's call, which charges me to remind you, plainly and clearly, of Jesus' teachings to love our neighbors, to provide for those in need—including refugees displaced by war, violence, famine and persecution—to serve others as we would serve him, speaking out against social injustice. This is not the liberal agenda. It's the Gospel, and I am making the choice to speak it and live it so that all can see what I believe and who I serve.

We are so much like the Israelites, and the Corinthians, too. More often than not, we make choices out of our fears and prejudices, feelings we may not even recognize or acknowledge. That has certainly been the case for me, as I've feared naming specifically how your actions and reactions concerning the issues of our day either serve or contradict the Gospel. Your reaction has been my fear. I suspect a similar fear is there for many of you; we're afraid to stick our necks out for what we believe. But today's lessons make it clear: we can either risk the consequences of alienating God, or risk the consequences of alienating other human beings. My choice is to seek and serve God, who in the end is the only one who matters. I choose life.

Whether you agree with me or not, I invite you to come visit with me. Let's learn how to talk about our faith and what it requires of us, even as we struggle with it. The Psalmist promises happiness for us as we walk in the law of the Lord. Surely it is so. It is what God has promised. *Amen.*