

THE COST OF BEING A CHRISTIAN

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 1

Philemon 1:1-21

Luke 14:25-33

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live." (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Seems like a simple choice, doesn't it? Reminds me of the old Jack Benny joke where the robber puts a gun to his head and says, "Your money or your life." And Jack Benny has to take time to decide. "I'm thinking! I'm thinking!"

So here, at the end of Deuteronomy, where Moses - as the spokesperson for God - is addressing the people of Israel after having led them through the wilderness for forty years and just as they are about to enter the Promised Land, Moses offers this choice to the people. "I set before you a choice between life and death." And unlike Jack Benny, there would presumably here be no hesitation. And as readers of the Bible, the better choice is as obvious to us as it would have been to that nomadic nation listening to its leader. "To life!" as they sing in Fiddler on the Roof.

But just because the answer is so obvious, that cannot be the lesson the Holy Spirit is teaching us here, or at least not the entire lesson.

I think we can find the rest of the lesson by reflecting on the rest of the verse I quoted at the beginning. Let's read it again, only this time the whole verse.

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your

offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice, and holding fast to Him, for He is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. (19-20)

The point Moses is making is that what matters is not so much the choice, but the life lived in the light of that choice, in his words, the life of love, and obedience, and reliance.

Many of you may remember a movie from the 60's called *The Graduate*. It starred Dustin Hoffman, and I think it was his first starring role. It was a romantic comedy and like all romantic comedies there's a bunch of issues that keep the lovers apart and then there's a climactic scene where everything gets resolved and the lovers fall into each other's arms and there's a big happy ending. In this particular movie, Dustin Hoffman works up his courage and gate-crashes a wedding his loved one is about to go through in a church, and at that point she realizes that he's really the one she wants and she dashes away from the altar and they fly out of the church and catch a bus, and ride off into the happily ever after.

But what struck me at the time and has stayed with me ever since is that the director - I think it was Mike Nichols - added a very short scene at the end, that made the movie a much deeper experience for me, and almost brought it out of the realm of romantic comedy and into the realm of realism. In the final scene - and it only lasts a few seconds - we're shown the young couple sitting in the back of the bus, having fled the scene of the wedding. But instead of showing them embracing and kissing the way romantic comedies always end, instead it showed them sort of looking at one another, then looking away, then looking straight ahead, as if they just really didn't know what to do or say next. And then the Simon and Garfunkel music kicks in and the final credits roll.

I think what Mike Nichols was probably doing here by throwing a small splash of cold water on the typical happy ending concluding scene was saying that, in real life, life goes on after that big scene where everything gets resolved and everything's now seemingly perfect. What he was pointing to was the human reality that the quality of a lasting human relationship isn't determined by the glamour or romance or splendidness of its beginning stage.

Here's what I mean. We often tend to think that the quality of our lives was determined by certain decisions we make at important junctures: whom we

marry, where we choose to go to school, what line of work we choose to pursue. And for many of us that can be the source of our melancholy and regret. If only I had chosen someone else or something else, my life would have been so much better. For others of us, it can be a source of self-congratulation.

But that's a mistake. Our big choices do certainly determine the direction of our lives, but they don't determine its quality. What determines the quality of our lives are the vast number of small, daily choices and decisions we make in living out whatever direction we've taken.

So in *The Graduate*, the satisfaction and fulfillment the two young lovers find in their lives together will not be found in that grand romantic moment that started it out, but rather in the endless affections and considerations - both small and large - that their shared life will give them opportunity for. How a couple chooses to live together day-by-day, hour-by-hour, moment-by-moment, is what will give shape and substance to their marriage, for better or for worse.

And what's true of our married life is also true of our Christian life, the life we live in conscious relationship with our God. That's the spiritual truth Moses is communicating to the people of Israel when he says: *Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice, and holding fast to Him.*

"Loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice, holding fast to Him." The nature and quality of our lived relationship with God is not established by our initial choice to worship Him or follow Him, any more than the nature and quality of our marriage is established by the vows we exchange at the altar.

We find the same point, I think, conveyed by the tremendous image in Psalm 1, representing the spiritual life lived in steady and consistent relationship with God.

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers...He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.

Standing, sitting, walking...these are the routines, the everyday activities of life. And a tree is something that stands firm, something that has roots, that grows slowly but surely, and from which others can therefore receive shade and gather fruit.

What better image could there be of the well-lived Christian life?

And I think that is the same truth that lies at the foundation of our Gospel reading for this morning, which is sometimes cited as one of the so-called 'difficult' passages, because in it Christ speaks of hating one's father and mother, and of counting the costs and being prepared to renounce one's life before becoming one of His disciples. But these are not difficult passages, provided we approach them in the context we've been talking about this morning.

When you get married, you in effect renounce the life you had as the child of your father and mother, and you choose a new life as the adult equal partner of another adult. But just as that choice brings with it a lifetime of new concerns and responsibilities, so also does the conscious and willful choice of the Christian life, and if it is being entered into seriously, it should be in the full awareness that it comes at a cost. The bachelor gives up the life of bachelorhood to assume the life of a husband. The Christian gives up the life of purely worldly concern to assume the life shaped and guided by Christ and His Holy Spirit.

But that life will contain an ongoing, endless, daily variety of willful choices - some large but most of them small - to mold one's life into conformity with being an heir of the Kingdom of God, redeemed from an existence of slavery to the world by the work and death of God's only begotten child, indwelt by God's own soft-spoken Spirit.

That is the cost of being a Christian.

And so, Gracious God, our prayer on this Communion morning is that You sustain and enliven in our hearts the steady, unwavering realization of Your reality and character, and we pray that we may use that realization on a daily basis as a measuring stick for our own lives, and as a guide for our thought and behavior. We ask for an ever-increasing intimacy with You, in light of our awareness that the Christian life is not a journey with a culmination, but rather an endless journeying into the infinite heart of Your love. And we ask this in Christ's name.