

If You Remember Nothing Else, Remember This

Cooke's-Portsmouth Church

February 12, 2017

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

This passage is a part of the farewell discourse of Moses as he prepares to take his leave of the people that he has lead, pastored, mentored, challenged, disciplined, fed, nurtured and organized for four decades. In grand patriarchal fashion, knowing that he will die and his people will cross the Jordan and enter Canaan without him, he reminds his people of what they need to remember when he is no longer around to remind. In essence the entire book of Deuteronomy is a farewell discourse. In it he reminds the Israelites of what they have been through: slavery in Egypt, crossing the Red Sea after the Exodus, receiving the tablets with the Ten Commandments, and wandering in the wilderness. Standing poised on the edge of the Promised Land Moses lays out the two ways between which Israel must decide once they put down roots in Canaan: life and prosperity, death and adversity. Of course we all know what happened over time in Jewish history but in this pristine moment, at the crossroads between what was and what was about to be, Moses is placing his final words of wisdom on their hearts, minds and souls.

Remember who you are and to whom you belong and let your actions testify to that truth. In the previous chapters of the book Moses took great pains to impart to his people just what it means to choose life and to reflect the grace of God. To choose life is to love God with one's heart, mind and soul and strength; the words of the great Shema of Deuteronomy 6. To that end some of his counsel was demanding and would cause us to squirm uncomfortably in our pews were we to listen to a similar sermon and teaching in our day.

Choosing life includes cancelling the debt of the poor (15:1-11) pushing government to guard against excessive wealth (16:18-20) limiting punishment to protect human dignity (19: 1-7) offering hospitality to runaway slaves (23:15-16) paying employees fairly (24:14-15) and leaving part of the harvest for those who need it (24:19-22). Throughout the book we glean that to love and serve God with one's entire being is to love others; and to love others as we want to be loved and treated ourselves. No small task even in our day when we continue to struggle with the chasm that exists between the rich and the poor; the person of colour and white; gender, nationality, race, creed and religion.

My week began with receiving an email from a member of the wider community-not affiliated in any way with this congregation or me- who took great offence at the column I had printed in the local paper last Saturday. I had written of my recent experience of needing to replace the furnace in our home which had quit after we had retired for the night on a Sunday a few weeks back. For two and a half days we lived in some discomfort when the temperature in the house went as low as 12 degrees Celsius. We still had power, hot water and an alternative heating source in a wood burning fireplace. We could cook, bathe and keep food from spoiling so were still very fortunate despite the short lived adversity. The experience made me mindful of those who are homeless and sleep in shelters and on grates in the streets and for whom the situation is not temporary. It was humbling and an opportunity to ponder what life is like for some of the less fortunate in our community. This is the email that I received in capital letters which is email speak for yelling.

I READ YOUR COLUMN :FEB. 5TH ,AND I JUST HAD TO RESPOND ,AS I TOO HAVE HAD SEVERAL OCCASIONS TO BE WITHOUT HEAT,ONCE FOR 3 DAYS ,AND ALSO NO POWER,AND I AM NOT A YOUNG PERSON,BUT I SURVIVED AND I ALSO THANKED GOD FOR HELPING ME THROUGH THIS. ALSO HAVING

BEING BROUGHT UP IN THE 30'S I WOULD LIKE TO BE ABLE TO RELATE ALL THE HARDSHIPS THAT WE ENCOUNTERED ,BUT WE CAME OUT AS BEING MUCH STRONGER PEOPLE. YOUR LAST STATEMENT ABOUT PEOPLE LIVING ON DOORSTEPS,AND IN TEMPORARY SHELTERS,PERHAPS THIS IS THEIR CHOICE,GOD GAVE US CHOICES AND SOME CHOOSE TO LIVE OFF WELFARE,BUT THERE IS HELP FOR EVERYONE IN OUR WONDERFUL CANADA ,BUT IF THEY WANT TO LIVE OFF THE SYSTEM THAT IS THEIR CHOICE. I AM A GIVING PERSON AND HAVE WORKED IN OUR LOCAL FOOD BANK ,BUT I SAW SO MUCH ABUSE I HAD TO STOP. WHEN PEOPLE PUT BUYING LOTTERY TICKETS AND SMOKING ,BEFORE BUYING FOOD ,THEN IT IS SAD. I AM IN AGREEMENT WITH THE REFUGEES BEING BROUGHT TO OUR COUNTRY AS THEY WILL WILLINGLY WORK AT ANY SMALL PAYING JOB,AND WILL THEN GO OUT AND OPEN A BUSINESS . i JUST PRAY THAT THE PREJUDICE PROPAGANDA THAT IS BEING SPREAD BY DONALD TRUMP DOES NOT INFLUENCE OUR PEOPLE. I KNOW THAT I SORT OF GOT OFF THE SUBJECT OF YOUR COLUMN BUT I JUST THINK THAT ADVERSITY DOES MAKE STRONGER PEOPLE ,AND WE HAVE TO STOP FEELING SORRY FOR THOSE PEOPLE WHO ARE YOUNG AND HEALTHY . OUR GOVERNMENT 'S LIKE TO KEEP EVERYONE HAPPY,BECAUSE AS ONE POLITICIAN SAID IF YOU DON'T FEED THE HUNGRY THEY WILL COME AND BREAK YOUR DOORS DOWN.. DEPRESSING BUT TRUE.

I felt that this diatribe by a self -professed “giving person” needed a response. The point of my column had been missed-or perhaps I had not done an effective job of making it in the first place.

Part of my response included concurrence that there are indeed those who do feel that the world owes them a living but I also know that there are many who are the working poor who work at two jobs, denying themselves for the sake of their children and for whom life is an ongoing struggle. It is out of respect for the many who struggle that our church is offering a free community roast beef dinner on February 25. I acknowledged that we are able to do this out of the abundance that God has graced us with. I know, from the relationship that we have with two inner city schools, that life is a great challenge for many and if there were not mitten trees in churches, meals programs and snowsuit campaigns that children would be cold and hungry. The point that I was making is that my suffering was short lived. Rather than making me stronger-as other life experiences like loss and unemployment have- this experience caused me to bow my head a little lower in humility and gratitude.

To truly choose life and to live our lives reflecting the grace and unconditional love of God for the world is not easy. A paraphrase of the conclusion of the sermon/farewell discourse penned by Brett Younger, Associate Professor of Preaching McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta Georgia, readily attests to this truth. "Listen to what I have said today. I have laid it all out for you, life and death, good and evil. Love God. Walk in God's ways. Keep the commandments so that you will live, truly live, passionately, joyfully, blessed by God. But I warn you. If you have a change of heart, refuse to listen, and serve little gods, you will die. It is your choice life or death, blessing or curses."

Younger continues, the choices that we make are not usually labelled life and death. Many of our choices seem trivial but we choose death when we ignore God's will for creation. Death is a slow process of focussing more on that which does not really reflect the light of grace. In essence we choose life when our actions model that we love God with our entire being: with attitudes that

are positive and uplifting and not judgemental and dismissive. We choose life when we work for justice for all; feed the hungry; treat others fairly and respectfully. Inasmuch as we have done it for the least we have done it for Christ. Conversely inasmuch as we have not done we have not done it for Christ. Like so many scriptures the point of Deuteronomy can probably be rendered down to something quite simple and succinct.

If you remember nothing else when you leave your wandering days behind and put down roots remember this: Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, is one LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

I was graced this week in having a preliminary conversation with a woman about her inevitable funeral. She is not affiliated with our congregation but well acquainted with the building as a member of a choir that is a rental and a former voice student of our Director. Diagnosis of terminal illness has cut short her singing lessons and place in the choir but she remembers many moments of joyous singing in the sanctuary. Simply sitting in it and being enfolded by its warmth and beauty has been a source of calm and inspiration. In this sacred space this person has been touched by the mystery of God's holiness and inspiration, although she may not call it that. I would describe her as an agnostic: one who does not necessarily embrace Trinitarian Theology but who does acknowledge that there is more to life than what we experience in the here and now. She has requested that her service be held in this place after her death in the coming months.

I passed on her request to members of the Official Board and received only affirming replies. Part of my discussion with her this week involved the subject of fees for use of the building and services rendered for caretaking and hospitality. All of these pragmatic matters were addressed and then sidelined as we talked about the passions of her life which include family, friends, music, theater and sailing. I can recall the sadness in her eyes but I can easily hear the quality of her laughter when things spoken were funny. She was awed by the grace that is being extended to her by people that she does not know in giving the permission to have her service here. When it was time for me to take my leave both she and her husband descended the stairs of their split level home to see me out. They both stood, side by side and arm in arm in the open door as I made my way out of the driveway and waved as my car made its way out of the neighbourhood. It was bittersweet and overflowing with grace and holiness. Even while residing in the valley of the shadow she is choosing life and once again a moment in my life caused me to bow my head a little lower.

Like Moses I say in passionate plea and inspired counsel if you remember nothing else remember this: I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying God, and holding fast to the Lord; for that means life to you. May it be so for us this day and always. Amen