

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
9/5/2010, The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 1, Luke 14:25-33
A Stunning Simplicity

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you *life and death*, blessing and curse; therefore choose life...
(Deuteronomy 30:19, RSV)

They say that my predecessor here at Immanuel, dear Pastor Raymond Schulze, preached wonderful, *long* sermons. And before him, in other pulpits, John Henry Newman and Charles Spurgeon, John Wesley and Martin Luther, St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom certainly preached wonderful, long sermons. But none of them can hold a candle to the sermon Moses preached in Deuteronomy. He began preaching in Chapter One, and he is still preaching in this morning's text, thirty chapters later!

Some sermons reach their peak early on and then rather straggle onwards, meandering toward a quiet and weak conclusion. Not so this sermon! Thirty chapters into his sermon, and Moses is reaching his stride, approaching the pinnacle of his sermon.

The setting of the sermon is the plains of Moab. The Israelites have escaped Egyptian bondage and wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Now, they are about to cross the Jordan River to take possession of the Promised Land. Moses will not make it. Joshua will lead them across the Jordan. Moses is an old man now. Soon he will die, and Israel will mourn deeply for that great man.

But now he lives and he preaches, and oh, what a sermon! He reviews their history together and he preaches the holy Law of God to them, both the Ten Commandments and all the statutes and ordinances that will govern their life together in Canaan.

What is that Law, the holy Law of God? Well, let me use some of the words of Martin Luther to describe it:

Here, then, we have the Ten Commandments, a summary of divine teaching on what we are to do to make our whole life pleasing to God.
(Luther, *Large Catechism, Conclusion of the Ten Commandments*)

I love Luther's description here of the Law. It is the path in which we should walk that our life might be pleasing to our Maker.

But Moses teaches us something besides this -- something glorious and awfully important for us. He teaches us that obeying God's Law not only pleases our Maker, but is the way of life itself for us. Do you catch the distinction? It is one

thing to know that a certain path in life pleases your Maker. But suppose it pleases your Maker because he thinks that way of life is lovely *for him* to behold, but of no special benefit *to you*? Such is not the case for our God! Moses urges God's Law upon the people because he knows that our God loves us. He loves us overwhelmingly, world without end. And therefore he gives us his Law, that we might be kept safe in this world and live with as much humanity as is possible for us.

So Moses urges God's Law upon the people, especially in this morning's text. He reaches the pinnacle of his sermon in which he, as it were, gazes into the eyes of his congregation and says to them: You have a choice. It is a choice between life and death. Life consists in obeying the will of God. Death consists in disobedience.

Theologian Robert W. Jenson, whom we are studying nowadays in our Coffee Hour Class, speaks of the "appalling clarity"¹ of the choice Moses sets before the people:

¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live... (Deuteronomy 30:19, RSV)

In describing the preaching of Moses here as "appalling clarity," Jenson does not disagree with the clarity; he in fact rejoices in it. It is simply that Jenson knows that in our modern world, we might think the simplicity of the choice to be impolite. We might figure that we can mix and match, take a little bit from one religion and little something else from another, love the Lord our God not with out *whole* heart and mind and soul, but simply with part of our mind and heart and soul, that we can pick and choose among the commandments, cherishing some and deemphasizing others, that, in general, we can be lukewarm in our relationship to our God. But Moses will have no truck with such mediocrity. Nor will the LORD.

The appalling clarity of the choice before us is also illustrated in this morning's Gospel reading, in the hard saying about "hating" our mother and father:

²⁵Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶"If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:25, RSV)

This appalling choice can be softened somewhat by noting that the Bible sometimes uses the word "hate" to indicate a lesser love, somewhat along the lines of Brutus's justification for killing Julius Caesar:

¹ *The Lectionary Commentary: The Old Testament and Acts*, page 140.

Not that I lov'd Caesar less, but that I lov'd Rome more. (*Julius Caesar*, Three: II)

Or Jacob's preference for Rachel is phrased in terms of "hating" Leah:

³⁰ ...and [Jacob] loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with [her father, Laban] yet seven other years. ³¹ And when the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren. (Genesis 29:30-31, KJV)

Jacob's hatred was not of the angry, hurtful kind, but simply that he loved Rachel more.

Likewise, in the Gospel story, Jesus does not want us to hate our family in a wrathful way. In fact, Jesus is a great defender of honoring our parents and being true to our spouse.

Still, our Gospel Lesson poses the same kind of appalling clear choice that Moses poses, and sometimes people are forced to know it. To their sorrow, sometimes people must make a choice between walking with Christ or with their kin. Then they should love both, both Christ and their kin, but love Christ first, with their whole heart.

Let me share a prayer with you that does a good job of describing what our text says -- of choosing this day to love the Lord. The prayer comes from the 19th century English preacher George Dawson (1821-1876)²:

Almighty God, we bless and praise Thee that we have wakened to the light of another earthly day; and now we will think of what a day should be. Our days are Thine, let them be spent for Thee. Our days are few, let them be spent with care. There are dark days behind us, forgive their sinfulness; there may be dark days before us, strengthen us for their trials. We pray Thee to shine on this day – the day which we may call our own. Lord, we go to our daily work; help us to take pleasure therein. Show us clearly what our duty is; help us to be faithful in doing it. Let all we do be well done, fit for Thine eye to see. Give us strength to do, patience to bear; let our courage never fail. When we cannot love our work, let us think of it as Thy task; and, by our true love to Thee, make unlovely things shine in the light of Thy great love. Amen.³

Moses preaching to those who have already died

Now, here is the interesting thing about the preaching of Moses: He was preaching to a people who were already *dead*, according to our Lord's reckoning, for they had already made their appalling choice, and, sorry to say, they had

² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Dawson_\(preacher\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Dawson_(preacher))

³ *For All the Saints, Vol. 4*, prayer for Sunday Pentecost 9C

chosen death. That's what the choice is when we choose to not walk in the way of God's holy Law. We thereby choose death.

The generation standing before Moses there on the Plains of Moab had chosen death. Alas, they are like you and me:

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; (Isaiah 53:6, KJV)

In fact, every time Moses' sermon is read aloud, both in the long history of Israel and the Church, it is being read aloud to a people who have too often made the appalling choice for death.

So, the question is, can our death be undone? Can we again face a clean, innocent morning, with a good day stretching ahead of us? Is there any point in striving for the kind of virtue preacher George Dawson speaks of in his prayer, or is all our striving simply *too late*, for we have already died, with no hope, so that we are simply living out our death throes nowadays?

Praise be to Jesus! It is not too late for us! His life, death, and resurrection mean that this day stretching before us is a true day, not some miserable playing out of a hand we've already lost.

If you are baptized, you are Christ's man, Christ's woman, Christ's boy or girl. You are his disciple and enjoy his protection. And therefore, we can pray Luther's morning prayer with a happy heart:

In the morning, when you rise, make the sign of the cross and say, "In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Then, kneeling or standing, say the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Then you may say this prayer:

"I give Thee thanks, heavenly Father, through thy dear Son Jesus Christ, that Thou hast protected me through the night from all harm and danger. I beseech Thee to keep me *this day, too*, from all sin and evil, that in all my thoughts, words, and deeds I may please Thee. Into thy hands I commend my body and soul and all that is mine. Let thy holy angel have charge of me, that the wicked one may have no power over me. Amen."

After singing a hymn (possibly a hymn on the Ten Commandments) or whatever your devotion may suggest, you should *go to your work joyfully*.

To this Jesus who lets us go to our work joyfully be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.