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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/13/2011, The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 119:1-8, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37
Choose life!

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

For my sermon text, let me begin by lifting up but a fragment of a verse from our First Lesson. Just two words – an exhortation from an old preacher to his people. Moses says this:

...choose *life* (Deuteronomy 30:19, RSV)

Soon Moses is to die. He is old, without a whole lot of time left for himself. Err long, he will be off to heaven. But while he can, he says to his people, Choose life!

Then I want to rebuild the verse from which these two words are taken. And finally, I want to enlarge the perspective on these two words by referring to our Gospel Lesson from the Sermon on the Mount.

So, first step. Suppose we hear the reading of the First Lesson, and, as sometimes happens, it all fades away into forgetfulness except for a word or two. In this case, let those words be the ones concerning life: choose life!

Now, who could disagree with this? Certainly not the faith of Israel, nor the faith of the Church. Our faith is neither melancholy nor misanthropic. Our fundamental appeal, underlying all of our appeals, is the friendliest of appeals: Choose life. Do yourself no harm. Go, thou, and flourish.

Such is our fundamental appeal to our children, isn't it? In a thousand ways over the course of their lifetimes, we make our appeals to them to choose life: to dress warmly, to look both ways when crossing the street, to do their homework, to be honorable to their friends, true to their spouses. And if in our appeals we are not urging them to choose life, then we need to back off, for we are then playing the part of tyrants. Or worse, we are playing the part of destroyers. But none of that for us! Our business as pastors, as parents, as neighbors is to work for an increase of life. Choose life!

And it is needful that we encourage one another toward life, for it is possible in this fallen world to choose not life, but death. Go to many a psychiatric ward, or college student health center, or the office of the psychoanalyst, or even to your friendly neighborhood pub and you might well find people who seem determined to do themselves harm. They know all the old sayings. They know that "the early bird catches the worm," that "a penny saved is a penny earned," that "early to bed, early to rise, makes one healthy, wealthy, and wise." They know such proverbs, and they do not doubt them, but they cannot bring themselves to live by them. And so the years slip by and the chances slip away. It is a strange phenomenon -- one we know all too well: It is possible to know the ways of life, but to decline them.

Take the middle-aged man or woman with responsibilities in this world. He looks at the Vodka bottle, she looks at the whiskey bottle, and they *know* that they should not drink. Other people might well drink, but not them! They know it. The physician has spoken to them about it. The boss and colleagues have spoken to them about it. Yet they drink from that bottle nonetheless.

And as I mentioned in last Sunday's sermon, somewhere in our city, in our land, there is a fifteen-year-old boy or girl whose life is sailing on toward shipwreck. *Always* there is, there is such a suffering one. It is needful to say, and may God grant grace and wisdom to our words, what old Moses said, "Choose life." Maybe we will save a soul that way.

So, that is the first point in my sermon: If we have a good heart toward others, our fundamental appeal to them will always be one meant for their good: Choose life! In a world beset with so much suffering and temptations toward self-destruction, there is often need for us to make such an appeal. And maybe to ourselves too!

Now, let me restore that two-sentence exhortation to its full verse. You will see that Moses connects "life" with loving and obeying the Lord. His whole appeal spans two verses. They go thus:

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, ²⁰*loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him*; for that means *life* to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.
(Deuteronomy 30:19-20, RSV)

Notice that this text does not speak of heaven and hell. I am not so sure of myself that I can confidently oppose preachers who speak of hellfire and brimstone. I mean, have you ever read Jonathan Edward's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." It is chilling, even for modern folk who have seen many chilling things in our lifetime and who have becoming somewhat numb to them. It is not a typical Lutheran sermon. But who am I to disagree with Jonathan Edwards? After all, that sermon seems to have driven New England to its knees and started the Great Awakening. And besides that, think of our Lord's preaching in today's Gospel story, about how it would be better, for example, to pluck out an eye than to enter into hell fire with two good eyes?

So, I am not condemning the fire and brimstone preachers across our land and throughout church history. But I do suggest that even if we set aside this kind of preaching, there is still something important for us to see -- something concerning *life*. Moses does not seem to be speaking of the afterlife, but of good, old-fashioned life in this day-to-day world. He has spent nearly thirty chapters preaching the holy law of God to the Israelites. Now, as he nears the end of his long sermon, he goes to the heart of the matter. He urges that the people live by

those preceding thirty chapters because he wants them to have life! He wants them to love the Lord, to cling to the Lord, to obey the Lord, and in their love of the Lord, to find life. And if they will not love the Lord and obey his voice, they will be marching away from life – not because the Lord means to punish them, but simply because that is the inner meaning of refusing to walk in the ways of the Lord. It means that you are departing from the ways of life. It is as Jesus says in the Tenth Chapter of St. John:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have *life*, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10, RSV)

He is the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. His whole aim for us is that we might have life, aye, even abundant life.

And that brings me to this morning's Gospel Lesson. Think back to your younger days, to days when you first fell in love with our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, perhaps with a King James Bible resting there on the desk. Was it not because you sensed even then that Jesus was preaching about a better life, a more abundant life? In the Sermon on the Mount, the whole world is being changed and humanity is being called "to another county and to a higher way of practising how to live."¹

Our Lord's great Sermon magnifies life and increases the chance that life shall flourish. So, Jesus heads right to the top of the mountain, to the very pebbles and rocks there, and disciplines them, before they cascade, constitute themselves an avalanche, and harm another person. Listen to the preaching of our Lord in today's Gospel Lesson. Note that he disciplines all, both anger and words, with the aim that we should be knit together in peace:

²¹"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' ²²But I say to you that every one who is *angry* with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5:21-22, RSV)

He bids us toward purity of heart concerning our anger, to get that anger under control, to calm it, to let it go before it tumbles onward and grows and takes the form of the wicked fist that would crush someone and diminish life.

Likewise, with our words. Oh! Those words that can set the world ablaze and ruin many a person's peace.

"...whoever says, 'You *fool!*' shall be liable to the hell of fire."

¹ Chrysostom, Homilies on St. Matthew, 5:17-26

So preaches Jesus, which in turn leads Chrysostom to exclaim about that word “fool”:

Think it not then a light thing to call another “fool.” For when of that which separates us from the brutes, and by which especially we are human beings, namely, the mind and the understanding, --when of this thou hast robbed thy brother, thou hast deprived him of all his nobleness. Let us not then regard the words merely, but realizing the things themselves, and his feeling, let us consider how great a wound is made by this word, and unto how much evil it proceeds.²

Altogether, our Lord’s Sermon the Mount is calling us onwards toward purity of heart and holiness of life to the end that life might increase in this old earth of ours. “Choose life” means also, “choose to live a holy life in the years remaining to you.”

I close with a few words about the individual, personal character of holiness of life. I do not think that holiness of life will make us all look the same. There is a holy life that is natural and suited for you. It is related to your temperament, to your opportunities and responsibilities, and to your personal history and to what life has taught you. Holiness of life for a cowboy in a rough and tumble nineteenth century frontier town is different from holiness of life for someone in a monastic community. But whatever form holiness might take in us, our Lord calls us toward it.

This past week I slipped away from town to Mount St. Alphonsus, north of Poughkeepsie, on the west bank of the Hudson River. I went there for the annual St. Gregory of Nazianzus Retreat. It is an annual gathering of old friends, going back to seminary days, along with a few younger clergy. We pray the church offices, Matins, Vespers, and Compline, we celebrate the Eucharist, we eat meals, and we discuss theology and ministry all day and night. It is our joy.

After all these years, the brothers there at Mount St. Alphonsus, pretty much give us the run of the place, including the chapel, along with all the beautiful vestments and Eucharistic vessels.

There are some outstanding mosaics in that chapel, on the chancel wall -- mosaics of the angels representing the virtues: charity, humility, patience, and so on. These angels are composed of individual mosaic tiles that vary in size, color, and location. Some are gold, some various shades of blue, some red, some small, some larger, some cut in precise ways in order to complete a smooth line.

So it is with you and me and our Lord’s call to a holy life. Each of us has our own personal characteristics. And even if we are shaped much alike, still, we each have our own personal location, you serving there, me serving here, and all the baptized serving throughout the church. We need not be replicas of each other. We need simply to live the holy life God has made natural to us each one. Then, leave

² Ibid.

the building of the mosaic to the Master Painter. Leave the building of the kingdom to the Master Builder.

Then it will be with us as it was with St. Paul in this morning's Epistle Lesson:

⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:6-7, RSV)

There are many good and precious things in this world. Among them is this: a holy life, a life spent cleaving to God, obeying him, a life that increases life on earth. Choose, then, *life*, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.