

“A Different Life Looks Different”
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Cor 3:1-9;
Matthew 5:21-37

February 12, 2017 (Scout Sunday)
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I think about what Moses said. You have a choice today. And in the starkest of terms, he really says, “You have a choice between life and death, good or evil. If somebody came and said you have a choice between life and death, good and evil, I don’t think most of us would think there is much of a choice. We want the good. We want life. It’s easy to say that’s the choice we want to make.

He goes on and says there is a way for that to happen. He basically says the way is to love God and to walk in God’s ways. It sounds pretty simple and pretty wonderful. We have a choice between life and death, goodness and evil, and all we have to do is love God and walk in his ways. Pretty incredible. We get to do that. In some ways what he’s inviting them to is to enter the Promised Land. He’s saying, “God brought you here. God loves you. And now you simply make this choice to enter.”

I think about those times when we get that choice to enter something new. When I was thinking about this, I was thinking about when we get a new job and how wonderful that is. All of a sudden it’s right there before us. We get accepted into a school or get onto the team we wanted to get onto. Or some of you may remember going from being a Cub Scout to being a Scout. There is a certain amount of excitement getting to be with that new group; those big boys. That’s a little bit the way this feels. Moses is saying you get to be on God’s team. You get to enter the Promised Land. But that’s the beginning of the story, isn’t it, because once you get on the team that’s just the beginning. The feeling is wonderful, and I think about Christmas a little bit like this. Christmas is that wonderful time when we feel different because we know God loves us. It’s like getting onto the team. At that moment we feel different because all of a sudden we’re on the team. All of a sudden we’re one of the Scouts.

I remember back to when I was playing basketball. After we got onto the team and we were in the middle of doing wind sprints, we sometimes looked at each other and said, “Why did we want to do this?” It’s hard, in the middle of that, to have the same focus, to recognize exactly what we want to do. If we think about the history of the Hebrews, they said, “Yeah, we want to be on God’s team. We will love God and walk in God’s ways.” Well, if we read the history as it goes on, they had a little trouble doing that. Their focus didn’t always seem to stay on God.

In this time, as well, it’s a little hard to keep our focus on God. We live in a society that in our daily lives does not expect us to be thinking at all about God or God’s ways. Maybe you live in a different kind of world than I do and see that more often, but when I’m out and about, it doesn’t feel like there’s much sense that we’re about loving God and following God’s ways.

So when Moses is asking, and as scripture asks us, to make that choice and to love God and to walk in God's ways, it's asking us to be different. When we join the team we know we're something different.

I loved that Jasper brought up the Scout Oath and the Scout Law in the children's sermon, because when you become a Scout, you are asked to be something different. There's a definition to that difference in the Scout Oath.

On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country, and to obey the Scout Law, to help other people at all times, and to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight.

And then the Scout Law:

A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

So becoming a Scout is more than *feeling* that you're a Scout. There is something about *being* a Scout. I think it's the same thing that Moses is saying to the people and Jesus is saying in his Sermon on the Mount. It feels great to know that God loves us, but it's more than *feeling* different. He's asking us to *be* different.

As Jesus works his way through the Sermon on the Mount, these passages today are considered pretty tough because of the descriptive language in them. But if we think about what he's pointing toward, the kind of description he's giving, he starts out about being angry. It's about how we relate with someone else and how they are feeling about our relationship, and what we do about that. He then talks about being taken to court. Do I have to prove that I'm right? That's generally what I would want to do. I want to prove that I'm right.

Then he focuses on one of the most intimate of relationships, the marriage relationship. He talks about the importance of our relationship there and how we live up to the responsibilities of it. We have fidelity and we don't use that relationship by being in it for a little while and then saying that's all we want. It was particularly important during Jesus's time because there was a power relationship there, as well. Women were powerless and could have their lives greatly affected by a man simply giving them a writ of divorce.

Jesus goes on to talk about the promises we make. It's almost like: don't make a promise because it's almost sure it's going to be hard to keep in this uncertain world. My sense is oftentimes we make a promise because we want something right now and it's awfully easy to make a grandiose promise to get what we want right now.

This whole series, it feels to me, suggests that life is not so simple. If only life were simple. In many ways I could work my way back through this. If only I could let my anger out... If only I could prove myself right... If only I could just follow my desires and didn't have to realize it takes me in bad places and it's better to cut it off before I ever

get there... If only I didn't have to be quite so trusted... If only I could change things and go off on a new path... If only I didn't have to be so responsible... If only...

It is the relationship we have to one another. When Moses says to walk in God's ways, he's inviting us to be different. Jesus continues that. He says he's teaching the fulfillment of what it means to be God's people, to care about the relationships and how they work out together. Paul reminds us that we struggle with that. We tend to get jealous and quarrel and we create division. Life is not always simple.

The interesting thing is, oftentimes it's wonderful to get the feeling and to think God loves us, and think that's all that we have to do. But God wants more. God wants us not only to have a feeling, but to be different. God gives us the opportunity and the responsibility and the ability to do things. And how we do things matters. We have a responsibility to walk in God's ways. And it doesn't mean we just do it here when we're in church, just like being a Scout doesn't mean you just do it on a Monday night. The idea is you follow your oath and your law all the time. You do a good turn daily. It's not just when you come to a meeting. And so it is with this idea of choosing life, choosing the good by loving God and walking in God's ways. It's not something we just do at church. It's not something we just do among us. It's something we do all the time. God invites us to be different in that way, that we're walking in God's ways all the time. We have to care about righteousness and we have to care about justice and we have to care about our neighbor who is sitting next to us, or our neighbor who is sitting across the world from us because they are all God's children. God invites us to walk in God's ways.

We are called into some activity, to use our abilities, to recognize that the world is complex and not always easy to figure out. In fact, there's a bit of letting go of trying to make it simple, recognizing that I don't understand it all and don't have it all figured out because I have one who does have it figured out, who knows the way. That's what it means to trust and follow God's ways.

Sometimes as I have a choice. I have a lot of ways the world would tell me to go, and then I have God's ways. The promise is that it's the good way. It's the life-giving way. I think that in all this complexity, it ends up creating something beautiful. Think about the human body and how complex and how hard to understand it is, and how it works, and yet it's a beautiful thing. It is as we join in and do things God's way in the midst of all this complexity, as we learn to be responsible in our relationships, to care for one another as best we can in the moments we have in the midst of the complexity of the world, sometimes it may feel like we're running wind sprints. In the end, there's going to be something that blossoms. There's going to be the beauty of goodness and life.

Again, we hear Moses' question, and I hear it in Jesus' teaching: what do we choose. Do we choose goodness over evil? Do we choose life over death? Do we receive the love of God and return it and live in God's ways? Amen.