

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 5 September 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

Two well known biblical sayings are juxtaposed this Sunday.

First, Moses says that God is laying before the people of Israel a basic choice: life and prosperity or death and adversity, blessing or curses. It is very straightforward, says Moses, choose life. God has called all of creation as witnesses of this offered choice – so choose life.

That seems entirely reasonable and appropriate. God created us for life. Of course, God means us always to choose life over death and destruction.

But then in the Luke we find Jesus saying, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

How can we make sense of the injunction to choose life along side another one to hate life (and all the people we would naturally love)? On the face of it, we cannot.

Choose life – hate life. Two very different things.

When we look at the context of Jesus’ teaching, we realize that hating life must not mean what one of us means when we become discouraged or depressed and say, “I hate my life.” Jesus repeatedly says that he came that we might have life, and have it abundantly – that we may have joy and that our joy may be full. This is not a life to hate. Hating the abundance wished for us by God would be sheer ingratitude.

So what does Jesus seem to mean? The saying about hate is in the context of saying that each disciple must pick up his own cross and follow, that is, each one must make her own sacrifice. He goes on to talk about counting the cost before entering on any enterprise, whether it is building a tower or starting a battle. This is about being wise, about recognizing what is required and what may be lost in following Christ. The section concludes, “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Yet we know that many of Jesus’ closest followers did not give away all of their possessions; rather they used their wealth to support Jesus and the group following him. So the giving up may not always mean abandoning all that one has, thus becoming dependent on others.

Some people are called to that, people like Saint Francis or Mother Teresa – but the thriving of their extraordinary ministries required that other people use their wealth and possessions to support Francis and Terea. What is required of everyone is holding everything, our money, our possessions, our families, our relationships in an open hand, not grasping or holding on.

To give them up in the sense of giving up any sense of ownership or entitlement. To know that at any moment what seems to be ours may be lost, may be required to help others.

So what are we meant to hate? Hate the needy grasping that keeps us too attached to our financial security or other relationships we feel we can control. Hate the fear that says we will die without ... cable television, my circle of friends, winning this competition, whatever. Hate any dependency other than

dependency on God. As we begin to think seriously about what Jesus meant, I believe that we are in fact helped by the words from Deuteronomy: Choose life.

Throughout the Gospels, we find Jesus taking the admonitions of Torah further. “You have heard it said that you shall do no murder, I say you must not even harbor anger against someone.” “You have heard it said ‘An eye for an eye’ but I say to you, ‘Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other one also’.” What if we were to consider what Jesus is saying here to be some sort of amplification of Moses’ words about choosing life – what if this is taking that idea further?

Moses says that since God, creator of the universe, has given his people a code to live by, we have a simple choice between following that code and thus choosing the life God has created us for – or following our own path, to adversity and destruction. When Jesus says that we should let go of (‘hate’) everything we might claim as our own so that we might become truly disciples, he is showing us a wide angle view of this way of life: life that accepts the generous gifts of God and yet holds onto nothing for my individual self.

Choose life – choose Christ. Choosing to follow the Way that Christ lays out for us, the Way of love and service and self-sacrifice, the Way of the Cross – choosing that Way is to choose fullness of life, but not selfishness of life.

When Saint Francis gave up all of the wealth and privilege coming to him as a wealthy merchant’s son, he did so in order to embrace the Way that Christ was calling him to, a way of extraordinary joy and abundance. But I imagine it looked to many of his contemporaries that he had an unhealthy hatred for ‘the good things of life’.

He did not hate them in any way that we might mean by that word – he simply could not allow them to get between him and Christ, between him and the remarkable ministry God had called him to. He gave up his life in order to choose life.

Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr. could have settled into life as the prosperous, gifted, educated, beloved pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. He could have enjoyed a peaceful life of admiration and accomplishment and good things for his family. I am sure he did enjoy them until God called him away from the comfort of that life into a service that cost him his life, but gave extraordinary gifts to the world. He gave up the things that were his, to choose the life that God offered.

Mother Teresa gave up her family, her native language, and her home country to follow the call of God to far off India. Once there, she was successful teaching in the missionary girls’ school. She could have stayed there, kept the fruit of her accomplishments, enjoyed the privileged life afforded her, but she did not hold on to those things. When she heard the call of the poorest of the poor, she gave up everything she had worked for and went off to do something that everyone else thought completely crazy.

All three of these heroes of the faith might have appeared to their contemporaries to truly hate life, hate their families, hate their lot in life – because they seemed to let them go so easily. They let them go so that their hands would be open to receive the mysterious gifts of God, so that they could truly choose life.

Jesus tended to use language to shock people out of their complacency, so that they would listen and think. If he had merely said that we should remember the words of Deuteronomy and ‘choose life’, everyone would have nodded their heads at this familiar scriptural reference – but would their lives have been changed? That language about hating family and hating life, about giving up everything is shocking, and meant to be so.

All our instincts tell us that we are responsible for sustaining our own lives, that we have to hang on like the kitten on the poster with its claws dug into the branch as it hangs in obvious panic. But we are not supposed to hang on like that. We are to choose life – with all its unpredictability and possibility.

If loving life means holding on with all our might, then we are to hate it. We are to reject the insecurity that demands that we build bigger barns, lock up our treasures, bury our talents. We are to reject the fear that closes us in on ourselves. We are to reject the tight fist so that we can open our hands, as Jesus did.

This can be a striking visual image to hold before ourselves, the image of standing tall and brave, with outstretched open hands. It can be useful to imprint this image, this way of life on ourselves by standing like this while we pray. There are many pictures and statues of Jesus, and of the Risen Christ, and of Saint Francis, and of the Virgin Mary, and of many other saints, standing tall and calm and welcoming, with open hands outstretched. I am sure we have all, at one time or another, found comfort in such an image. This text suggests that Christ is telling us, “You do it too.” Hate the ordinary, self-protecting life. Choose real life.

Hold out your empty hands to bless the world and God will fill them with blessing.

Try it. Let me know if it makes sense to you.