

Sermon: C Proper 18 2019  
8 September 2019  
St. Augustine's in the Woods  
The Rev. Susan S. Gaumer

Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
Luke 14:25-33  
Psalm 1  
Philemon 1-21

Our readings today are all about choices:

Deciding to follow God's ways you may choose life and prosperity over death and adversity, so "choose life" encourages Moses as the Chosen people head toward the Promised Land in Deuteronomy.

Psalm One encourages us to join up with those who keep God's commandments who are happy while those who don't are doomed.

Luke's Gospel says we need to hate our families and give up all our possessions in order to follow Jesus. Jesus' words get our attention for sure! They led a former student of mine to ask "Was this Jesus on a bad day?"

So let's first think about this passage from Deuteronomy. "Choose life and prosperity" sounds like the better option. All that is required is keeping the commandments of God so life and prosperity will follow. The alternative is idol-worship and death. "Prosperity" meant pretty much the same thing in Moses' time as in ours--wealth, a good life--although the degree of prosperity we enjoy would have been unthinkable to the ancient Hebrew people.

Thinking about the prosperity part, Moses' advice hasn't fared very well throughout modern history, particularly Protestant history. Somewhere along the way some of those rich European burghers and wealthy colonists in America

got the idea that God did not provide their largesse--they did. To them their riches were signs of God's approval. Poorer people not only didn't have wealth, but by inference, they did not have God's approval either. So the rich were deserving, the poor undeserving and, thus, easier to ignore, neglect. Blaming the poor for their circumstances and reluctance to help them is an observable behavior in our country today. God has slipped largely out of the equation. In our age of individualism, most billionaires don't credit God with their success, but their own clever ways of making money. Is this "choosing life" in Moses' sense? I don't think so.

There is another way prosperity has not delivered "the good life" today. Whether not we believe God provides all we have, consuming more and more stuff has become the American way of life. On my way up Rte. 99 from Seattle the other day I saw a new storage facility going up that is 6 stories high and fills 2 square blocks. Our appetite for acquiring more and more stuff is seemingly insatiable. Is this prosperity choosing life or choosing death and adversity? Have we replaced God with an idol of consumption?

Jesus understood very well what an obstacle wealth is to having faith in God. From the rich young man to the hoarder with the silos Jesus confronts the rich with the hold their possessions have on them--and on us. Do we own all the stuff we store or does it own us? Good question.

Jesus said “To be my disciple you must hate your family and give up all your possessions.” Those words, surely hyperbole to get our attention, strike quite a chord. They tell us that there is a price to pay for following Jesus, a cost of discipleship that is not about ending human relationships but about putting God first--in front of everything else and they tell us that there is really no other way to follow Jesus.

Every Christian has, at one time or another, had to deal with the cost of discipleship--what it means to really give your life to Christ or to just go through the motions, intending to get more serious about it someday. When I was growing up church for me meant singing in the junior choir, having fun in youth group, going to church camp. But I also I remember the day as a teenager that I realized that martyrdom would make it's way onto every Christian's screen, not just those people in stained glass windows. Me a martyr? I hoped not, but the possibility is never entirely absent for those serious about following Jesus. Surely every one of us has had to make a hard choice in order not to follow the crowd into behavior that would have been harmful to someone else.

In 1965 at the height of the civil rights turmoil in the south, Jonathan Myrick Daniels, a seminarian from Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, stepped in front of a young black girl about to enter a small grocery store run by white supremacists in Hayneville, Alabama. He took the bullet intended for her and died on the spot, a martyr.

In 2002 I led a pilgrimage of parishioners to Hayneville to observe the day of Daniel's death, August 14th. About 500 people were there, gathered to hear the story of what happened on that day, some of them were eyewitnesses. We heard about the acquittal of the man who pulled the trigger, but also about how some in the town had, because of Jonathan Daniels death, had come to understand that racial inequality was a sin, entirely contrary to loving one's neighbor. One said "I went home and knew the racism I was brought up to believe was wrong. I couldn't be a racist and follow Jesus at the same time."

Jonathan Daniel's Day is commemorated in Hayneville every year. I understand the pilgrims now number in the thousands. Jonathan paid the ultimate price of discipleship, he gave his life to save a small black girl's life and in so doing reminded a good many people that following Jesus means acting for the common good, for justice against the powers of discrimination and racial hatred.

So there we have it: choices today. Choose life and prosperity, but be careful of prosperity as it can lead us astray from God's intentions for the good life for all of God's children. We are not all called to be martyrs, but following Jesus means getting our priorities in order. To do the right thing in the face of evil and adversity is never easy, but ultimately worth it for all of our souls, whatever the cost. Choose to follow Jesus, God's way of love, and you will find that you have chosen life, the good life.

