

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 4, 2022

“Choose Life”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost and also the Labor Day weekend. Today’s readings all gather around the quality of life someone leads as being a direct result of their actions and choices in life. In other words, choices have consequences.

In the reading from Deuteronomy, we have set before us a list of opposites; basically life and death, and the idea that we have choices in our lives that lead down one path or the other. Our Old Testament reading explores that if you love God, good things will come your way. And although I love this sentiment, these Torah passages come from the same tradition and rabbi commentary that in recent years has published books entitled, “Why bad things happen to good people.” So we can see the irony there.

What we need to realize about this reading in Deuteronomy is that this was another covenant reinforcement of the relationship between the love and protection of God with his people. By the time the authors of Deuteronomy were putting things together, the Hebrew people had gone from a tribe of wanderers to an agricultural people who were in the midst of becoming able to govern themselves.

By following the covenant, Israel will have community health. This would be a natural consequence of choosing to love one another as they love themselves. They would have familial health, for the same reason, because they would continue

through tradition to teach this self-governing approach toward life to their children. They would also have economic and commercial abundance; a society that tells the truth and protects one another's property is what lays the foundation for a vibrant economy. On top of the natural consequences, God promised to add abundance, through cooperative weather and protection from enemies.

If however Israel chose the path of disobeying God's covenant, it would lead to *death and adversity*. The Hebrew word for *adversity* is "ra'," usually translated as "evil," "misery," or "distress." The phrase *death and adversity* includes the biblical notion of death as separation. Disobeying the covenant would lead to Israel being separated from the blessings of God and a self-governing society. In place of love and care for one another there would be envy and exploitation. In place of honesty and collaborative industry there would be distrust and isolation.

Additionally, God would add supernatural chastisement in the form of adverse weather and invasion. Part of the *death and adversity* would ultimately be loss of physical life and loss of freedom to foreign invaders.

These were people trying to find their identity, and by living within the laws of their religious tradition they would stay united and therefore good things would happen to them. This puts the responsibility on both parties of the covenant, Creator and creature.

And if this still leaves us with the "why do bad things happen to good people" question, I want to quote a friend of mine, Father Chris from Wisconsin. He states, "It is not true that everything happens for a reason, it is possible that meaning can be found in everything because we're meaning-making people. We tell stories and make connections, we learn, remember, figure out, and adapt. That's part of what it means to be made in the image of God, who spoke the universe into existence. We

are co-creators because we learn, remember, figure out and adapt. And if we have faith, whatever comes at us is eased by the knowing that we are not in the situation alone, but with a God who will help us stretch and grow.

We do, however, often have choices. Some of those choices are whether we are going to choose a life, point of view, faith tradition, or spirituality that gives us life; gives us hope, life and love, makes us feel connected to God, his Creation and each other. Are we reflecting and finding meaning, are we searching for God in our midst?

Choosing life involves loving God. Deuteronomy presents this love as more than an emotion and certainly not an infatuation. The ancient reader and perhaps the modern, is reminded of an earlier statement from this biblical book: “You shall love God, with all your heart, and with all your self, and with all your might.”

So one needs to understand that the basis of life is with loving God. We may not need laws that change our diets now. Our society has refrigeration and high speed cooking to keep our bodies safe. We no longer need to kill an animal at an altar to feel forgiven and make amends for our mistakes; we have Jesus. We no longer have the same work schedules as electricity, technology and life style has changed since the list of Old Testament laws were written about work and rest. But loving God and seeking answers to everyday dilemmas with loving neighbor in mind will still bring a better quality of life than not.

The Gospel Reading for this Sunday has Jesus engaging the Ten Commandments and, although Deuteronomy is not referenced, we can see that Jesus’ interpretation of these commandments stands on the side of life. As Jews. Jesus and his followers

are well aware of the requirements of Deuteronomy; therefore, Jesus calls them to act and to obey as a way to choose life.

This was actually the true issue with Jesus' ministry. He was Jewish; he was aware of the commandments; and he was openly calling out those who had twisted the laws. Those who were following him were desperately seeking to understand the true covenant with God, to have a true relationship with the Creator that could bring them peace in their lives.

We are here to make meaning, to find the life that we are co-creating in covenant with God; even if it is in the midst of our own choices which may have consequences. Jesus is asking us to do the unpopular thing, leave behind what no longer serves you, and focus on a relationship with God. Jesus is asking us to choose life. Amen