

Sermon – Walking in God’s Way
Sunday, February 12, 2017
Scripture Readings – Deuteronomy 30:15- 20, Matthew 5:21-37
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Our first scripture reading, Deuteronomy 30:15-20, presents the final words of a lengthy speech attributed to Moses right before his death. As the Hebrew people enter the Promised Land, Moses reminds them of the choices before them. This is the word of God.

¹⁵ See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in God’s ways, and observing God’s commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying God, and holding fast to God; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Amen.

Our second scripture reading, Matthew 5:21-37, presents Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. In today’s reading, Jesus introduces six antitheses: *You have heard it said...but I say to you...* At the heart of each scenario lies a broader, more sweeping demand. Listen to what the Spirit is saying through Scripture.

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one. Amen.

Title of the meditation: "Walking in God's Way"

Text: If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God...walking in God's way...God will bless you. Deuteronomy 30:16

Let us pray. Holy God, we thank you for loving us enough to challenge us with Christ's teachings. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

When friends ask Peter and me how we like living in Springfield, I often respond with what a delight it is to be walking on holy ground. To live on some of God's richest soil in the county where Abraham Lincoln walked, studied the law and became the person he was meant to be is a privilege not to be taken lightly.

We received a gift this morning from Dale Rogers and the Walnuts in the presentation of the anthem "The Abolition of Slavery" composed by Bob Chilcott with words by Charlie Bennett. It is a tribute to Abraham Lincoln "*Sometimes one person, one good person can set a nation free...*" and it is a challenge and call to each of us "*Give me the good words...make me the right person....*"

This anthem is a part of a larger musical piece entitled *Five days that changed the world* written for the Worcester International Festival for Young Singers in the summer of 2013. It was the culminating piece in the final concert performed by 400 young singers from 11 different countries. The five historical events, according to Chilcott and Bennett, which had a global unifying effect on the world are: the invention of printing, the abolition of slavery, the first powered flight, the discovery of penicillin and the first man in space.

On this day, February 12, 1809, the man who abolished slavery was born. The day before his 52nd birthday, Abraham Lincoln boarded a train in Springfield for Washington, D.C. to become the 16th President of the United States of America. He bid farewell with these words:

My friends, No one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting in God who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To God's care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

Perhaps it is especially poignant that we consider Christ's most challenging teachings on Lincoln's birthday who faced an overwhelming challenge, and, who gained a profound understanding of the God in whose way he walked.

In today's reading from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers a new understanding of old commandments and calls his followers to look within for a fresh accountability. I would like to share some commentaries on these verses simply because they are so complicated and need to be understood in the context in which they were written.

Concerning anger... Jesus believes that God not only condemns abusive language, physical violence and murder, God also condemns the anger that gives birth to this kind of destructive behavior. Is anger a sin? Anger itself is not a sin, rather it is an emotion that we all experience. Having insight and learning how to process our anger in a healthy manner is “walking in God’s way.” Jesus invites us to own, explore, understand and take responsibility for the anger that is ours. Jesus also expects us not to hold on to petty differences, but rather to forgive and to be reconciled with one another.

Concerning adultery... In first century Middle Eastern culture, a man’s wife was his property. He owned her. Therefore, adultery was more about theft than lust and clearly forbidden. Jesus introduces lust into the conversation because of the way lust trivializes and objectifies women. As Matthew makes clear, it is not a sin for a man to look at a woman or for a woman to look at a man. It is not a sin to be attracted to another human being. What is prohibited along with adultery is looking for the purpose of lust. Jesus requires a new kind of self-discipline for those who walk in God’s way.

Concerning Divorce... There were no laws prohibiting divorce in Jesus’ day. Divorce is regulated in Deuteronomy 24. Women, of course, as property, had no right to divorce. On the other hand, a man could divorce his wife on a whim. Jesus addresses this double standard. His prohibition of divorce, both recognizes God’s intent for marriage as a lifelong commitment, and advocates for women who had no power in the legal system. Jesus’ words prohibiting divorce are not intended to be a legal mandate against divorce. As painful as divorce is, there is a time to choose divorce. As a community of faith, it is crucial that we go the second mile in respecting and supporting those among us whose lives have been touched by divorce.

Concerning oaths... This prohibition does not exempt Christians from the legal requirements of taking oaths in courts or elsewhere. The taking of an oath to guarantee one’s word implies that otherwise one’s word cannot be trusted. Jesus calls for simple and thoughtful honesty in all our relationships. Truthfulness is characteristic of walking in God’s way.

As we prepare to receive communion, once again we are reminded of the choices before us. May we surprise ourselves and one another by choosing compassion, forgiveness, self-control, faithfulness and integrity. Amen.