

February 12, 2023 Epiphany 6

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

15 "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. **16** If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God^[a] that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules,^[b] then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. **17** But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, **18** I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over 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, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, **20** loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

Psalms 119:1-8

- 1** Happy are they whose | way is blameless,*
who walk in the law | of the LORD!
- 2** Happy are they who observe | his decrees*
and seek him with | all their hearts!
- 3** Who never do | any wrong,*
but always walk | in his ways.
- 4** You laid down | your commandments,*
that we should | fully keep them.
- 5** Oh, that my ways were made | so direct*
that I might | keep your statutes!
- 6** Then I should not be | put to shame,*
when I regard all | your commandments.
- 7** I will thank you with an | unfeigned heart,*
when I have learned your | righteous judgments.
- 8** I will | keep your statutes;*

do not utter- | ly forsake me.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

But I, brothers,^[a] could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? ⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother^[c] will be liable to judgment; whoever insults^[d] his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell^[e] of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.^[f]

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 lustful intent 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. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your

right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body 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 everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath 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 take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.^[a]

Message: The *Whole* Witness of Scripture

As Lutherans, we always have our ears tuned to the distinction of Law and Gospel. But sometimes in our desire to hear the latter, we still tend to mistake one for the other. The texts assigned for this morning are a case in point because if we restrict ourselves to just these texts, there is nothing in any of them that could rightly be considered *good news*.

The reading from Deuteronomy can sound like good news: "*See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live.... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life!*"

Sounds good – all we have to do is choose wisely!

But it's the same choice given to our parents in the Garden! How'd it work out for them? It's given again to the children of Israel on the threshold of the Promised Land – how'd it work out for them? And it's the same choice we're faced with every day – how's it working out for you? And what happens when any ability we might have for continuing to choose well becomes impossible? Tiny blood vessels break in our brain and we suddenly find ourselves no longer capable of rational thought.

The portion of Psalm 119 is not much help either! Written in praise for the beauty of God's Law, the happy, blessed state of the reader or listener evaporates pretty quickly when you get to the fine print:

¹ *Happy are they whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD!*

² *Happy are they who observe his decrees
and seek him with all their hearts!*

³ *Who never do any wrong,
but always walk in his ways.*

Great! How you doing so far?

The wisdom for which Paul praised the church in chapter one of 1st Corinthians was apparently short lived, for we hear in the epistle this morning that they weren't as wise as they thought! As a result of their petty bickering and the factions springing up from cliques based on personalities, Paul was forced to step back from deeper, mature teachings to the most simple, basic truths of Christ alone.

And then we get to this portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Oh, yes! This is all part of the same!) If we thought that those words from the mouth of Jesus himself would provide the good news we need, we're sadly mistaken! Jesus knows our tendency to grade our own sin on the curve, comparing ourselves to our neighbor – murder and adultery just to name a few. We want there to be levels of sin; we want some to count more than others so we're not left with the short end of the stick. When Jesus says, "But I say to you...", he's taking the counting game to a whole new level! He's saying, "You want to start counting sins? Let's count all of them and see how ugly it gets!" When anger is compared to murder, yes, there are levels of sin; but only for the recipients: one is left dead, the other wounded. But there are no levels for the one committing the sin: they both have the same impact on us as the sinner! The bottom line is Jesus has only made the problem worse!

If we are restricted to just the Word of God contained in the written texts of what the church knows as the Revised Common Lectionary, we might be left with a sense of hopelessness even despair. It is for this reason that Luther chose as his first Theses of the 95 the declaration that "when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent', he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance!"

But here is the good news: as a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ, I have been charged with proclaiming the whole witness of scripture. We are called and gathered by the Holy Spirit this morning to be recipients

of all that our triune God would bring to us! The good news is that all the demands made by God's beautiful law of which the Psalmist spoke so highly, which Jesus clarified so terrifyingly, have been met in him!

While the writer of Deuteronomy had to speak in the old covenant terms of choosing, God in his divine service to us this morning brings his Word in a new covenant. So regardless of what kind of past poor choices and bad decisions we may be dragging around with us – murder in word or deed, wandering eyes or divorce decrees, Christ Jesus is present in the flesh to tell us that we no longer have a relationship built on the decisions and choices of *If...Then*, but a new covenant relationship built on the grace – his grace – of *Because...Therefore*. Because Jesus said, *given and shed for you*, therefore those words assure us that in the Sacrament in which he comes to us we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation – the whole witness of Scripture.

Thanks be to God.