

Feb 16      Door Number Three

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

In Deuteronomy things are laid out in stark choices. Choose life or death; prosperity or adversity. On the surface, of course, we would choose the first. But that means obeying all of God's commandments, walking in the way of God and all the rest. The implicit opposite is that if we don't do those things we have chosen death and adversity. We would like a third option. We want to be kind of faithful, kind of religious, you know enough to feel good, to do good but not so much that it gets in the way of living. We don't want too many demands or to be made uncomfortable or make our friends uncomfortable. We will look at this struggle and why there is no third option.

First, some history. The people of Israel are getting ready to cross the river Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Moses, in preparation, has been teaching them about the ways of God and their response to God's laws. These are things they are going to need to do if they are to be faithful and to flourish. Today's speech is a final ringing challenge. It calls for a selection between two options: life and death. The Common English Bible translation stays close to the Hebrew wording: "choose life and what's good versus death and what's wrong." So, that's a rather easy choice, right? Surely if given the option of life or death, blessings or curses, we would naturally and enthusiastically choose life. That is until we start thinking about it. We don't want things laid out with such stark clarity. That whole notion begins to make us uneasy. We are at least a little afraid that at times, through our actions, we have not chosen life but death. I want us to live with that tension as today we explore what it means to choose life.

First, choosing life involves loving God. Deuteronomy presents this love as more than an emotion. The ancient reader (and perhaps the modern) is reminded of an earlier statement from this biblical book: "You shall love The Living God, your God, with all your heart, and with all your self, and with all your might." Love is depicted as a whole person experience involving the heart which was the seat of intelligence and conscience for the writers of Deuteronomy and for Jesus. It was not the seat of emotions as we think about it today. We were also to love God with our soul, or body as well as our strength or

actions. To love God in this way is not to have a purely intellectual or emotional experience but instead a full commitment of all of our life and actions. Likewise, choosing life involves more. It involves a total commitment and so you are beginning to see why there is no door number three.

Here is a brief example of this kind of love. In my last church a woman walked very early every morning. In her complex there were a lot of seniors, kind of like here. Many were struggling with health issues. One day she was visiting with a neighbor and he was talking about canceling his paper subscription. "Why?", because it was too difficult for him to retrieve it from the street. She immediately told him she would place it in his screen door. She then went up and down the few blocks of her development and asked if others would like her to do this. For the next 10 plus years she faithfully rain or shine, cold or snow put her neighbor's papers in their screen doors. When she was gone on a trip she recruited a neighbor. She did this until her health failed. Whenever she was asked why she did this she replied, "Helping my neighbor is my way of loving God."

Second, choosing life involves walking in the ways of God and striving to be open and listen to the voice of God. This is an idea we hear often in the Bible and it is the basic biblical image of discipleship. Psalm 1 uses this same image of walking to conjure up notions of following and listening: "Happy are those who do not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the path of sinners, or sit in the seat of scoffers." The link between hearing the voice of God and obeying it is so established in Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Bible that some modern Bibles simply translate it as "obey God."

In our contemporary context, obedience, especially unexamined obedience to authority, can get a bad reputation. We often view it as submissive or uncritical in nature. Yet, Deuteronomy envisions obedience as a response to God's covenant. It is active -- walking and listening.

One of the things I have learned over the years is to not ignore the little nudges that I get. You know what I mean. Out of the blue you get thinking about someone and feel you should give them a call, or you change your schedule to go visit someone or you see someone and you get the nudge to stop and ask how things are going. Almost always I find, after the fact, that the nudge was a God thing. I see the person in the hospital a day earlier than planned and the next day they are in a coma. Or in stopping to really talk deeply with a person I learn about some struggle they are going through. They had not come to me about it, but once asked, willingly shared knowing I would, in spirit, help them carry their burden. Being obedient, obeying and responding is a way to choose life.

Third, choosing life involves keeping God's commands. The Israelites were given the Law so they would know what was expected of them and how they were to act toward each other and God. The commands were not burdensome or impossible, as they are often viewed by us today. They get a bad reputation because the Pharisees of Jesus time carried following the law to the extreme. The law, especially the Ten Commandments, was a way to remain faithful, to care about one another, and to respond to God's call to be the special people of God.

So to choose life means: to love God with our whole selves, to follow God's voice as we walk and to keep God's commandments. This is the way to life, not death. And when you think about it, doing these things means a rich and rewarding life. One, though not free from difficulties, filled with grace and with peace because we have the assurance that we are being faithful. So, choose life!

So now back to that earlier question. Why no door number three? God does not want us going into a faith commitment believing there is an escape hatch. Just as the people of Israel were told that if they were not faithful in following God's will that they would get into trouble, we are told the same. The people of Israel's striving to find door number three led them to compromise on their values, their faith and in some ways they lost their identity.

But what, you might be thinking, happens to us when we fail. We don't really mean to choose death. That is where grace comes in. If you steadfastly strive to choose life, God forgives the mistakes. When we opt for that middle way, door three, God does not save us from the folly of those choices and we struggle with the consequences of switching from living in the world and in God's kingdom. No, we have not chosen death but we do put ourselves into difficult places and we find we have not made available to ourselves all that is possible. So, no door number three. But by your life and actions choose life!

In closing let me share a story of a person embracing this idea. He had been one who lived as if door number three was a reality. He wanted enough religion to be comfortable in church on Sunday but not so much that it would get in the way when he was hanging out with the guys on Monday night. His wife wanted to go to a weekend Spiritual retreat but the rule was that she could not go if he didn't go. They were separate weekends about three weeks apart and the men always had to go first or the organizers realized they probably would never go. The reason for it is they were trying, in the retreat, to create a whole family commitment to walking in the light of God's love and realized they needed both husband and wife to commit. After several years of her asking him and he refusing, he finally said yes. It was life changing. In returning home he no longer wanted to live a door number three kind of life. He became fully committed to his faith and church. Some of his friends understood and others dropped him. He became active, not just in attending worship, but in the life of the church. He would later say, "I thought I had a good life before going on the retreat. But when you fully give yourself to God life is awesome." Now this didn't mean he was free from problems. But it did mean he had a sense of peace and was filled with love that he treasured more than anything else.

So hear the call and choose life in your life, your thoughts and your actions.