

The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany, Year A – February 12, 2023

**“The Law is a Lodestar, Not a Destination”**

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20 • Psalm 119:1-8 • 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 • Matthew 5:21-37

It is human nature to see the world as black or white, rather than shades of gray. We love order. We love to label things, then put things in their proper cubby hole. And we tend to see things as good or bad. Furless creatures tend to be bad (snakes and bugs), while furry animals tend to be good. People are either good or evil, saints or sinners.

So when I listen to the first words of today's lesson from the book of Deuteronomy, I know that the ancient writers had this kind of simplified, two-choice way of thinking, too. “So I have set before you today: life and prosperity, death and adversity.” The passage ends: “choose life.”

Choose life and God's covenant guarantees blessings—the things people desired the most thousands of years ago: land and offspring. The only alternative will leave one cursed—unable to conceive, invaded by enemies, condemned to wander and die.

The book of Deuteronomy was one of several written during the Babylonian exile. After the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in 567 BCE, survivors were driven out of the Promised Land. Scholars believe they spent these years writing their stories after centuries of oral tradition in the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings. My Old Testament professor, Julie Faith Parker, used to

say, “You can take away their temple. You can take away their land, but you can’t take away their stories.”

The writers of these books were honest about their history. They believed the Hebrew people were invaded and exiled because they worshipped false gods. They abandoned the one true God, so God abandoned them. Laws were broken, prophecies ignored, judges and kings had huge character flaws with very few exceptions, like Deborah, to keep the reader from losing hope.

God’s final message to Moses was to choose life, which Moses then delivered to his people before they entered the Promised Land. Choose life sounds freeing, doesn’t it, but that choice means choosing to **obey** God and follow God’s ways.

Like discipline, obedience is a word with negative connotations. But obedience comes from the Latin *obedire* “to listen”—to be open to hearing God’s will, to use one’s mind and heart to discern the right path. In three places in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses calls on the Israelites to listen with all their hearts. To obey!

The choice we are all called to make is life and prosperity, which means we must obey God’s laws. The ten commandments are meant to preserve the covenant and keep people in right relationship with God. The Torah, what we call the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, contain over 600 commandments, were used to teach believers how to apply God’s laws in everyday life.

Christians don’t follow all 613 commandments—only the ten. And we have a hard enough time obeying them. Our society promotes the freedom to choose life, but we interpret that as life on our own terms, not God’s. Interpreting the

commandments literally—and with two choices only, to obey and be blessed, disobey and be punished—makes them harder to follow.

So we do not murder, except when we are threatened or afraid or are ordered to kill.

We honor our father and mother, except when it conflicts with what we want to do.

We do not lie except when we don't want to hurt someone's feelings or it's convenient and we are sure we won't be caught.

And so on. Pretty soon, the exceptions outnumber the rules.

This rigid, two-choice, literal of thinking about the law (and God) makes us want to widen the path, instead of staying on the straight and narrow. When we begin to realize we don't want to or can't follow the rules to the letter, we distance ourselves from religion because it feels more honest—and quite frankly convenient—to do so.

Jesus gave us a new way to think about these ancient laws and traditions. He said that to obey the law fully, people's righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20) who followed the letter of the law. This new way of interpreting the law departs from the literal, two-choice (obey-or-disobey) way of interpreting Moses' law. It embraces the spirit or underlying principles of the law which opens up many more ways to live in right relationship with God and our neighbors.

The concept of "the spirit of the law" is not entirely clear. It doesn't mean that we can obey or disobey as the spirit moves us. It means we are called to listen to

God and invite God's spirit of love, faithfulness and mercy to enter into us and fulfill us, before we interpret the law.

Today's Gospel has several examples (Matt 5:21-30). I will talk about two of the commandments: not to murder (Exo 20:13) and not to commit adultery (Exo 20:14, 17). Jesus said, when we are angry and insult others, we are disobeying God's commandment not to murder. If we change our behavior to match those who disobey, we will not be in right relationship with God. To be saved, we forgive and reconcile, not retaliate. Immediately following today's Gospel reading, Jesus said:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."

There is nothing in this passage that justifies killing someone to protect oneself, one's loved ones, or one's property. The spirit of the law (its deeper intent) is to call people to live with one another in a spirit of radical love and acceptance in opposition to the ways of the world built on power and often oppression.

Jesus said, make amends with your brothers and sisters (Matt 5:23). Do that before you offer a gift at the altar. If you don't love your neighbors, you are not loving and worshipping God. The opposite is true as well. If you don't love and worship God, it is harder to love other people. These Great Commandments are tightly bound one to the other.

Jesus' teaching that it's better to get rid of the body parts that cause you to sin than for your whole body to go to hell is a graphic way to say: be ready to willing to give up the things you hold dear—your desires, your self-seeking ways, if that's what's necessary to live in harmony with God and with others. Also, do not to hurt others even in small ways, because it can lead to greater harm, whether it's ending a life or breaking a marriage vow.

If we allow God's spirit of love, faithfulness and mercy to enter into us, we will be in right relationship with our spouses and partners and God. John O'Donohue wrote, "In the kingdom of love there is no competition, there is no possessiveness or control. The more love you give away, the more love you will have."<sup>1</sup> When we live in the spirit, we are fulfilled, appreciate what we have and don't look for love elsewhere.

The spirit of the law is what the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke described as "the law of the stars." God's law as taught by Jesus has infinite choices, some of which align us with God. The law is a lodestar, not a destination; a star that guides us toward God. Rilke wrote,

Ah, not to be cut off,  
not through the slightest partition  
shut out from the law of the stars.  
The inner—what is it?  
if not intensified sky,  
hurled through with birds and deep  
with the winds of homecoming.

The law brings us in line with God's order of things. What is it? If not a place of infinite joy and love.

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<sup>1</sup> O'Donohue, John. 2022. *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*. Harper Perennial Anniversary Edition, p. 31.