

**The Third Sunday before Lent
February 12, 2017, Year A
St. Dunstan's Anglican Church, Largo, FL**

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalms 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Each of our Scriptures this morning point to the fact that those who are spiritual make a conscious choice to put their trust in God based on fact – not just a belief. We are to make decisions using our minds, not just trust that because we are members of the Church we will go to heaven some day (that's great), but also to make conscious choices about how we live, what we believe, and what is important to us in our everyday lives.

Let's take another look at our theme verse for 2017 from Paul's letter to the Romans, and us, to stay grounded in our quest for how to grow spiritually. This is from Romans 12:1-2. Paul wrote, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

He says we should be willing "to present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice." That's a pretty serious commitment, and from my reading of Scripture, I do not believe this is hyperbole, it's not an exaggeration to make a point. God wants all of us, not just when we're all polished up for church on Sunday, but all of us all the time, in every sphere of our lives. There should be no part of our lives that is fenced off from God; rather every part of our lives should be grounded, directed and inspired by God in keeping with his good and perfect will.

We are to make conscious choices about what we believe and how we live every aspect of our lives. Let's look at what Scripture tells us.

In our Old Testament reading this morning, we heard the words of Moses who was speaking to the people of God as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. This is from the Book of Deuteronomy, which in Greek means "the second law," where Moses was reminding the people of what God had commanded them to be and do. Moses said, "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."

In the name of God from words given to Moses by God directly on Mt. Sinai, Moses is reminding the people that God has set forth a way of life that is honoring to him and good for them. He is also telling them that, in our terminology, they are not robots; he has given them minds to use so that they can understand what he has set before them and choose whether to follow his plan or not.

And we have the same choice today as have all the generations before ours and all those who follow until the Lord returns in power and great glory. And how is that going? There are some who

buy into this offer from God without reservation. They are sold out for God. Their whole lives, their very beings, are committed to God. They often take a lot of grief for being so “on fire” for God. Families complain, the world around them may scoff, nearly 2,000 years ago they may have been fed to lions for sport, or today Muslim jihadists may murder them, but as Paul said in Ephesians 6, they “stand and continue to stand” for God against the forces of this dark world in which we live.

A full and true commitment to God is just as risky today in 2017 as it was in the first century after Jesus walked with us in human form. He is calling us to give ourselves as a living sacrifice in his honor.

Then there are others who make the opposite choice. They have no interest in God or the things of God because they think they have a better wisdom. The world feeds them all kinds of ideas about how to have a good life and resolve problems which never stand up to scrutiny over time but sound so promising in the short term. Even those who are wildly successful in this life will be shocked to find there is a very unpleasant eternity for those who do not honor God.

But even though God gave us only two choices, there is a third group to consider, and this is where we find ourselves if we are truly honest. There are those who “choose life” but then go out into the world and live in such a way that God is not pleased. Paul said it best in Romans 3:23, that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

People in this category who are justified by their faith in Jesus Christ are going to heaven, but there is more to being a Christian while we are still in this world. By making the decision to choose life, we should bear in mind that part of that choice is to grow spiritually on a continuing basis until the Lord calls us home. We need to make the right choices in all areas of our lives.

In our New Testament reading, Paul shows us that we always have the choice between life and death. The Corinthian Church was inflamed in controversy over which leader they should follow. Some wanted to follow Paul’s teaching, while others wanted to follow Apollos, a good Christian teacher who had followed Paul to build on Paul’s foundational teaching.

In his letter, Paul is admonishing the Corinthian Church for being divisive rather than living in peace and harmony with each other. He pointed out that “while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?” In other words, are you not making choices based on the wrong facts?

God has a perfect plan for everyone in all aspects of life. We can learn from this passage that we can choose to follow God’s plan or wallow in problems. In street-level perspective, anyone who has lost his temper lately or become angry over something that could have been resolved in a peaceful way has made a bad choice. Perhaps he ought to read this passage from 1 Corinthians a few more times and make an attempt to do better in the future. (Could be a good Lenten discipline.)

As a further example, is this not a summary of the plague that has attacked the body of Christ in North America? In the United States alone, there are 6,000 denominations of Protestant churches. With that amount of disunity and dysfunction, our effectiveness as the body of Christ in the world today is profoundly corrupted. We have choices. We need to make them wisely, a perspective that seems to have fallen on bad times here at home.

Our gospel reading shows us how to understand the Ten Commandments from the perspective of making choices, of choosing life over death. If we just read the Sixth Commandment as it is written, “You shall not murder,” Jesus says we are missing the point, because if you are angry with someone, you are still liable to judgment. We make choices all the time, often unconsciously if we allow our emotions to rule our thoughts and actions, but choices none the less.

Being a Christian is hard work. But it is important work. It requires us to take control of the choices we are making and choose a path that will bring honor to God rather than soothing to emotions that are out of control. By working on making healthier and better informed choices, we are engaging in spiritual growth. For after all, spiritual growth is all about growing closer to God by “the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

So “let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

And now unto you, O Lord, be ascribed all might, majesty, power and dominion. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.