

Being formed into community—telling our stories into our fuller humanity
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21–37

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and ill...now choose life, in order that you may stay-alive...by loving YHWH your God, by hearkening to God’s voice and by cleaving to God, for God is your life and the length of your days....”

This ancient calling sounds so simple. And at one level it is. This invitation asks for a Yes or No response. But we know, we know that even when we choose life, it isn’t easy. Throughout human history, we may *want* or intend to choose *life* and *good*, but unintentionally and unknowingly, too often we choose *death* and *ill*. Without meaning to, we *be* and act in ways that cause death and ill.

Why is this so hard? It has been 2,000 years since Jesus was born and ascended into heaven. How is it that there is still so much death and ill in our world?

I wonder if one of the answers is that we expect it to be easy. Is part of what happens is that I think that since I’ve chosen Jesus, I’ve chosen life, so I’m now good to go. I’m going along, following the rules, doing what I’m supposed to do. Because I chose life yesterday, or last year, or five decades ago, I’m now just doing what I think I’m supposed to do. So, in fact, today I’m no longer *choosing life*. Instead, today I’m obeying the law...rather than choosing *life* and *good*.

Deuteronomy ch 30 is assumed to have been written after the people of God had gone their own way, away from God, and have now returned to God. They had previously made choices that led them to experience all kinds of death, adversity, and distress. Now they are once again turned towards God; they are repenting; they are experiencing *metanoia*. And with this *metanoia* they are experiencing grace and mercy. Love and forgiveness. Whenever we turn towards God, we experience such amazing grace, such unexpected and tender mercy. And

we know and remember, in our bodies and beings, we know *life* and *good*; we know aliveness and beauty.

But we have to be careful here. The *life* and *good* that is promised does *not* mean that life will be easy and free of pain. Choosing *life* and *good* is a way of being, not an outcome. Let me say that again: Choosing *life* and *good* is a way of being in the world, it is a posture, an attitude, a way of being in relationship with others and with creation. Choosing *life* is the action, the verb; it is not the outcome.

The Law that God gave to Moses for the people of God is the Law of *life* and *good*. The Law of *life* and *good* is *torah*, the Word of God spoken into the cosmos. And it is the Word-made-flesh in Jesus, the human one. Unfortunately, because we expect God to make life easy for us, too often we reduce choosing *life* and *good* to following rules. So we follow the *letters* of the Law rather than following the Law of *life* and *good* as a way of learning to be human.

Jesus understands this human impulse to reduce God's Law of *life* and *good* to the simplicity of letters on a scroll or verses in a Bible. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' 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."

Choosing *life* and *good* is so much more than simply *not* murdering or *not* committing adultery. Those rules are easy enough for most people to follow. But acting out of anger? Dwelling in unhealthy fantasies? Breaking relationships? Those are much harder. And how often have I justified myself by insisting that I did the "right" thing, I followed the rules. I choose the rules rather than choosing *life* and *good*. As Jesus is teaching God's Law, he is expanding and extending the Law. It's more than a list of 10 Commandments... Jesus

expands our understanding of the Law, insisting that it includes the attitudes and postures of our hearts and the kinds and quality of relationships.

On this mountain, Jesus is revealing to us the fullness of God's Law, the same Law of *life* and *good* that Moses received on the mountain. And what we hear and see is that choosing *life* and *good* is about relationships, about the nature and characteristics of our relationships. Choosing *life* and *good* is something we *be* and *do* every day, every moment. It isn't a choice that's made and then we stop paying attention. It's a choice we make, and then we *start* paying attention. Because we aren't following rules in a book, even if that book is the Bible, choosing *life* and *good* means we're paying attention and making choices in every interaction, every relationship. Relationships with other humans, and relationships with all creatures and creation. We're paying attention not just to what we say or do, but to what's in our hearts, and to the impact of our actions on the other.

This is *not* easy. It requires us to be awake and vigilant, to be looking and listening with resurrection eyes and ears, to be seeing and hearing with the fire and wisdom of God the Holy Spirit. Choosing *life* and *good* means releasing our expectations that God will make our lives *easy*. Choosing *life* and *good* doesn't mean that we won't experience difficulty or adversity; it doesn't mean that we will never know pain and dying; it doesn't mean we'll never experience evil or injustice. Choosing *life* and *good* is choosing a way of *being* in this world. Choosing *life* and *good* means *being* good and beautiful in a world that is ugly and evil. Choosing *life* and *good* means *choosing* love in the face of hate; choosing healing and restoration and relationships instead of the judgment and righteousness of the altar.

Choosing *life* and *good* is not easy...it's *hard*. And it doesn't make our lives comfortable and easy either...it makes them complex and difficult, beautiful and holy. Choosing *life* and *good* forms us, one day at a time, into our fuller humanity.

And the fullness of our humanity is always in relationship with the fullness of another's humanity. Choosing *life* and *good* is always relational. Choosing *life* and *good* means living and being paying attention to the collective—to *them*, to *us*. Choosing *life* and *good* means living and being as part of a larger body, part of a community, part of Earth and creation's body. When we choose *life* and *good*, we are choosing the *life* and *good* of the body; we are choosing the reconciliation and liberation of the body; we are living for the healing and wholeness of the body.

Choosing *life* and *good* isn't something we can do on our own. To choose *life* and *good* we need the breath and power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Choosing *life* and *good* is a choosing that is powered...always powered by God the Holy Spirit.

But how to we do this? Or *be* this? How do we know whether or not we're being powered by the Holy Spirit and choosing *life*?

One of the ways we choose *life* is by remembering that God is a God of life. That the Spirit of God is always blowing and breathing, creating new life in impossible places. And resurrecting life out of death. We remember that our God is a *living* God because we will, invariably and inevitably, we will mess up. We will make mistakes. We will do wrong. We will cause pain. But even when we cause harm to another, God the Holy Spirit will defend us. God's aliveness and mercy and love will already and still be for us. And from our mistakes, from our sins, we will grow more fully into our humanity.

Another way we learn to choose *life* is with our stories. By listening to the stories we are telling. And listening to the stories we are hearing. Are my stories only about me? Or do they include the larger bodies and communities that I am part of? Are my stories always the same telling and retelling of my experiences? Or do my stories change as I mature and encounter

others and their experiences? Is the context of my story my lifetime? Or do I place my story within the context of many generations, places, and peoples?

Telling our stories within a larger context is not something we know how to do, or at least it isn't something *I* know how to do. But one of the gifts of the time we're living in is that people are telling their stories. Stories that have been silenced and buried are being told. And if I am choosing *life* and *good*, I will be listening and hearing these stories, letting myself be changed by them. And when I hear these new stories, including the ones where I with my white privilege have caused harm and brokenness, it means that I leave my place at the altar and go to the spaces of broken relationships. The Holy Spirit of God is there, in the unfamiliar and uncomfortable places, the Spirit of *life* and *good* is there...reconciling, restoring, liberating...raising up new life, giving us new stories. Stories that are bigger, more complex, richer, more beautiful and holy that we can imagine.

And when I let myself be changed by the story of another, I will experience *metanoia*. When I give myself to being formed and re-formed by God the Holy Spirit, as I undergo *metanoia*, my understanding of God's Law will grow, expand, deepen.

When we choose *life* and *good*, our stories will always be changing. Our individual and collective stories are always being formed and told through time. Through time the stories of European colonizers are being reconciled with indigenous stories of genocide and erasure. The stories of those who experienced the trauma and horror of slavery are slowly, too slowly being stitched together with the stories of slave owners. Choosing *life* and *good* means that I as a white woman make space in my story for the stories of indigenous and Black and Latina women, letting their stories change me.

Choosing *life* and *good* is not easy. Telling our stories and being changed by the stories of others is hard. And complicated. And it takes time, generations of time. And it's also one of

the most exquisite and beautiful things we as human beings do. Because when we choose *life*, when we give ourselves to being changed by the Spirit of God, we experience the surprise and delight of God's creativity and mercy, of God's generosity and grace, of the power of God to bring new life in the most impossible ways and places.

When we choose *life* and *good*, we give ourselves to partnering with the Holy Spirit of the living and creating God. And the Spirit is always breathing and blowing, taking our failures and successes, our sins and our good deeds, taking all of it and raising us up into the fullness of our humanity. And stitching us—one story at a time—more and more securely into our place in the body of humanity.

May we choose life. And may God *be* our life and the length of our days.