

“A Matter of Life and Death”
Deut. 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-24

I would start out today’s message with a question: **“How important is your Christian faith to you?”** OK, who wants to go FIRST? ☺ WHAT? I mean, after all, you’ve heard me use on several occasions that passage from *1 Peter 3:15*: ***“Always be prepared to give an answer... for the hope that you have.”*** Well, NOW’S your chance to GIVE that answer... *Alright*, well I won’t make you come up to voice your response. But by my observations, I would say that, as a whole, your faith IS fairly important to you: You come to worship pretty regularly... even in you DO have to endure a ‘long-winded preacher’ who picks songs you don’t know. You do support the work of the church financially... even if you’re not always sure just where the money goes. Many of you serve in the outreach of the church... others are active on Session, and their committees... even if they DO take up so much of that valuable commodity known as TIME. There is pretty good support for special events like FNS, and Gumbo cook-offs... but hello, who doesn’t like FOOD!

Let’s face it, we are ALL doing pretty well at those morsels of resources that we can throw to God an hour or two here, a check or two there... but how about in our every day, every hour, walking around, going to work, shopping, banking, eating, going-to-bed and rising-in-the-morning lives? As you and I look in the mirror each morning... and you KNOW that we do... do we choose to say to God: ‘I’m going to do everything I can to serve you today, Lord, with ALL that I am.’ Are you SOLD OUT to Christ? Does God have ALL of you... or only the ‘leftovers’?

The reason I am challenging you with these poignant questions is because of what today’s readings say to us about the **choices** that we make... and how they affect our **future**. The consequences of our choices. What really spoke to me was the first part of that Deuteronomy passage, where Moses says: ***“IF we love the Lord our God, walk in his ways, and observe his commands... THEN we shall live and be numerous (‘thrive’), and the Lord our God will bless us in the land that we are entering to possess.”*** (Deut. 30:16-17) What is forefront on most everyone’s mind concerning the **future** of this church? About what it takes to be more

'numerous'... not merely to 'survive,' but to **thrive!** AND, the hope and prayer that ***"the Lord our God will bless us in the land that we are entering to possess"***... that 'land' also known as 'MORGANFIELD! It goes on to say that if we instead choose to 'turn our hearts away' from God, 'refusing to listen,' and 'bowing down to other gods,' that ***"you shall not live long in the land that you... enter and possess. ... you shall perish."***

And so, just as it is in ALL of Scripture, I don't believe that these are just words of an ancient leader to his wandering (physically AND spiritually) contemporaries. These speak to US as well. That if we too wish to be 'blessed,' and thrive, in the 'promised land' we seek to possess, we must bear in mind that there are certain 'requirements.' Both INDIVIDUALLY and CORPORATELY. And that the choices we make TODAY... for ourselves, and for our church... are indeed, **"A matter of life and death."**

As Carole read earlier from Deuteronomy, God spoke through Moses: ***"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses; choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him..."*** (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

This passage tells us that the way that we 'choose life'... for US and those that are to follow us... comes in three parts. LOVE the Lord your God. OBEY him, by observing his commandments... and 'holding fast' to him, by WALKING in his ways. **Love** the Lord. **Walk** in His ways. HOW? By **obeying** His commandments.

First and foremost, we are to **LOVE GOD**. Is that something we 'choose' to do? We Presbyterians believe that NO, it is not a conscious decision to follow Christ, because that would basically put US in the 'power position' of self-determination; in effect, making ourselves God. Rather, we adhere to Paul's words to the church in Ephesus: "For it is by **grace** you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

This being said, we can yet choose ways to **experience**, and **grow**, in our LOVE of God. Last week you may recall that I mentioned our church calendar, and how each Sunday there is a special focus on a particular ministry or group. One of those for this week is **"Camps and**

Conferences.” Many in this room... myself included... has had our lives significantly impacted by attendance to a particular summer camp, enrichment conference, or spiritual retreat.

While you may be familiar with the statistic that 85% of Christians came to faith before the age of 18, did you know that more than 3 of 4 of those DID so in the context of a ‘non-church’ gathering (camp, conf., retreat) OUTSIDE the walls of a community of faith. Accordingly, I saw where 80% of church officers... deacons and elders... became a Christian at such an ‘extra-curricular event. (Which might NOT be a selling point for young people to attend!)

So, aside from the importance of encouraging our children and grandchildren to go to Christian camps/conferences, what does this mean to US who are ‘significantly’ older than 18? ☺ It means that we all should be open to special opportunities to ‘get away’ from our everyday lives to experience God in unique, powerful ways. A conference at Mo-Ranch. Or Montreat. A spiritual retreat like LA Pilgrimage (formerly Cursillo) or a silent retreat at Manressa. AND, we don’t even have to leave the city limits... there are single-day events, weekend retreats, spiritual renewal/revival gatherings in other area churches year-round.. Who knows... maybe we could even host a renewal event right HERE! (A little ‘food for thought’ ...) My point is, in our continual efforts to grow in our LOVE for the God who first loved us, we should always be looking for opportunities to experience that love in new and fresh ways.

If this could be seen as a way to ‘be **still** and know that God is God,’ then we must then be ready to **move** from our ‘stillness.’ To **choose** to WALK in the ways of Christ. If we consider ourselves to be ‘followers’ of Jesus, we must then actually ‘follow’ His LEAD. I saw this quote the other day posted on FB by one of my closer, non-P.C. colleagues: *“If we are the hands and feet of Jesus, then we must get first off of our butts...”* OUCH...

As Jesus ‘walked’ the path of His earthly ministry those 3 brief... yet very FULL... three years, what did he do? He taught. He preached. He prayed. He healed. He served. The ‘footsteps’ that he left for his disciples to follow. And how are you and I doing in ‘following in those footsteps?’ What are WE doing to ‘walk in the ways’ of our Lord Christ?

This Sunday is also recognized as a day of “Prayer for Healing and Wholeness.” Interesting, isn’t it, what we held just this past Wednesday: our “Prayer and Healing Service.”

That special time together, at which we gather SOLELY for the purpose of lifting up prayers for healing and wholeness, is part of what it means to WALK with Christ.

Such prayers are not to be reserved for times of gathering... we are also to be lifted up as we visit those who are lost, alone, hurting. Those who need 'healing' of mind, body, and spirit. When our brother Elton was in the ER just this past Friday, I put out a request to some of our Elders to go and visit him in the hospital. And I was SO pleased at the response! Within minutes there were four volunteers to go and see him. Irregardless of how difficult or inconvenient it might be.

As one of them would tell me afterwards, to pray with others, particularly in a more public place, "is always a humbling experience." AMEN. Praying with someone can be one of the most difficult things we can do. 'Who am I to pray with somebody?' I'll tell you who. A Beautiful, wonderful child of God, who is a member of the priesthood. You know, 'the priesthood of ALL believers.' Remember those timeless words from 2 Chronicles: ***"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, THEN will I hear from heaven... and I will hear their land."*** (7:14)

And finally, if we are to choose LIFE and PROSPERITY, we must choose to 'observe God's commandments'... to **OBEY GOD'S WORD**. As our confessions remind us, the Scriptures are to be, for us, "the rule of faith and life." And as we seek to be obedient to that 'rule of faith and life,' perhaps we could start with the reading from today's Gospel (as in, the 'Gospel-TRUTH!'). (I'll bet you were wondering if we were going to ignore that *Matthew* passage!)

From the last part of it, we read that ***"if you remember that your brother or sister¹ has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,^[f] and THEN come and offer your gift."*** (*Matthew 5:23-24*) Jesus makes it 'crystal' clear that before we attempt to bring any offering to God... of our time, our talents, our treasures, our touch... we must FIRST reconcile any differences we have with each other. It could be our true 'sister' or 'brother.' (Or mother, father, other family member). It could be with a 'brother from another mother.' It could be with another child of God. Regardless, the message is clear: we will be held accountable for how we treat one another. The consequence for such angry, insulting behavior of which Jesus speaks? ***"the judgment...the hell of fire."*** And

remember, this is not that 'OLD Testament' of Moses and Abraham, and those 'fiery' prophets, talking; this is our 'Sweet Baby Jesus.' So I think we would all do well to listen... and OBEY...

And so, as we seek after the blessing of God, on our own lives, and the life of His Church, we should take seriously our commitment to **love God**, to **walk in His ways**, and to **obey God's Word**. As we consider what it truly means to be a follower of God, I would leave you with two quotes: one from a man with an earthly perspective, and the other, with a more eternal one: "Your faith is very important. I have done the math, and you are going to be dead a whole lot longer than you will be alive." — Zig Ziglar

And then, from the same Sermon on the Mount spoken earlier, the words of Jesus: ***"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."*** (Mt. 7:13-14)

Your faith... and the faith of those you love... is indeed 'very important.' With 'long term implications.' Faith IS a matter of life and death. **Choose life...**

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

As we prepare to go out into the world to fulfill God's calling on our lives, I would ask you to join me in one of the verses from the song that Sami sang earlier, "The Blessing." May it be our pledge to leave a legacy that will last...

**"Let it be said of us By the ones we leave behind
That we lived to be a blessing for LIFE."**

"The important thing is neither your nationality nor the religion you professed,
but how your faith translated itself in your life." — Eleanor Roosevelt

"The most important test you will have in your life is the test of your faith."
— Rick Warren
