



Today I've set before you life and death

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Year A, Ordinary 6

Deut. 30:15-20 Matthew 5: 21-37

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Today I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving, obeying, holding fast to God.

Choices and laws and how to live echo through today's readings. Choices have repercussions that are expressed in us and in our world.

As you look across our world, who, would you say, has greatest chance to choose what they want, when and how they want it? To do what they want when they want to?

My take is it's those with most privilege of power, wealth, status and/or capacity to influence. This is nothing new, sadly, we're not even particularly surprised by it. We know it's the way the world goes round. Given the context of the passage from Deuteronomy I'd suggest, however, this is a thin choosing. Not to cast aspersions upon those with wealth, who may indeed live generously toward others. But this passage reveals not only that we've power to choose but that our choices have impact, we're vulnerable to our choices. I think we prefer the first part, about the power to choose, and we've come to ignore, or overlook, or learned to numb and distance ourselves from the consequences of our choices. It's much easier that way.

Thin choosing gives us control, power over and minimal experience of our impact. This other type of choosing puts us in the now, aware of and connected to the impact of our choices.

For some of us Matthew's gospel today might be hard to hear. Listening with the experience of our lives and perhaps the judgments laid on us or our loved ones from misuse of this passage its no wonder its difficult to hear. Again, I'd suggest, this is a repercussion of a choice made that has a

lot to do with power over and a choice to disassociate from the messy vulnerability of real life that defies tidy ordering. But, if you're willing to give it another go, let's have a bit of a poke around with a slightly wider lens.

Matthew structures his gospel in such a way to suggest he intended to portray Jesus as the new Moses, giving a new Law for the New Covenant. Tempting as it may be for this to give us an excuse to do away with the law altogether, Matthew doesn't portray Jesus doing this. Last week Matthew has Jesus state very clearly he's not come to abolish the law "not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law" but to fulfil it - literally to perfect or complete it. Today's passage demonstrates such fulfilment. Jesus knew the law could be cold-hearted. He knew it could be used to demean and oppress. He knew that a law left in the realm of letters and court rooms could often accomplish the exact opposite it's original intent.

We all know it's possible to abide by the letter of the law and still wreak havoc on the lives of others. We can do business in ways that are completely legal, but leave our workers destitute and unhealthy, and ravage our environment. It's possible to lead nations and organisations in ways that are legally sanctioned, but serve only ourselves and leave others broken. It's easy to apply the law as a weapon, to learn to use it with lethal accuracy and to manipulate the world to our own agendas with it. This applies equally to religious and 'secular' law. But, when we do this, the law becomes incomplete, broken, a shadow of the social-glue that it was created for.

That's why, John van de Leer suggests, Jesus, in this passage, moves the law from the realm of the letter to the realm of the heart. Jesus' words in Matthew resonate with those of the prophet Jeremiah: "But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day," says the Lord. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." The law's made complete when written on our hearts. It gives us life and brings people together when carved into the very core of our being.

Today Jesus speaks the radical message of the complete law - calling us not just to ensure that we uphold the letter of the legal code but that we uphold the dignity and humanity of our companions in this world. We cannot just avoid physically killing. We must also avoid destroying the dignity and reputation of another. If we seek life and wholeness, we'll

refuse to degrade another with our angry words – be they insults, gossip or manipulative “back-stabbing”. Rather, we’ll do everything we can to recognise the humanity of the other, and if at all possible seek to be reconciled. We cannot just avoid the betrayal of adultery. We must also avoid the betrayal of another person’s humanity by objectifying them and making them nothing more than an object of our own pleasure and satisfaction. We must avoid the betrayal of treating another like property (which was how women were viewed in marriage back then) to be discarded when we’re finished with them.

When we deny others the fullness of life ironically we also deny this ourselves. This complete law calls us also to ensure we uphold our own dignity and humanity. Rather than allow our reputations and self-worth to be undermined by manipulative vowing, promise-making and persuasion, we’re to uphold our own dignity and humanity by being people of integrity who stand by our word.

We each participate in ways of living and being that don’t fulfil the heart of the law portrayed this way, whether we do so knowingly or unknowingly. We’re socially constructed to be this way. We don’t necessarily know how to enact differently, even as we might want to. I’m not convinced it’s possible for us, off our own bat, to self-determine a complete overhaul. Whatever we’d generate, even with the best will in the world would be done from our existing habits and patterns, would express our form just in another guise.

How, between these two passages, might we understand the heart of law today in a way that means we can actually do something. For our world, our lives are in sore need of life bringing transformation.

We’ve only each moment in which to choose and in a busy life it’s challenging to notice each moment, much less pay attention. Yet, this is our place to begin. In one of those noticed moments we can pause and ask honestly, “Does our choice dominate, diminish, demean, deny or destroy life, the other?” Can we choose differently? Can we acknowledge this, even if we don’t know how, yet? That we can see the negative impact of our habits of being and doing and we want to do otherwise. With honesty, humility, vulnerability and hope, this faith lineage suggests we can learn to choose in a way trusting that leads to life and flourishing.

The symbol of the justice the law brings is blindfolded. This “blind” justice is intended to be unaware of status, fame or economic resources, ensuring

that all people are equal under the law. But the blindness often extends to the humanity of those who are judged by the law. This kind of law can end up as cold-hearted legalism. It may preserve a kind of truce among people, but it can never lead society or the individuals in it, to creative, connected, wholeness.

The new law Matthew has Jesus bring about isn't blind. Rather it sees with incredible clarity right through to the dignity and humanity of all people. It invites us all to release our obsession with letters and allow our hearts to be inscribed, allow our hearts to be the place where the law does its work. If we will follow this way of "living by heart" we may discover that the law, in its complete, heart-capturing form, leads us to life, and teaches us to be life-bringers with everyone we encounter.