

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
February 13, 2011
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Choices of Life and Death
Deuteronomy 30:15–20, 1 Corinthians 3:1–9, Matthew 5:21–37

In the past few weeks, we have heard the Apostle Paul proclaim that Christians are the sanctified saints of God. Last week, we heard Jesus declare we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Now, we know that we cannot do enough to make ourselves this holy. Only God, by his grace in Jesus Christ can do what is necessary to make us holy or declare us to be his salt and light. In response to this grace we are to choose to confess his Son as our Lord and Savior, and then choose to live lives that reflect his grace and love to others. To choose to believe in God in Jesus Christ, and follow his ways leads to everlasting life for us as individuals; a better life for those around us; and points the way for others to find eternal life in God in Jesus Christ.

God approached the Hebrews in the time of Moses and the prophets, as we heard in Deuteronomy, with similar choices. God spoke through Moses to say: “If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, then you shall live... But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish...” To choose God and live out his ways would lead to life, not just for those individuals, but for future generations.

Then, as we heard in Paul’s words to the Corinthian church, the early Christians also had similar choices of believing in God in Jesus Christ and living out God’s grace that led to life. Like us, they chose the way of Jesus Christ and confessed the faith. But, in their day to day activities with each other, in the church of all places, they made bad choices in becoming hateful, spiteful, jealous, arrogant and rude to each other. They forgot they were God’s servants. This negative way of living was a sinful choice that could lead to death and destruction. Paul chewed them out for this and pointed them back to the way of life in Christ.

And so it was for the Jews who heard Jesus preach the Sermon on the Mount, and for the Christian congregation with whom Matthew shared Jesus’ sermon in his Gospel. Both groups were told that they had been made the salt of the earth and light of the world, and then were offered choices on how to live this out in the world, choices of life and death in what Jesus taught them. Jesus knew well, as one of us, that human beings did not always follow the law of God in their relationships. So, “Jesus took this law and intensified it, magnifying its spirit and faithfully cutting through to the very heart of the matter. When it comes to sin, of course, the heart of the matter is always the heart.” “Emphasis,” 2/13/11

In today’s message, I only have time to tackle two of the issues of life and death, or “intensified law” that Jesus raised in today’s Gospel lesson—anger and

divorce. Most of the insights I will share come from a commentary on Matthew written by Dr. Thomas Long.

First, let us deal with anger, often a matter of the heart. No doubt the Christian congregation to whom Matthew wrote “Like every other congregation in the history of Christianity, had its bruised feelings, and church fights. Christians are saints, but their behavior is not always saintly.” Jesus gets to the heart of this matter when he “addresses the matter of angry words and broken relationships. In addressing anger, Jesus refers to the Old Testament law that condemned murder. “At the heart of this law lies a respect for the life of another, regard for the right of another to be, reverence for another as the creation of God.” Jesus intensifies this law by stating that “to level a brutal curse at a brother or sister is, at least in the moment of fury, to say, ‘I wish you were dead.’”

To boil over with rage and to sling poisonous words that seek to destroy another person renders one, Jesus says, ‘liable to judgment ... to the hell of fire.’ Those are frightening words. Does Jesus mean that if you lose your temper that you stand a good chance of burning in everlasting fires of hell? No, we can quickly say that this is not what Jesus means. This interpretation takes the language of this passage more literally than it means to be taken,” and ignores Jesus message of salvation. “Yet, on the other hand, the language of this warning *is* intentionally tough, and it will not do for us to simply wave it off with the hope that Jesus does not mean what he says.”

“What, then, does Jesus mean? In order to get at a better sense of this passage, we can begin with the concept of ‘judgment.’ In the biblical sense, judgment is God’s exercise of *good* judgment, repairing all that is harmful to humanity. Judgment is God’s burning away of all that is cruel and spirit killing in order that we may breathe the air of compassion. Judgment is good news; it is God setting things right.”

When God sets things right, there is no room, of course, for murder, but there is also no room for murderous words or vicious deeds. So, Jesus goes on to say, if you come to worship, that is ‘offer your gift at the altar,’ and remember that someone ‘has something against you,’ it should become a matter of immediate concern to do whatever is in your power to heal it. Worship depends upon a congregation of worshipers who seek to be reconciled with each other and with their neighbors. Therefore, Jesus urges us before you open *your* mouth to sing ‘Peace Like a River,’ do what you humanly can to make peace with those around you,” as we do in passing the peace. In order to underscore the urgency of this, Jesus uses a practical example: If you are sued by someone and he or she has a good case, you’d better settle out of court as quickly as you can. If you delay too long and the case goes to court, you could find yourself in prison doing hard time. In other words, don’t wait until it is too late to make peace with your brothers and sisters.” How we handle our anger as God’s sanctified saints, salt of the earth and light of the world can be a matter of life and death.

Another issue of life and death, and the heart that Jesus took on was divorce. The Jewish community to whom Jesus spoke and Matthew’s congregation included marriages, “so there was always the possibility of divorce. Jesus wanted the Jews and inevitably Matthew’s congregation to struggle with this question that particularly affected women.”

“The law of Moses,” so important to the Jews to whom Jesus spoke, “specified a divorce procedure: If a man found something about his wife objectionable, he could write a certificate of divorce and send her out of the house,” with no place to go. “Notice that this law assumes a male-dominated world, one where men are in charge and make the decisions about whether or not their wives are welcome in the home.” There was one constraint on men in this law. The man was required “to write a certificate of divorce gave at least a small measure of protection to the woman, for it certified that she had been divorced by her husband and allowed her to be remarried without the suspicion of adultery. So, we must see this Old Testament divorce law in its own social context in the ancient world, namely, a patriarchal world in which a wife was seen as the legal property of the husband.”

“But the question for Jesus is, ‘What is the heart of this divorce law? Is it on the side of the law that endorses the male prerogative to rid himself, without any ethical qualm, of his wife whenever he feels like it, so long as he fills out the proper papers? Or is it on the side of the protection for the woman and the valuing of her person reflected in the requirement to provide a certificate?’” These can be choices of life and death for women. Jesus' statement leaves no doubt. There is no divorce procedure a man can follow that will leave him with clean hands. To abandon his wife, with or without a certificate, is, in essence, to treat her as worthless (that is the effect of the phrase ‘causes her to commit adultery,’) and to be guilty of destroying her person. Even to participate in a secondary way in such a custom (‘whoever marries a divorced woman,’) is to support its evil effects. Jesus' statement in the Sermon on the Mount about divorce still assumes that divorce is always initiated by men.”

“Thus, Jesus clearly speaks to forbid divorce. The only exception to this rule is ‘unchastity,’ a word used in this context that probably means either adultery or incest. The main point, however, is that Jesus allows no room for the practice of divorce in a culture where divorce is an assault on the value of persons, an abuse of power, and a trivializing of faithful commitments. How shall we receive Jesus' words today? Divorce is common in our society; hardly any family is untouched by it. Is divorce outside the bounds of the Christian faith? Is remarriage forbidden by the Sermon on the Mount?”

“In an environment where commitments are frivolous, where marriage covenants are taken lightly, and where divorce is easy, it is not difficult to apply Jesus' words. However, even in our divorce-saturated culture, this is rarely the case. In most instances, marriage is taken quite seriously, and divorce is a grave-sometimes even tragic-matter. Even though today approximately half of all marriages end in divorce, not many of them end easily, but rather with great cost, much pain,” and broken hearts. It feels like a life and death event. “Some people, to be sure, casually leave their marriages. Most divorced people, however, have left their marriages because, to the best of their ability to see, they had to. What do the words of Jesus mean for these people?” “We need, first, to acknowledge that the word ‘divorce’ in the Sermon on the Mount does not mean exactly what the word ‘divorce’ means today. In the first-century world, divorce was similar to what we would call “abandonment”- someone simply walked out (or, more likely, threw the woman out) with little ceremony. In societies where the church has been a major factor, divorce laws have

been changed to make abandonment illegal. In other words, most contemporary divorce laws have been affected, to some degree, by the Sermon on the Mount.”

“The most important need, though, is to discern what lies at the heart of Jesus' words, just as Jesus discerned what lay at the heart of the Mosaic Law. Marriage is intended to be a communion between two people that expresses, in their mutual fidelity, the faithfulness of God. It is intended to be a place of safety, nurture, and honor for persons. In Jesus' day, the customs and practices of divorce were a direct assault on those values.”

“Today, ironically, a hopelessly broken marriage can itself sometimes be such an assault. A marriage can become distorted. It can betray its intended purposes and become a place where people are in physical or mental danger, where they are tragically dishonest and mutually destructive. Jesus' word about divorce was spoken to preserve the value of the people involved in marriages. When a marriage becomes the very arena where people are destroying each other, we should ask how can the safety, nurture, and honor of the marriage partners best be preserved? This will mean viewing with compassion the people and their relationship, not merely defending the institution of marriage as such.” Dr. Long writes: “Marriage was made for humanity, not humanity for marriage.”

“In any case, Jesus' statement on divorce is not to be turned into a new restriction that forever keeps broken marriages bound together despite the reality of the brokenness. Instead, the effect of the prohibition is the affirmation of the sanctity of marriage and the encouragement of a reconciled relationship of husband and wife, whose union is characteristic of the new rule of God announced in Jesus' ministry... In each of these scenarios Jesus is calling for an entirely new way of viewing human relationships. Behind the prohibitions lies the vision of a restored humanity.” And, a reminder that Jesus is always with us to forgive us when we fail, as we all have, or when a relationship dies. He is also always with us to help us renew our lives and relationships again. He is always there to help us chose life once more. [Texts For Preaching-Year](#)