

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Services of Holy Eucharist
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany– February 16, 2020

“Choose Well”

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-37 (and Sirach 15:15-20); 6 Epiphany A

From Sirach, the 15th Chapter...

“If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.”

Well, so much for “The devil made me do it.” Right?

[Please be seated...]

I think it was Henry Ford, the developer of the American automobile assembly line, who once said: “Whether you think you can or think you cannot, you are right.”

It’s a sobering thought to consider that, in a life of faith, what we think or what we believe or what we choose in relationship to others is... what we can do. Now, I’m not saying that we do good things outside of God’s help. And I’m not saying that we choose *everything* that happens to us. We don’t choose those things that others might do *to* us, right? And I might choose to win the lottery, but my choice alone won’t make it happen. I might always choose to drive safely, but that doesn’t mean others will. Someone may come down with a serious disease, but that doesn’t mean they have chosen it. No, we don’t always choose the things that happen to us, but we do choose the character of our responses. We choose how we are going to act. And

whether we believe we can respond to someone or something in a wholesome, caring, honest, decent, loving, and life-giving manner, or whether we believe we cannot, we are right.

When Jesus taught his followers how to live, it was their character he sought to transform. He told them it wasn't enough simply to follow a law, rather they were to choose to fulfill even deeper intentions. The Law says not to murder; Jesus says choose not even to hold onto anger toward another or insult them. The Law says not to commit adultery; Jesus says choose to respect one another and give no harbor to untoward thoughts in your heart. The Law provides that a man can divorce his wife; Jesus asks his followers to act fairly and be considerate of marriage and what a divorce would mean to one's partner. The Law provides that a person can take an oath to guarantee their word is true and good, but there is no oath so strong that we cannot break it. Jesus asks that we choose to honestly utter our "yes" or our "no". Say what we mean and mean what we say.

So, I suppose that, as a follower of Jesus, I am not a particularly law-abiding person. I want to look for something deeper. Our laws exist to govern our relationships in the absence of those deeper choices we can make for truth, honesty, fidelity, decency, and love. Law is there to enforce a particular behavior, but would it

not be better to choose decent behavior on one's own? It is something beyond the Law that Jesus advocates. He speaks for right relationships, for the fulfillment of the better parts of our nature, for a caring response to those we encounter. Can it be so simple as to understand, as a ordinary example, that... we don't observe a speed limit in order to prevent us from driving as fast as we want, rather we observe a speed limit as a means of being thoughtful and providing the best possible situation for everyone on the road to be as safe as they can be? Can it be that, in Christ, the fulfillment of the Law is... consideration for the well-being of others? I believe so. For in providing that consideration for others, we live most fully into what we are being called to be... people who care about how our choices, our actions, impact this world and the people in it.

Oh, we can fight that. We can strive for what we want, no matter the cost to ourselves or to others. We can make our laws good for some and terrible for others. We can choose to ignore Jesus' call to fairness and honesty and compassion and love. We can be law-abiding citizens, and still not care about others. We can break our marriages for none of the right reasons, we can live in angry or illicit or dishonest relationships, we can fail to speak the truth. We can even cynically believe that this sort of bad behavior is more true to human nature than is choosing to be thoughtful, honest, and kind. But whether we think we can live after the manner of Jesus, or

whether we think we cannot... we are right. And when we choose not to live as Jesus teaches us to live, we struggle. Doesn't matter how smart we are, how powerful we are, how well-educated or gifted we are. Eventually, if we want to live happily and well, we need to realize that the call to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves goes far beyond the letter of any Law. And those teachings are for our own good, in our own best interests, and worthy of every effort we make to fulfill them.

But we can be stubborn. We can believe we are right, and vilify anyone who disagrees with us as wrong. We can use the Law for that. We can use the Bible for that. But we need to be careful of that kind of righteousness. I am reminded of the story of the ship steaming up into the English channel...

In front of them they saw a flashing light from another ship that seemed dead ahead. The lieutenant on watch said to the signal officer, "Make signal to that ship: 'We are on collision course. Suggest you alter course 10 points to the North.'"

A few minutes later, the signal officer came back with the reply which said: "YOU are on collision course, suggest YOU alter course 10 points to the South." The lieutenant showed it to the Captain, who ordered the reply:

"This is the Captain of the United States Navy aircraft carrier. My ship has right of way in this channel. Suggest you alter course 10 points to the North." And after a little while the answer came back:

"This is Able Seaman Jones of Her Majesty's British Navy. Your ship does not have right of way in this channel. Suggest you alter course 10 points to the South." The Captain was infuriated and showed the note to the Admiral, who ordered the next message.

"This is the Admiral of the United States Navy aircraft carrier. I demand right of way in this channel. Alter your course 10 points to the North immediately." And a few moments later came the reply:

"This is the light-house on the Eddystone rock. I'm not moving. You can do what you want." And the aircraft carrier altered course 10 points to the South.

Sometimes, no matter how certain we are that we are right, it's *our* hearts that may need to alter course in order to live as Jesus calls us to live... with compassion, forgiveness, honesty, fidelity, generosity, and peacefulness.