

Choose Life
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 5:21-37
February 13, 2011
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There's an old favorite hymn, "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide." Most important questions are up to us to decide. We can't choose everything: We can't choose whether an earthquake will strike the Bay Area or whether our children will get cancer. But we can choose how to handle moral questions.

There have always been choices about important subjects, like race. The captain of a ship in the Atlantic Ocean had to choose whether to take African slaves to the New World as his cargo. Plantation owners had to choose whether to purchase slaves, and then if they did, they had to choose how to treat them. Certain states chose not to allow slavery, and certain religious groups took the ethical stand against slavery from the start: the Quakers, the Church of the Brethren. For generations, the choice may not have seemed even conscious to most white people about how to treat black people. Racism was so engrained in the society that to many it was a "given."

Today we still have *de facto* segregation and unequal opportunity. Segregation by race has been outlawed since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a choice that came out of a movement to reverse unfair, discriminatory laws. Yet other choices—more subtle ones—continue to put African Americans in positions of disadvantage.

Today an African American man is 14 times as likely to die a violent death as a white man. Now you could say that it only takes one person to pull the trigger of a gun; and of course, that is that person's choice. But so much more than one man's choice to pull the trigger contributes to the violence on the streets of Oakland. The cost and condition of housing, the poor schools, the unemployment, the culture of hopelessness, the gangs, the flight of white people to the suburbs...in each of these complicated factors, there are choices for our society to make, whether to keep the status quo or whether to seek the common good.

So here's the juxtaposition. Here's where we stand with the ethical decisions regarding race: whether to foster the status quo or whether to promote the common good.

When you choose the status quo, you're really choosing things as they are because you like them that way. Really a choice for the status quo is a choice for yourself.

During the Civil Rights Movement cities across the country resisted change. In general, white people didn't see the need for change. This last week was what would have been the 98th birthday of Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks was a black woman who recognized the need for change and lived it out. When she refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man, she became the catalyst for the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56. Black people boycotted the Montgomery city buses for a whole year, and black and white people marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. to force the city transit company to change its

policies. Rosa Parks said, "As long as people use tactics to oppress or restrict other people from being free, there is work to be done."

The Civil Rights Movement forced the nation to see that it had a choice: to keep the status quo, which meant life *for some*, or to seek the common good, which meant life *for all*. These past weeks the people of Egypt have gathered in Tahrir Square to say, "We want freedom. We want life *for all*."

Life only for the privileged, life only for oneself, is really not life at all—in terms of God's understanding of life. So if we choose the status quo in terms of racism, if we choose to permit race to hold down a people from a full and meaningful life, we are choosing not life, but death.

God says, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (Deut. 30:15, 19).

"Choose life!" It was God's commandment to the ancient Israelite community, and it is God's commandment to us today as a society.

This commandment is also God's advice to us as individuals. "Choose life!" Don't be a victim! If you are oppressed by racial prejudice, by social status, by life circumstance, by health, or lack of opportunity, still...choose life! No matter what problems have been dished onto your plate, you still have a choice.

It is hard to imagine a life more oppressed than the life of a slave, carried over the Middle Passage in the hull of a ship not fit for animals, sold and torn from family members, overworked and whipped, raped and denied even the simple right to learn to read. And yet... even in these atrocious conditions, slaves found in the Christian faith a reason to choose life. They pieced together the scraps of their lives and made quilts and stitched into the fabric messages of hope and freedom.

Dr. Howard Thurman, a black preacher and writer, former Dean of the Boston University Chapel, said of black slaves, his ancestors, "Daring to believe that God cared for them despite the cruel vicissitudes of life meant the giving of wings to life that nothing could destroy" (*Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, 21). Daring to believe that God cares for us—in spite of everything—gives us wings! Daring to believe that God so cares for us is an individual choice, and when we can make that choice—in spite of everything going wrong around us—that gives us wings! We are free! God's love sets us free!

I can't speak for the African-American community. But President Obama has spoken eloquently. In his speech "A More Perfect Union," referred to as "Obama's speech on race" delivered before his election, in March 2008, he said:

Working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, ...in fact we

have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans....And it means taking full responsibility for own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

Not just with words, but with deeds—by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations.

For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism. We can tackle race only as spectacle—as we did in the OJ [Simpson] trial—or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina—or as fodder for the nightly news. We can play Reverend [Jeremiah] Wright's sermons on every channel.

That is one option. Or, at this moment,...we can come together and say, "Not this time." This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can't learn; that those kids who don't look like us are somebody else's problem. The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21st century economy. Not this time.

This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected

(<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/03/18/text-of-obamas-speech-a-more-perfect-union/>).

Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount call us to a high ethic. Not only are we not to murder, we are also not to be angry or insulting. Not only are we to seek justice, we are also to forgive those who have wronged us. Not only are we not to commit adultery, we are also not to look at another person with lust. Not only are we not to swear falsely, we are not to swear at all, for it is an offense to God.

God calls us to a high ethic. We have free will. We have a choice each day how we will live. Will we accept the status quo and take the low road? Or will we seek the common good, work for that perfect union, and take the high road?

James Russell Lowell's words sum up the choice:

Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;
Some great cause, some great decision, offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever, 'twixt that darkness and that light.
Then to side with truth is noble, when we share her wretched crust,
Ere her cause bring fame and profit, and 'tis prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses while the coward stands aside,
Till the multitude make virtue of the faith they had denied.

It is the brave man, the brave woman, who chooses life over death, while the coward stands aside. It is the daring person who believes God loves all people, whoever they are, and that belief gives life wings!

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

Choose life! Choose life with a capital "l." Choose life for all.