

Sermon Sixth Sunday after Epiphany Year A February 13, 2011

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

Choose Life so that you and your descendants may live. Amen.

Michael was the kind of guy who had such a positive outlook that you either loved him or hated him. When someone would ask him how he was doing, he would reply, "If I were any better, I would be twins!" He was a natural motivator. If a co-worker was having a bad day, Michael would encourage them and help them to see the positive side of the situation.

A friend asked how he could be so positive all the time. After all, it seemed so unnatural compared to the rest of the world. Michael replied, "Each morning I wake up and say to myself, 'You have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or ... you can choose to be in a bad mood.' I choose to be in a good mood. Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or ... I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it. Every time someone comes to me complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or ... I can point out the positive side of life. I choose the positive side of life." The friend protested that even though it sounded great in theory it would be hard to live out.

Michael responded, "Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk, every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people affect your mood. You choose to be in a good mood or bad mood. The bottom line: It's your choice how you live your life."
(T)

Today's Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy and the passage from the gospel are closely linked and put before us the importance of

choices...life giving choices or death-dealing choices. As beings created in the image of God we share in the gift of freewill...the ability to make those choices each and every day.

The reading from Deuteronomy is Moses teaching the people that following God's commandments and walking in his ways leads to life and not to do so leads to death. Jesus, in the gospel passage today, also uses Moses teaching to assert his own authority. Jesus acted in a sense as the second Moses, the new Law-giver. Jesus Himself was the fulfillment of the Old Covenant. The New Covenant is a person, not a set of required rules. The thrust here is not on the inability of the Old Covenant to make man right with God, but rather Jesus, in effect, expanded the scope of the Law from overt actions to mental thoughts. Our righteousness is met by Christ Himself and given back to the repentant/believing faith community through justification by faith. Humankind's religious life is a result of a relationship with God, not a means to that relationship.

While some of these texts in the gospel today can be hard for us to hear they point at one thing that is appropriate as we approach Valentine's Day. The work Jesus invites us to do is the work of the Heart. As Jesus expands on the teachings of Moses he points us to the intentionality behind that which we do. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount he uses murder, adultery and divorce as issues where he expands on Moses' teaching.

"You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER'...the sixth of Moses' commandments. But Jesus says,

if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, so make peace with your brother or sister and then come to the altar and offer your gift. Christ teaches that *rash anger is heart-murder; whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause, breaks the sixth commandment.*

Anger is a natural passion; there are cases in which it is healthy, lawful and laudable; but it is *sinful* when we are angry without cause. The Greek word is *eike*, which signifies, *without cause, without any good effect*; so that the anger is then sinful. When it is without any really good reason, merely to show our authority, to hold a grudge, to gratify a brutish passion, to let people know our resentments, then it is in vain, it is to do hurt and therefore **murder of the heart**. Cain's killing his brother began in anger; he is a murderer in the account of God, who knows his heart, from whence murder proceeds.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery, but Jesus says everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. In the OT adultery was a sexual affair involving a married person. Again, Jesus redefined sexual sin as an attitude of the heart. Sex is a gift of God, a good and wholesome thing. But God has also put boundaries on its expression for our well-being and long-term enjoyment. Prideful, self-centered humans always want to go beyond the God-given bounds. This command also implies God’s ownership and control of our sexual and family lives. (T)

Several years later, Michael, the guy with the positive outlook, was involved in a serious accident as he fell sixty feet from a communications tower. As he lay on the ground, the first thing he thought of was the well-

being of his soon-to-be-born daughter. Then, he remembered that he had two choices: He could choose to live or ... he could choose to die. He chose to live.

The paramedics arrived and went to work. They kept telling Michael that he was going to be fine. But when they wheeled him into the ER, he saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses. He began to feel fear overcoming his body because he could read their eyes: "He's a dead man." He knew he needed to take action.

A big burly nurse was shouting questions. She asked Michael if he was allergic to anything. He replied, "Yes." The doctors and nurses stopped working as they waited for Michael to fill in the missing blank of his allergy. He took a deep breath and yelled, "Gravity." Over their laughter, he said, "I am choosing to live. Operate on me with that understanding."

After eighteen hours of surgery and weeks of intensive care, Michael was released from the hospital with rods placed in his back. Michael lived, thanks to the skill of his doctors, and also because of his amazing attitude. When asked about his health, Michael would respond, "If I were any better, I'd be twins. Want to see my scars?"

You and I are continually faced with the choices for either life or death each day. It is how we approach our living, setting aside those things that bring small deaths to us and those around us and opting for life-giving choices that change our hearts and minds and actually increase our quality of life here and now.

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