

First Presbyterian Church of Redlands
Sunday, February 16, 2020
Rev. Cheryl Raine

The First Reading is Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵ ***See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.*** ¹⁶ 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, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. ***Choose life*** so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ ***loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him;*** for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

The Second Reading is James 4:1-10

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it; so, you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so, you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? ⁶ But he gives all the more grace; therefore, it says,

"God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble."

⁷ ***Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*** ⁸ ***Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*** Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

The Message is entitled *The Choice*

Three years ago, I was getting ready to move into our home located on Revelation Way in University Grove. We had purchased the home in December, but we did some renovations before moving in. Paul was still living in Cerritos at the time and I was the onsite decider of contractor questions. Of course, there were plenty of choices to be made even before construction began.

What I remember most about the renovations was the abundance of choices we had to make. We had to choose flooring style, texture and color. We had to choose the cabinet design and color. We had to choose shower tile and fixtures. We had to choose and then choose yet again when problems cropped up. There were so many details that needed to be decided. Choices, choices, and more choices and if you have ever shopped home renovation stores the multitude of choices doesn't make choosing easy.

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Well, the writer of Deuteronomy and James is speaking about choices as well. In Deuteronomy, the mantle of leadership is being passed from Moses to Joshua and Moses makes his final plea to the people of God as they make final preparations to enter into the promised land by crossing over the Jordan. Moses is blunt, saying to the people, "Choose life!" Choose to love the LORD your God, walking in God's ways, and observing God's commandments." Or as James puts it, "Choose to humble yourself before God; [and] draw near God." Yes, choose life, not death!

Yet, more often than not we choose death or as James puts it, "the ways of the world." We don't choose rightly, the ways of God, because something gets in the way. James describes this something as the internal war going on within each of us. The internal war between choosing God's ways and our ways which mimic the self-centered ego-centric ways of the world. If you are wondering what these ways are, we just need to refer to Apostle Paul's litany in his letter to the church in Galatia. Listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Paul's litany:

"It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time, [of living the ways of world]: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on."

All we need to do is to pay attention to twitter feeds, Facebook posts and headlines, to know that all too many of us choose the ways of the world, for our world is filled with jealousy and envy that leads to violence and selfish ambition that causes ruin, critical and slanderous words that destroy people, and power used over and against at the expense of others. As Paul said, the examples could go on and on.

Resist the ways of the world, urges James or in his words, "Resist the devil." James' words about resisting our selfish spirits, our bitterness and our indulgent desires brought to mind cartoons I saw growing up. The cartoon showed the devil dressed in red with pointy ears, a tail and a pitchfork sitting on one shoulder and a white angelic winged figure sitting on the other shoulder. The cartoon most often depicted an individual succumbing to self-centered ego-centric ways of the world blamed on the red guy. "The devil made me do it," was the punch line. Comedian Flip Wilson even popularized this saying for choices that were worldly through his comedy routines in the 1960's.

Yet, James is clear that the warring within us is no laughing matter, for a selfish spirit leads to quarrels, fights and the appalling wars that have littered history. Someone or some group wants what they want and violence is perpetrated in order to secure it. Unfortunately, given that the church is filled with people, churches don't escape these quarrels and fights and even wars, as we were to scan our 2,000-year-old history.

Yet, you and I have a choice in each and every circumstance we encounter and blaming the devil is just an attempt to deny our responsibility in the choices we make. Viktor E. Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning* reminds us that even in the absolute worst of circumstances imaginable we still have a choice. Frankl writes, "Everything can be taken from a man but one

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thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” And the Deuteronomist and James urge us to choose the way that leads to life, which means choosing to live the way of love, which is the way of God. Choose love in the face of ridicule, insult and meanness. Choose love by deescalating an angry argument. Choose love by forgiving a betrayer. Choose life in the face of death. Yet, as people of God, all too often we don’t.

The Jewish philosopher Spinoza observed this almost 400 years ago, saying, “I have often wondered that persons who make boast of professing the Christian religion – namely, love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men – should quarrel with such rancorous animosity and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith.” His experience of our faith as lived by Christians in his day was “rancorous animosity and bitter hatred.” Yet didn’t Jesus say we are supposed to be known by our love? Yet, this rancor Spinoza observed was exactly what James saw in the first century church as well. And such animosity and hatred are sadly not foreign to churches today either.

So, what are we to do? How we to choose life and not death? James suggests a simple litmus test through his counsel. When we make choices big or small we simply need to ask ourselves, “Who am I trying to please?” Am I trying to please God or someone or something else including myself? Asking, “Who am I trying to please?” will uncover our motives. Asking this question will help us discern what is really going on within us, for all of us are capable of both goodness and destruction.

“Who am I trying to please?” This question can be painful though. We might realize that even when we thought we were loving, we really weren’t. This is the topic of a book entitled, “When Helping Hurts.” Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert chronicle how churches might help alleviate poverty without hurting the poor or themselves. In this book these authors confess times when their loving actions, really weren’t. Like the time Steve Corbett lived near a Uganda refugee camp teaching his small business curriculum to women in the camp, as a Christian focused on saving souls. Yet, while in Uganda he did nothing to address the extreme poverty and unsanitary conditions of the refugee camp that he only dared to enter once a week on Mondays during daylight hours. Upon his return from his five-month sabbatical in Uganda, he realized the poverty of his good. Yet, sometimes our helping, our good actually harmful.

Of course, the opposite can be true as well. Sometimes when we thought we were sinful, we weren’t that either. So, asking, “Who am I trying to please?” requires wisdom from above. Wisdom as defined by James that is willing to yield and full of mercy. As Richard Rohr writes, “That is why saints are humble and scoundrels are arrogant.”

Hence, why James at the heart of his message says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” God opposes those whose motives are to please the world, to please oneself or please others. Whereas God gives grace to those who can humbly say, “It is not all about me.” God gives grace to those who humbly say, “God I yield my will to your will,” just as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane when he said, “Not my will but yours be done.”

So, how do we acquire this wisdom from above? James gives this counsel first, “Submit yourselves to God.” And then he follows quickly with this counsel, “Draw near to God.” We cannot possibly know that ways of God, if we do not spend time with God. Our faith is relational.

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We must draw near to God day in and day out. We must lay our decisions before God and seek God's guidance. And not just with our words, but with attentive hearts and willing spirits. If we just show up and tell God what we want, then we have not yielded ourselves to God. If we delve into scriptures thinking we already have all the answers, then we have not yielded ourselves to the living and active word inspired by the Holy Spirit.

"God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." So, "humble yourselves before the Lord," says James. But how do we do this according to James? I must admit that James' advice makes it sound like God is a killjoy, "Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection." Does God really want just a sour tear stained face?

Eugene Peterson's translation gave me some insights into James' thoughts. Peterson writes, "Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious." Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet."

Get serious folks. Choose life. Choose a relationship with God that can help you stop the internal warring that goes on within us. Purify your inner life, by humbling yourself before God. Now I'll be the first to admit this is not easy, because we are going to find out things about our motives that we would rather not know. As spiritual teachers and psychologists remind us, we all have shadow sides. But, until we own this truth through our submission to God, the internal warring will continue and we will choose the ways of the world over the ways of God.

I believe James is clearly saying to us through this text that submission or yielding to God is a prerequisite for spiritual maturity. If we don't submit our will and ways to God, then we are choosing the way of death according to Moses and James. And the way of death makes our world a very inhospitable place, a place devoid of love and hope. As Benjamin Franklin reminded us, "A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small bundle." Yet, when we risk the way of love, our world expands. When we submit ourselves to God, God will do through us more than we can ask for or imagine. I know this to be true through my own life again and again.

The choice we have to make is not a one and done. We choose daily, again and again, between the way of love and the ways of the world. The question for us today is this: Will we draw near to God? Will we draw near to God and examine why we do what we do? Will we lay ourselves bare before the Holy One who can guide us through life with wisdom from above?

The siren's call of the world to bow down to other gods and serve them is real. The other gods of power and influence, fame and wealth, security and safety, clamor for our allegiance to meet just our needs at the expense of all others. Will we risk submission? Will we yield to the one God of love?

Moses said to the people of God in the desert and says to us as well, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today for I have set before you life and death... choose life." Amen.