

Dealer's Choice
Proper 18
August 28, 2016
Trinity Bixby

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20
Luke 14: 25-33

Every Summer, my extended family descends on a small house on a lake in Michigan. Some years, there have been as many as seventy people, all vacationing together in this cabin that used to be my grandparents' home away from the City. Some folks pitch tents in the yard, others have taken to staying across the lake in a rented home, and others stay at my parents' or with my great Aunt. During the day, there's a steady flood of activity; cousins taking the speedboats out to ski or tube or wakeboard; aunts and uncles relaxing with a book by the shore; various and sundry friends and family making enough food to feed everyone as we take turns with the expense and the work. But in the evenings, when things settle down, we nearly always turn to playing cards at several tables. Now, being a family with strong Midwestern roots, we tend to play Euchre – a quirky card game that uses a small deck, and is designed for two teams at a time, who take turns bidding on the trump suit and trying to take the majority of tricks in a hand to win points. While each hand plays out differently, they all start the same – with a chance to order up a card into the dealer's hand, making that card's suit the trump suit for the rest of the hand.

Sometimes, it's an easy choice – the card that is turned up is the top card in the game, and you've got most of the others, so you order it up to your partner. Sometimes, the choice is easy the other way – you don't want that suit to be trump come hell or high water. But, just like life, usually it's not a clear and easy choice – there are possibilities, but you don't want to give the opposing team the advantage, or you need more help from your partner than

you can count on. If every player turns down the opportunity to order up the card as the trump suit, then, in the same order, each player has a chance to name a suit as trump – but by naming trump, you commit your team to taking the majority of the tricks, without knowing exactly what your partner has in their hand. If no one chooses again, then it becomes what I'll call “stick the dealer” or “dealer's choice” – and no matter the consequences, the dealer has to choose a suit so that the game can go forward.

There are many folks who feel like this about their faith. Study after study have been released recently showing that the percentage of Americans who claim no religion has been increasing rapidly. When asked, most of the respondents say that it's not that they don't believe in God, but that they can't commit to following the demands of organized religion, or have been hurt by their childhood denomination, and don't see why they should bother choosing another. Forums and videos online make it clear that even the word Christian is now primarily associated with hypocrisy, stubbornness, narrowmindedness and intolerance. Who would associate themselves willingly with such things? Why should we pick up that card, and tell everyone that this suit – God's suit – is the most important of all?

Because we are called to choose to do good – to choose life – no matter the consequences. No – because of the consequences!

Moses warns the Hebrew People, just as they are about to enter the Promised Land, that it is time to make a choice between life and what is good, and death and what's wrong. That goodness flows from choosing to love God, and walking in God's way – and that choosing to turn away from God leads to suffering and death. The consequences of not choosing life are much, much worse. And Moses tells the people that heaven and earth will serve as witnesses to this oath, this choice – and urges them to “choose life – so that

you and your descendants will live – by loving the LORD your God, by obeying [God’s] voice and by clinging to [God].”

To Moses as he is presented in Deuteronomy, then, the consequences of choosing life are prosperity and goodness. This seems very straightforward, and indeed, forms the basis of much of theological understanding even today. But just choosing life – and loving God – will not ensure a stress-free, perfect life. No matter what you’ve heard, there’s no magic prayer that ensures your life is great. Because loving God doesn’t mean ordering God to do your bidding, but in opening yourself to God’s radical love, in putting God first, and in recognizing that the goodness and prosperity Moses described are about the people of God as a whole, and not you individually.

Indeed, Jesus has some of the hardest words for individuals who wanted to be known as his disciples! There are numerous examples – especially in the Gospel of Mark – where Jesus excoriates the twelve for their lack of understanding and follow-through. But in today’s Scripture from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has some pretty harsh news for the huge crowds that have been following him on his journey to Jerusalem. Look at what he says to the crowd: “If you want to be my disciple, you must, by comparison, hate everyone else – your father and mother, spouse and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even your own life! Otherwise you cannot be my disciple.” What?! This sounds nothing like Matthew’s “Best-of-Jesus” album called the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the peacemakers”; but “hate everyone else?”

Guess what – this is a major translation problem. Hebrew and Aramaic have a few words that are translated “to hate.” A couple of them are used pretty similarly to how we use it – “to feel passionately against something or someone”. Another means “to spurn” or “to renounce one choice in favor of another.” But, all of the words are translated into Greek as one word – *Miseo* –

which is pretty much used the way we use “hate,” despite the differences in Hebrew and Aramaic. Yet, just as you aren’t filled with passionate distaste of the card you turn down, Jesus isn’t saying to be filled with negative feelings towards everything else in the world – but saying to make the choice to lift Jesus above any other obligation in your life. He’s saying: If you want to be a disciple of Jesus – if you want to call yourself a Christian – then you have to put Jesus first. He can’t be an afterthought, a box to mark on a survey that changes nothing about how you live. You’ve got to make that dealer’s choice – and choose life, no matter the consequences. Because Jesus tells the crowds that they will have to be willing to die – to pick up your own cross – for the sake of Jesus. The personal consequences may be great, but the result of choosing to follow Jesus is goodness for the world. As the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards once said: “Resolved: that all should live for the glory of God. Resolved: That whether others do or not, I will.”

So, I’m ok with people willing to follow God and not call themselves Christian. It’s a high bar – and a difficult one to follow through. But God’s grace is great – and I know that, no matter the personal consequences, putting God’s love first and foremost is the right thing to do. So, when you’re forced to make the dealer’s choice, choose life! Choose Christ! And most of all, choose love!

May God’s love make every choice you face clear. May Christ’s example lead you to love extravagantly even in the face of difficulty. And may the Holy Spirit bring peace and prosperity to all the nations and people of the world, one choice at a time. Amen.