

6 Epiphany – Year A – February 16, 2011 - Homily
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37
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It has been said that “In life there are neither rewards nor punishments, only consequences.” Personally, I’m inclined to agree with this statement because God is not distant, uncaring or capricious, doling out wrath and bolts of lightning whenever we step out of line. Nor does God lavishly dispense whatever we want when we want it, like some kind of crazy divine vending machine. Instead, God offers us an abundance of life, encourages us to make good choices, and graciously honors our free will, allowing us to live with the consequences of our choices. We have all experienced the consequences of poor choices in our lives. Perhaps one of the things we most struggle with is why we want to blame God or someone else when bad things happen, and are tempted to set God aside when life is good.

Tonight’s reading from the Book of Deuteronomy offers God’s view of human choices in the face of all that God desires for us and all that God offers to us. Frankly, this reading makes us uncomfortable; it feels constrictive and even rather disempowering to have it laid out for us in such stark black and white terms. Culturally, choice is what America is all about and the number of choices we have is actually quite shocking to other cultures around the world. From my own travels, it’s evident that America’s level of choice is truly incredible when compared to other countries. Next time you go to the supermarket, take a few minutes to walk slowly down the cereal aisle and simply count the different choices available on the shelves. Let’s just say it isn’t corn flakes or nothing here. It’s evident that choice is one of our society’s preferred values. This part of Moses’ speech to the Israelites as they are nearing the Promised Land, also offers us a choice, but not on anywhere near the scale we’re used to, or even with the kind of unconditional love and grace that we’ve come to expect from our benevolent God. In this case, the choice appears to be severely curtailed by the explicit presentation of consequences, **and** by Moses’ own exhortation to choose life under Yahweh. Suddenly, it’s very clear that we are not in control here. Moses’ prophetic words put our independence and autonomy front and center to bow humbly before the power and majesty of God.

As one commentator puts it, “The truth, according to Deuteronomy, is that there will be hell to pay for the choices we make when those choices run counter to God’s covenantal obligations” (Andrew Connors). We actually don’t have to look far at all to see the truth of this all around us, and in our own lives. Everything from that imprudent purchase of jeans that are two sizes too small and always will be, to the kind of betrayals and broken promises that undermine marriage, destroy family life, and wound us deeply. Poor and reckless stewardship of personal, corporate and national resources continues to lead us down a path towards massive debt, financial ruin, constant wars, extinct species, irreversible climate change, and rapidly dwindling fossil fuels. We don’t have to be Einstein to figure out that what is going on in the world today is probably not what God desires for His good creation, or what He wants for you and me as His stewards. We are living with the consequences of mass rebellion against God’s will for humanity and all creation.

The good news is that God really does desire that each of us, as well as the community of faith know His blessings and His will. God has chosen us as His beloved children, drawing us into a covenant relationship, where the fullness of life can become reality. God desires that we accept the gift of His love, and live faithfully in obedience to His will. There is even more good news

from this passage, a deeper truth that Christians experience as freedom in Christ. Obedience is not just a matter of doing what we are told to do. The word obedience comes from the verb “to listen”. Therefore, obedience involves our participation with God in discernment. We are called to listen, especially with our hearts as well as our minds, to hear the still small voice of the Holy Spirit guiding us, encouraging us, and empowering us to live with integrity. We are called to offer ourselves to God so that we might experience the fullness of life in Him. We are invited to participate in the life of God, by doing the work that God has ordained for each of us according to His purpose for our lives. Obedience to God’s commandments and Jesus’ teachings gives us the best opportunity to experience the joy of gratitude, freedom to love, and the peace of God in our hearts. Obedience to God in Christ Jesus is life giving, and transformational. To live in relationship with Christ is our way of life, our daily steps, the rhythm of our heartbeat, and our daily bread. To love God and our neighbor is to live expansively and generously. And because God is God, it is our choice to accept or decline this life.

Listening to God is probably a little different for each of us, but will certainly involve some form of prayer, and maintaining lively relationships with God, and with the community of faith that is the Body of Christ. Some of us like contemplative prayer, sitting in silence and letting God fill us with His peaceful promptings. Some of us just like to talk it out. I’ve spent lots of time having long conversations with God whilst walking or doing housework. It’s just important for us to remember that we need to listen as well as talk. Some of us are especially attuned to hearing God speak through our friends and family, or through our experience of worship in community. A certain Scripture can lead to promptings or stirrings in our hearts through the power of the Spirit. The words of a favorite song or hymn are prayers as well. Journaling is another form of prayer. We all just have to figure out what works best for us. God is always available to us when we open our hearts and minds to Him. Choosing a life with God is a lifelong process, and a daily commitment.

Remembering that God gives us what we need, which doesn’t always coincide with what we want, we also acknowledge that bad things happen to good people, and bad people still find ways to prosper. As Job tells us, not all misfortune can be attributed to God’s judgment against us. However, as Martin Luther King has noted, the moral arc of the universe does bend towards justice. The choice to live and to know God’s blessings is life’s open door, through which we are all invited to walk. And those who already enjoy a relationship with God in Christ Jesus are always welcome to invite a friend. The consequences of that decision are eternal.

Amen.