

Living Yes and No

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37

Freedom

On Monday, our nation marks President's Day.

On this day, we stop to honor the leaders who shaped and reshaped the land of the free and home of the brave. And from casual observation, I can tell you that the highlight of this Monday will be "The President's Day Sale".

Advertisers have spent the last week encourages us to celebrate our national heritage and freedom with "blow-out" prices at car lots and big box stores, malls and mom-and-pop shops.

We live in a nation that values personal freedoms, accepts few given limits—and those only grudgingly, and most often rejects the value of dependence or inter-dependence.ⁱ

In particular, we like the freedom to choose—particularly the freedom of consumer choice—complaining audibly when our favorite brand disappears from Wegman's shelves to be replaced by the "store brand."

We like to keep our options open when it comes to the foods that we eat, the clothes that we wear, the places we live, the activities in which we participate and the people to whom we become attached.

To quote William Willimon, "in the conventional modern way: I am most free when I am least attached to anyone other than me... Freedom has become our favorite definition of a human being. Freedom—defined as the maximum ability to choose whatever life I want to live with a minimum of external attachments..."ⁱⁱ

A Discordant Word

Yet, on this Sunday before President's Day, we hear Moses speak from his farewell address and Jesus speak from his Sermon on the Mount.

If we haven't already tuned it out, the culture clash should be ringing in our ears as if we were standing between the cymbals in the marching band—vibrating and dazed like a Saturday morning cartoon character.

Moses and the gathered tribes of Israel were standing on the "verge of Jordan" staring down the long awaited entry into the land of God's promise.

Moses wanted to prepare the people for what would come next. The people faced opportunity and challenge. And Moses reminds them that they have a choice to make—keep the covenant or break it, prosper or face adversity, live or die.

Moses wanted them to choose a life lived in obedience to God. He knew that the most perilous part of crossing into Canaan wasn't the military opposition the people faced, but the cultural assimilation that would take place if Israel did not hold fast to covenant faithfulness.

Canaan was a land of "other gods" rich with the fertility religions of that age; religions that sought the illusion of control over their environment through the "technical procedures" of cultic ritual. Perhaps we can relate. After all, we live in an age when the search for self-determination and control—often expressed through our personal "freedoms"—continues to have great seductive power.

So in this moment, the words of Moses, the choice he placed before Israel feels stark—this life or death. It feels limiting. It feels threatening. It feels... ODD.

Andrew Foster Connors writes, "We hesitate to agree that divine sanctions operate against the rabid independence and unrestrained consumption that resist fidelity to YHWH and the social vision that YHWH enacts.... 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."ⁱⁱⁱ

In his farewell message, Moses made plain the blessings of covenantal obedience.

Such obedience formed a society where food was shared with the hungry, debts were forgiven those who could not pay, government guarded against the hoarding of wealth, laborers were paid promptly, the harvest was shared with the disadvantaged, and punishment was limited to protect human dignity.

Covenantal obedience was an invitation into justice and equity that mirrored the justice and equity of the people's relationship with God. The choice that stood before the people of Israel was to live as God's covenantal people, or to disappear into the murky practices of the age.

So Moses pleaded with them, "choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life and length of days..."

Navigating Cultural Challenge

There is a corollary to the age-old question about the tree falling in the forest. It goes like this, "If a pastor takes study leave, and no one hears the report, was it really study?"

So let me share this, during my study leave in January, my study cohort joined other students for chapel. Music, prayers, scripture, and silence; each day, twice a day in the morning and the evening...

We read from the foundation story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, one verse each day amid the stained glass surroundings of Montgomery chapel. We were knee deep in the foundation narrative in Genesis, where Abraham and Sarah received God's promise of an heir, a homeland, and descendants without number.

It seemed so plain in those moments and through the unfolding of that story—that the essence of what God sought, what God still seeks, was and is to be connected and in relationship human kind, to be in relationship with us.

That particular morning, we heard how Sarai lost patience with God, and set out to control her own destiny. She gave Abram her slave as a surrogate to give birth to the awaited heir.

This was her unfettered choice—seduced by the notion of self-determination and control—and indeed there was hell to pay afterwards.

In the silence, that morning I reflected on Torah. I thought about the ways that God's "commandments" were more than legal codes—after all, everything that Sarai did was legal. I thought about how the commandments were more a roadmap of "God's way."

Less checklist than guide, the commandments seek to help us navigate cultural challenges, to help us act in ways that are life giving, inter-dependent, equitable, and just.

Covenant Keeping

In our gospel lesson, Jesus speaks to the people in a time when "covenant keeping" had been reduced to "rule keeping".

And if we look hard enough, we can see that rule-keeping is simply another means to seek control and self-determination.

Jesus begins this portion of his Sermon on the Mount by presenting the gathered people with a choice akin to words of Moses. "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Let me share that most days, I love technology... Yet, I am certain that my computer has become a grammatical Pharisee.

This week, as it so often does, my SPELL CHECK tried to think on my behalf, using its rules and limited dictionary to keep my document mistake free.

So—take a look at your bulletin cover—as you read the quote, you will find the error of my computer's benevolence.

The quote from Peter Wood's blog should read, "The essential teachings of Jesus challenged the way the Pharisees had replaced the essential INTERIORITY [not inferiority] of a relationship with God... a covenant written on the heart and not on stone with external legalism and ritual observance."

It makes a difference doesn't it?

Speaking "to" and "about" a superficially observant people, Jesus was pointing out that the narrow letter of the law does not capture its spirit.

Jesus lifted specific commandments—and with them all of God's law—redeeming them from the legalism of his age. He reimagined them in light of the coming of God's reign when human beings will be fully human at last.

Jesus taught the crowd that the heart of the commandments was not about outer appearance but inner motivation and just connection:

Anger and estrangement are as deadly serious as murder; lust and misplaced longing are symptomatic of spiritual infidelity; common oaths display the underlying lack of honesty and authenticity; lawful divorce reveals the brokenness that distorts human relationships.

Much like Moses, Jesus calls us to choose—to choose between the values of the world and the values of the kingdom, which is the world as God intends it to be.

Charles Cousar writes, “Christians are invited by the text to be different, to obey and teach the covenantal commitments, to be directed in their moral decisions by Jesus’ interpretation of the law...”

Living Yes and No

It is about living the YES—through “specific conduct” that conforms to a different social vision.

It is about living the NO—in a steadfast refusal to reduce our relationships to expressions of “power, force, greed, and brutality.”

I can confess my own cultural complicity makes me reluctant to hear and make this choice. Perhaps you feel that reluctance too.

Andrew Foster Connors concludes, “Perhaps our resistance to this kind of counsel is not simply a concern about God’s beneficence, but our wish to live as though God were not so attentive to the choices that we make.”^{iv}

But the truth is that we live with the YES and the NO of our free choosing every day and that our choices have consequences that we can scarcely comprehend.

We like the freedom to choose, but we are caught in the lure of self-sufficiency and enmeshed within a system that promotes fear, proclaims scarcity, generates anger and hatred, upholds inequality, promotes lust and conspicuous consumption...

Bound in this way we are scarcely free to choose at all.

But today’s word of choice brings with it good news: William Willimon writes that “Christians, attached as we are to the story of Jesus Christ, believe two countercultural ideas about freedom: most of what passes for ‘freedom’ around here is a lie; and there is no real freedom apart from the freedom to be who God created us to be...”

He continues, “At the heart of the Christian life is a holy paradox: the more securely we are tethered to Christ, the more obedient we are to his way rather than the world’s ways, (and) the more free we become.”^v

We are called to embrace true freedom, to shrug off our desire for self-determination and control.

We are called to shrug off our own legalism that seeks to substitute rule-keeping for covenantal community.

We are called to live in ways marked by justice and equity, stability and compassion.

We are called to live the yes and no of God's way, this day and every day.

Let me close with this prayer, written by Ted Loder, found in his book Guerillas of Grace. Let us pray...

Teach me your ways Lord,

that I may be open to the same Spirit
who moved over the face of the waters
in the first day of creation
and moves also over the chaos of this time
to fashion a day like this,
a world like ours,
a life like mine,
a kingdom like leaven in bread,
like a treasure
buried in the fields of the daily I plow;

and make me aware of the miracles of life,

of warm and cold,
of starkness and order,
of screaming wind and impenetrable silences,
and of the unfathomable mystery of amazing grace in which I am kept.

Teach me your ways, Lord,

that I may praise you
for all the surprising, ingenious ways you bless me,
and for all the wondrous gifts you give me
through artists who introduce me to the beauty of holiness,
who usher me into awesome worlds in which I begin to live anew
in a fullness of pain and joy not possible before.

Teach me your ways, Lord,

that I may accept my own talent openly,
nurture it hopefully,
and give it freely.

Teach me your ways, Lord,

that I may love the kindness of the prophets
and practice it toward the hunger of the world,
the poor and sick and oppressed
that I may learn the healing humility
which responsibly tends the earth and all creatures therein.

Teach me your ways, Lord,

that I may be swept up in worship with the saints,
which surges in wonder, gratitude and obedience,
and shapes my life into an irrepressible YES to you,

to all my sisters and brothers,
and to the presence of the kingdom among us
until the ancient vision of mothers burns in me
with a fire to light the world
and warm its heart,
through Jesus Christ,
the singer of passionate songs,
the teller of powerful stories,
the artist of daring ways. AMEN.

ⁱ Richard Bauckham. *Freedom and Belonging. Christian Reflection: a series in faith and ethics*, Vol 39. Baylor University. (15)

ⁱⁱ William H Willimon. *Freedom. Christian Reflection: a series in faith and ethics*, Vol 39. Baylor University. (74)

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Foster Connors. Pastoral Perspective on Deuteronomy 30:15-20. Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1. WJK: Louisville, 2010. (338)

^{iv} Andrew Foster Connors. Pastoral Perspective on Deuteronomy 30:15-20. Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1. WJK: Louisville, 2010. (340)

^v William H Willimon. *Freedom. Christian Reflection: a series in faith and ethics*, Vol 39. Baylor University. (76-77)