

Choosing Life

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1 Corinthians 3:1-8 and Deuteronomy 30:15-20

How do we live together? How do we live together as a community, a family, a church, a neighborhood, a nation, a culture? How do we live together? What values do we enlist? What principles do we activate? How do we persevere in the face of resistance, or disappointment, or rejection? How do we live together, particularly as people of faith, and how do the values of our faith make a difference? In our Year of Reconciliation, how do we reconcile those values in our broken and fearful world?

Several recent movies, based on actual events, as they say, have sought answers. Perhaps you saw “Hidden Figures.” If you haven’t, you should. “Hidden Figures” dramatizes the stories of three women, African-American women, gifted women, who overcame the double evils of sexism and racism to help propel an American into orbit. They were mathematicians and engineers who, because of their race and gender, were relegated to NASA’s basements, figurative and literal. They persevered, and persisted. That is the story. That they had to is also the story. How we do NOT live together is to divide, degrade, demean, destroy, based on any human or worldly condition. Note that two central characters, the mathematician Catherine Johnson and the astronaut John Glenn who she helped calculate into space, were both Presbyterians elders. Yay!

So we think now, some 50 years later or more, how we combat anything that divides, degrades, demeans, destroys, based on anything, anything. That’s how we live together.

Perhaps fewer of you saw “Loving.” If you haven’t and can, you should. While “Hidden Figures” is about free and equal access to things like work and education and restrooms – more public expressions of dignity, “Loving” tells a tale of more fundamental expressions of dignity – who you can love and where you can love. Richard and Mildred Loving were in love and expecting a baby. They planned to get married. Which is all good except in Virginia in the late 1950’s that was illegal

and immoral for the simple reason that Richard was white and Mildred was black. Miscegenation is the name, which puts almost a scientific gloss on a gruesome interpretation of who we are. She is jailed, cruelly. They are married in Washington, D.C., but when they return to Virginia they are told their marriage is not recognized, and if they persist in living together, they will be imprisoned and their children taken from them. To avoid jail, they agree to stay out of Virginia for 25 years – 25 years. But they are rural people and the Virginia pull is strong. So they return, in hiding, not to fight the unjust law but to live, privately, in peace. That cannot happen, and the ultimate result is a U.S. Supreme Court victory that every first year law student studies, so I am told.

How do we live together when we can't do the fundamental things we want to do – to love who we love and live where we want to live. And how do we combat those forces that persist, even now, sometimes subtly, sometimes not so much.

These are not new questions. The biblical story, from start to finish, is in many ways about this question – how will we live together. There are moments when things work well. We should pay attention to them. There are moments when things don't work so well. We should pay attention to them as well. Because human life is human life, sometimes both the great peaks and lowest valleys of human life are all tied together, intertwined.

We saw that last week as our youth shared the Joseph story. A group of brothers ready to kill their brother, then settling for simply selling him into slavery. That same brother willing to forgive and welcome.

How we live together can be messy, conflicted, loving, uplifting, demoralizing. And often we strive to live up to aspirations in our common life even as we fall short. And sometimes we fall short and are so blind to it that we codify it – sinfully, tragically. That's what "white only" and "colored only" restrooms and water fountains were all about, codifying how not to live together because of human fallenness, sin, fear. That's what glass ceilings were, and are, about, at many kinds of work places.

Our calling, I believe, as people of faith, is to identify when we've grotesquely mangled our understanding of common life, and fix it. Fix it on behalf of our commitment to simple human values like decency and civility and respect, liberty and justice for all. But at a deeper level fix it on behalf of our faith values, on our fundamental believe that we are all created in the image of God.

Not that we have it perfect, by any means. The church has, in its history, often been the best perpetrator of racism and sexism and other exclusionary practices. That's why this is even more urgent for us, to fix, to repair the breach, to reconcile, because when we listen to God and our better angels, we have a strong and clear sense of our calling.

These are not new questions. The bulk of the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to the first churches were written to address conflict. Church conflict, imagine that!

Not more than 20 or 30 years after Jesus and already there were quarrels and factions and infightings. "For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you," Paul writes to the Corinthian church, "you are not of God." There are factions in the church, following different leaders. Leaders are taking credit for growth, and followers are willing to give that credit. Hence the infighting. Hence the obscuring of the church's true mission. Paul reminds that whatever else happens, it is God who gives the growth. No one else.

This is a tremendous mission statement – "we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building." Remembering that we are God's servants puts us all at a place of equal footing, no place at the table more or less prominent than any others. And when the church, in whatever ways, suggests that any person's place is any less than any others, our task is clear and compelling. Make it right. We cannot be the field, or the building, we are called to be, unless all of us, all of us, are working together. Anything less is less than the gospel.

These are not new questions. The ancient Israelites, facing the imminent death of their leader Moses, are unsure of their future. Moses' leadership in so many ways, including his function as the conduit between God and the people, seemed critical to their future. How would they live together when their leader was gone?

They knew their capacity for faithfulness, but they also knew their capacity for pettiness, for infighting, for creating factions. Moses knew as well. He had experienced it firsthand. We've heard a portion of a kind of farewell address. Whether I am here or not, you will have choices, Moses says. They are not mine. They are God's. I am simply the mouthpiece. There will be other leaders. There is only one God, and this God has said that if you love me, walk in my ways, you will be blessed. If you don't, you won't.

There are always choices, the temptation to bow to other gods. The god of wealth or the god of fear or the god of no god. The choices will always be before you, and when you choose the God who has led you out of captivity, you will choose life, and you will be blessed. As will your people. As will your community.

Choose life. Is there any other barometer? For our own lives? For the lives of those we love? For the lives of those to whom we are connected in church, in community? Choose life. And when others can't, because they lack the capacity, or because the world has established conditions that prevent them from doing so, we choose life for them, and we work day by day to dismantle whatever realities get in the way.

Mildred and Richard Loving were not political activists by any means. They did not want to lead a cause. Just wanted to work on cars and tend their garden and play with their children. So, oddly, when they were invited to be present at the Supreme Court to hear their case, they declined, or, per the movie, Mr. Loving strongly declined and Mrs. Loving then followed suit.

What should I tell the justices, his lawyer asked him? "Tell them I love my wife." That's all. "Tell them I love my wife." Tell them I choose life, and am willing to go to jail to love the woman I love. Tell them I choose life, and am willing to undergo indignities to pursue the work I am called to do, to do very complicated mathematical computations that will launch someone into space.

Tell them I choose life, and I will recommit myself to work for, and increasingly with, those who can't, until all experience blessing, all have a place at the table, all are loved, fully and freely, all our days. Amen.