

See, I've set before you today life and goodness, death and perdition, says the LORD. Your future with me is contingent upon which way you decide to go. If you choose to obey my commandments, by loving me, walking in my ways, observing my commandments, you will live and become numerous, and you will be blessed in the land. But...if your heart turns away, and you are led astray to bow down to other gods, you will perish.

I've been wondering why God should present such basic options to us. On the face of it, doesn't it seem that the wise choice is a rather obvious one? "I HAVE SET BEFORE YOU LIFE AND DEATH." *Ah, yes, I believe I will choose...well, now let me think. Life or death? I'll need to sleep on this one.* "I HAVE SET BEFORE YOU BLESSINGS AND CURSES!" *Oh, well you put it that way, I...well, this is a toughy...I'll have to pray about this...* This is not Robert Frost's "Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood." There's clearly one road before us that appears to be less traveled for a reason. We're quite happy we could not travel both.

We can hear a hint of desperation in God's plea to Israel, not unlike a parent talking to a child about to set out on their own. "I have given you everything you need to flourish. But now you're free to go your own way. Because I love you, I cannot force you. But how I long to see you thrive and excel. (I beg of you) choose life!"

Maybe the choice God sets before us today is so stark and simple because God knows the decision will be difficult for us. Why? Because this is finally a decision of whether to love God, or not. "If you obey...*by loving* the LORD...then you shall live" (v. 16). Again, at the hinge of vv.19-20, God says, "Choose life so that you and your descendants may *live, loving* the LORD your God." The difficulty of the choice is rooted in the command to live-loving. To live-loving the LORD your God with all your heart, and all your mind, and all your soul.

The gravity of this moment is as if our church were standing at the marriage altar as the bride, hearing the marriage vows read to us. The bridegroom has already promised to love us, to have and hold us, to cherish us not only until death, but in death's defeat. Now the same question comes to us, "Will you love God, honor God, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, be faithful to God as long as you live?" Today this sermon is situated within the delicate space between the question, "Will you?" and the answer, "I will."

This choice to love is set before us today, but is made especially difficult in the quarrelsome atmosphere of our time, constituted as it is by unrelenting contests for our allegiance. Large, diverse congregations like ours are struggling to speak faithfully about the headlines of the day. I confess my own struggle has not been about the nature of whether I might offend some with my speech. Rather, I'm wrestling with how to address the things that weigh on our minds strictly from a gospel point of view. What, precisely, does the *gospel alone* permit me to say? Because I don't stand above this fray, but in it, alongside you, and I'm given to the same kinds of anxieties and fears you are. I wish I could say I had reached perfection in glory, but, wretched man that I am, I appeal to God daily for mercy. I could rewrite the words of G. K. Chesterton. When he was asked to compose an article answering the question, "What is wrong

with the world today?” he answered, “Me.” But on your behalf, I seek the gospel answer because this question about life or death isn’t mine. It is God’s question. I present it to you feebly, both as a herald, as well as one being addressed.

But none of us can leave the question unanswered. There can be no neutral position in this choice of life or death. To seek neutrality will be to choose idolatry and perdition. So it would be helpful to know the real content of this option to “be led astray” as the text says, “to bow down to other gods and serve them.” Though it leads to death, this option remains an enticing one, because other gods are visible, while the one true God is so hidden. Moses left the Israelites to climb Mt. Sinai, to be in the presence of a God who would not show his face, and in the Israelites’ anxiety of being left alone, they fashioned an idol they could see and touch. Is our own context so different? Are we not continuously tempted to place our trust in worldly rulers and authorities, and attach ourselves to their promises, and make their slogans our own? And has the temptation to do this not taken on a new urgency today? But Jesus warned his disciples, saying, “The rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and promise to be their benefactors. Not so with you.” But hasn’t it become so with us? We too often lend the rulers of the Gentiles our full attention, even though not one of them has ever offered us anything that improves in any way upon the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One of Asheville’s most endearing eccentricities is the vibrancy of its bumper sticker scene. You can’t drive a block without being accosted by some kind of deeply held opinion. I prefer the witty ones that say things like, “Bumper sticker,” and (my favorite) “Don’t move here.” But most of them have the effect of proclaiming some kind of allegiance to a cause or a candidate. I wonder if the earliest Christians were tempted to put stickers from Roman politicians on their donkeys. “I’m with Augustus! ‘16” ...or “Make Corinth Great Again!” I can see Roman citizens doing it. But Christians? Paul is so concerned about allegiances he tells the Corinthians in the first chapter, “I’ve heard there are quarrels among you...each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? (1 Cor. 1:11-13). Sometimes I think we treat political parties like we treat our favorite sports teams. We’re willing to forgive anything done by those wearing the same colors we do.

But the stakes are higher here. Divisions among us can make reading even the gentlest passages of Scripture sound politicized. I’ve begun wondering if I’m going to sound partisan simply by articulating the fruit of the Spirit. Do we place ourselves in one camp or another by seeking to live the Sermon on the Mount, with its extraordinary commands about peacemaking and enemy-love? Am I showing partiality in reading the very first Psalm, which throughout my entire ministry, during every Presidential administration, I have taken delight in declaring, “The rulers take counsel together against the Lord...He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision”? I hope that as we read the Scriptures together in our Sunday School classes, we will honor every voice. And when we find disagreement, work on it in a Christian way. Stay together. That is, do not agree to disagree. Agree to be patient with one another in working *through* disagreements.

The choice set before us today is not merely about whether we will choose life or death, but whether we will allow the strong ties that bind us here to be loosed by every skulk of foxes

that flitters around the halls of power. It is a choice between pursuing a path that leads to division, or a path that leads to oneness in Christ Jesus. The word for death in this passage also means “annihilation.” Which has to do with atomization and isolation. Will we be divided and conquered? Or will we make the love of God in Jesus Christ our one communal concern? One of these ways leads to annihilation, says the Lord. The other leads to the land of promise.

In the verses preceding today’s passage, the LORD tells us this commandment to love God with all our heart and soul is “not too hard for you, and not too far away...No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in our heart for you to observe.” That is, this choice between life and death is only as difficult as we make the decision to love, for God has already given us to the power to choose life.

So as your pastor, I remind you of the promise I made in the beginning, to seek the way of life by proclaiming the Word of the Lord, in season and out of season, the living Word who has creative power to give order to the chaos of this age. I will suffer to speak this Word to you with gentleness, and with a quiet confidence that God has already given us the capacity to utter the reconciling language entrusted to us, that we may continue *to be inventors of unassuming eternal things*.

And I want to remind you that I am not afraid. Because I do trust this church. I trust that we will discern our way forward as we always have, with or without the support of our elected officials. We will continue to love God and do the life-giving things we have already been doing for generations...

We will continue organizing our life together according to what seems right to us and the Holy Spirit, not because we are liberal or conservative or progressive but because it is biblical, and right.

We will minister to lost and hurting people, the homeless, the widow, the orphan, the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, those in prison, and every kind of outcast, even if it means becoming outcasts ourselves, because in meeting the least of these we come face to face with Jesus.

We will hope for new life, and teach our children with no other motive than to nurture and enjoy them as they grow in wisdom and in stature.

We will be the people Jesus calls blessed, and a refuge for those who want to join us, as our church leadership was already in the process of doing before the election. Last fall, our deacons considered how we might extend a welcome to Syrian refugees. So, we will continue to discern how to welcome strangers and aliens and refugees, not because we are trying to be political, or resisting some principality or power, but because that’s simply what was already seeming right to us and the Holy Spirit.

We will be a sacred space, a Cathedral in midst of the city, seeking its peace, not only because in the city’s welfare we will find our own welfare, but because as Christians we can’t imagine doing anything else.

We will “Keep on doing the things that [we] have learned and received and heard and seen in [the disciples who have gone before us], and the God of peace will be with us, strengthening our fellowship, and tightening the bonds by which Christ’s Spirit gather us.

And yet, if divisions do take hold in our fellowship, may I offer the example of the Christians of Friendship Park, a plaza atop a seaside bluff south of San Diego on the U. S. –

Mexican border. Before it was walled off by the authorities nearly a decade ago, these Christians would meet to take communion with their neighbors on the other side. They would slip the bits of bread and chalices through the openings in the chain-link fence. And they would pray for reunion, and long together for the day when the vulgar border between them would go the way of every wall in Scripture (there are no walls in Scripture that are left standing in the end).

If there would be any divisions in this fellowship, I pray they will be few. But if any divisions persist, let them be mere chain-link fences, through which we may share even the briefest prayers and smallest amounts of bread and wine.

And if any should come and sow discord, and attempt to build more permanent walls between us, may we frustrate them with our love.

And if they should succeed in their construction, may we, with a holy stamina, endeavor to scale the walls they build.

And if we cannot scale them, can we remember that the Risen Christ himself simply walks through them, to reveal himself to us, break bread with us, and show us the way to the good life?

Today, says the LORD, I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses...Can I be so bold as to say to you my new brothers and sisters, in my heart there is an overwhelming confidence, empowering me to say that I believe, with God's help...we will make the right choice.