

Choosing Life

Last week as nearly all of America worshipped at the altar of the Super Bowl....it was amazing to see that the TV commercials seemed to get as much attention as the game itself...

Which got me thinking about my personal favorite commercial of all time that ran just a few years ago.

It's the Direct TV commercial that starts off with some guy getting frustrated with his cable carrier, so he storms out on the street to cool off, only to be attacked and eaten by a grizzly bear that just escaped from the circus....the moral being, don't get eaten by a bear, get Direct TV.

I thought of that commercial as I read today's gospel lesson, because Jesus is making the same point, equating anger with murder, a leering glance with adultery and a curse with the fires of hell: it's just like getting mad at your cable company ends up with you getting eaten by a bear!

There's a slippery slope that both the commercial and Jesus take us up to, warning us all to: "watch out!"

If we translate today's gospel into a TV ad, maybe we'd get something like this:

"Don't get mad.

Getting mad lets someone wrap you around the axel of your emotions.

If you let someone wrap you around the axel of your emotions, you will start to fume.

If you start to fume, you will yell curses in your mind.

If you yell curses in your mind, you will say "to hell with that person."

If you say "to hell with that person," you might find yourself in hell, because hell is the place where everyone is mad and wrapped around the axel of their emotions.

Don't go to hell.

Go to Jesus.....and choose a new life!"

And yet, the kind of life that Jesus invites us into today seems for all the world to be an impossible one to actually live out.

Like the Pharisees, many will say "to make demands that cannot be obeyed makes no sense."
J. Cobb.

Never get angry?

Fat chance!

Never check out that beautiful woman walking down the street?

Sure!

No divorce under any circumstances?

What planet are you living on?!

So I can sympathize with the Pharisees who are convinced that Jesus is out of his mind, because, for them, and for many of us, following the rules, if not completely, than at least better than that slob over there, well, isn't that what makes us right with God?

If that's what you believe, don't feel bad, because for years, that's what the church has taught.

The only problem is, it's probably not what Jesus is teaching.

What Jesus seems to be saying is that obeying rules doesn't get us where we need to be, because we aren't capable of actually obeying in the first place.

Oh sure, maybe most of us can do the easier stuff, like not killing someone, at least today — or we can say no to taking a friend's spouse to bed — but what about killing the other fellow's reputation with gossip or cheating on my spouse, not with a neighbor, but with internet porn?

This morning, Jesus holds a mirror to our collective face so we can see our parade of foibles and failures, self-excused nastiness and ego gone wild.

So try as we might, if we can't **obey** ourselves into salvation, if our own willpower won't do the trick — what saves us?

Perhaps it is grace — not my efforts — but God's kindness.

And since every one of us is incapable, on our own, of living out the incredible demands of the law, especially as those demands are deepened and heightened and widened by Jesus, what we have to rely on is not **our ability to perform**, but **our willingness to surrender**.

Surrender to the love of the God who delights in making us whole, if only we will exhale long enough to make room for God working in us.

Surrender to the love of the God who delights in filling our hands with good things, if only we will lay down our guns and self-help books long enough to receive these good things.

Two weeks ago, we heard Jesus bless the very things we often despise or fear: the poor, the meek, the merciful, the mournful.

And in his blessings, he invites us to wonder why God blesses what we so often scorn.

Then last week, after his blessings, he calls us salt.

He calls us light.

He invites us to look at who we are from a different angle, from a new point of view.

That we, gathered around Jesus, might become, like Jesus, a sign to the world of a different way to live life, to become a people who "search for something deeper and better than our own comfort, to become a people who see that all of life is holy." B. Younger, paraphrased.

This different way begins in Genesis.

When God creates, the day of creation doesn't begin at dawn; no, the new day begins at night:

"It was evening, it was morning, the 1st day."

In other words, night, the symbol of death, is followed by light, the morning, the symbol of life.

In the Bible, and for Jesus, and now for us, life follows death just as day follows night.

Until Jesus comes along, until we sign on to his way of life, we had it completely backwards.

Our day begins in the morning.

First light, then night, meaning, first life, then death.

No wonder we worship the small gods of power and prestige and money.

If life is followed only by death, then who doesn't need a healthy bit of anger, a little bit of lust, being the big man on campus?

But if life begins not at birth but at death, a death that is defeated by the resurrection of Jesus; a death that no longer obliterates; but is the very entry way to new life, then, we might begin to reexamine where we have come from, and where we are going, and whether it is our own power, or the power of grace, that sees us through.

This death I am speaking of isn't only about when we close our eyes for the last time.

It's every death that comes when I surrender my will, my wants.

It's the death we endure when we hand perfectly justified anger over to God, and leave it there.

It is the death we endure when relationships are a mess and rather than running away, we work to heal them....

Seen this way, the impossible burden of today's gospel lesson isn't a burden at all.

It is a new vision of how we are called to live in the world, by surrendering to the healing grace of God, a grace strong enough to smooth out my sharp elbows, yet gentle enough to calm your fears.

Today, Jesus stands shoulder to shoulder with Moses:

"We set before you blessing or curse, life or death, choose life so that you may live!"

How do we make such a choice?

Perhaps by admitting that we choose death when we give ourselves "to that which doesn't matter; when we submit to the lack of purpose that pervades modern life; when we rush to meet insignificant deadlines or bow before demands that are unworthy.

These ways all embrace death.

How then shall we embrace life?

Perhaps by loving God with all of our heart, mind and soul.

Perhaps by giving to the poor and fighting for justice, by caring for the hurting, the weird.....so go ahead..... play with children!

Laugh out loud and often!

Cry when it's time to cry!

Be patient with your imperfections, and those of others....

Walk around the block...

Read a poem...

Quit doing what's not worth your time...

Apologize.

Forgive.

Live in the joy that holds all of life together.

Choose life... and live!" B. Younger, paraphrased.

+amen