



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 8, 2019

“The Choices of Life”

(Deut. 30:19ff)

Rev. David K. Groth

"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life" (Deut. 30:19ff).

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone,...sharing
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

Collect: O merciful Lord, You did not spare Your only Son but delivered Him up for us all. Grant us courage and strength to take up the cross and follow Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

The other day at morning devotions, I asked our faculty what sorts of things they heard parents say while dropping their kids off for the first day of school. Of course, there were the predictable bits of parting wisdom: “Listen carefully.” “Follow directions.” “Work hard!”

But there were also some surprises: “No biting this year.” “Don’t forget to tell your teacher if you have to use the potty.” “Don’t be a bully like your sister.” And my favorite, “Good luck!” . . . said to the teacher.

The stakes are higher when dropping your kids off at college. It’s one last opportunity to condense and deliver all that life-giving, life-preserving information. I told my kids things like, “Please find a church and attend it.” “Don’t skip classes or do shoddy work. We’re paying far too much for that to happen.” To my daughters, “Your first and most important line of defense is sobriety.” And to my son, “Treat the young women you meet with respect.”

Parting words. Something like that is happening in our Old Testament lesson. Moses and the Israelites are finally at the banks of the Jordan River. On the other side of the river is the land God promised they would inherit. For forty years they’ve been in the desert, anticipating this day. It’s an exciting time, but also ominous and frightening.

Moses knows he is not going with them into the land; he must stay behind. So, it’s time for one last speech, one last opportunity to condense and deliver all that life-giving, life-preserving information. He sums up a lot of things and lays it all out before them. At the very end he says, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and the length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers” (Deut. 30:19).

What Moses knows and wants desperately for them to remember is that this covenant of grace, and the Lord who made

the covenant with them, is their source of life. If they want, they can choose to opt out. If they want, they can allow themselves to be seduced by other gods. If they want, they can be thoroughly absorbed into the beliefs and values of the pervading culture. But all those decisions only to death. Instead, "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." That is, how all this turns out is, to a great extent, up to them. They can count on God to be with them, but they do have decisions to make and responsibilities to exercise. They have choices. "Now choose life."

Please understand, God had already chosen them to be his people. They did not choose him. He made a covenant with them. So, they are already God's people by way of grace. Moses is simply imploring them to make choices that are consistent with being God's people. Luther said these words of Moses are for believers. Similarly, following the commandments will not make *you* a child of God or make him love you. You already are a child of God by Holy Baptism, dearly loved by him. These words direct the people of God to *live* in their identity as God's people. There are decisions to be made, every single day, and it's in those decisions where our faith is lived out. No one can snatch us from the Father's hand, but we can hop off and walk away from him. Follow the ways and paths of the LORD, **OR** turn your back on him, wander off and get yourself lost.

After the Los Angeles riots in 1992, Steve Futterman of CBS interviewed one of the many looters. The man had been among a group who pillaged a record store. When asked what he had stolen, the man replied, "Gospel tapes! I love Jesus." Just remarkable! Why would someone who loves Jesus think it's ok to do something obviously against his will? Then again, we find ourselves doing the same thing! "I don't go to church very much, but I love Jesus." "I can never forgive her for what she did, but I love Jesus." "I cheat people out of their money all week long, but I love Jesus." "I fudge on my income taxes, but I love Jesus." "I don't want to get involved in the work of the church, but I love Jesus." Loving Jesus is supposed to happen in all those day to day decisions.

In John 14 Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Similarly, Moses sets the choices down in the clearest terms: "If you listen to the commandments, loving the

Lord your God, walking in his ways, then you shall live. If your heart turns aside and you do not listen and you start serving other gods, you shall certainly perish.”

He’s asking them to live as a people set aside to the Lord. So also in 2019, there’s nothing virtuous about blending into the crowd . . . when the crowd does not know the Lord or love him. There’s nothing commendable about assimilating and merging into the culture, when the culture has rejected the Lord. There’s nothing meritorious about being an anonymous Christian. And it may not be good news to have tons of followers on social media and tons of likes on Facebook, for to be embraced by the world may mean you’ve been seduced away from the Lord your God. In John 15 Jesus said, “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, for I have chosen you out of the world” (v. 19).

God has chosen you, not to be swallowed up by the darkness, but to be a light shining in the darkness. God did not mean for you to be pliable clay in the hands of the culture. He meant for you to be clay in his hands, the master potter. Your job as his child is not to harmonize your faith and life with the changing values of this world. Your job is to witness boldly to the unchangeable truth with your words and with your life. Not just in safe places at safe times, but out there, where it’s not expected, not welcomed, not safe.

The Essen Haus in Madison is well-known for its German beer and food, live polka bands, and dancing. It’s a loud, happy place. When I was a child, Pastor David Koch and his wife, Ruth, once joined our family for dinner there. The waitress brought over several large, heavy platters of brats and potato pancakes and red cabbage. “Let’s give thanks” Pastor said. My brothers and I glanced sheepishly at each other; we were accustomed to praying before meals, but at the Essen Haus . . . on a Friday night? I closed my eyes partly out of habit, but also because it was the easier alternative. The Polka Band was loud, so Pastor nearly had to shout the prayer. When he finally finished, I looked up and around, but no one was staring at us. No one was pointing at us, laughing at us. The band was still playing, the dancers still dancing, and the brats were still hot. No one even seemed to notice. I didn’t know it at

the time, but I realize now it's important not to compartmentalize the faith into a little weekend exercise. It's important to practice our faith in the world, to remember who we are at all times and to whom we belong wherever we might be. And this, not just for others, but for ourselves. It doesn't define us as children of God (for God already did that in Holy Baptism); rather it reminds us we are his children. So, in all those little day to day decisions, choose life!

And when you fail, remember this, parting words from Moses in verse 20: "Hold fast to the LORD your God . . . For the LORD is your life." The Lord is your life because the blood of the Lamb has been shed for you, for the forgiveness of your sins. The Lord is your life because the death of the Lamb of God was exchanged for your death. The Lord is your life because Jesus promised, "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved." Therefore, "Hold fast to the LORD your God, for he is your life."

Last week I saw Shirley Draeger in the hospital. It was a memorable visit, and I asked Shirley if it would be ok to tell you about it. In spite of her advanced years, she is a dynamo. Shirley has a great big heart, and a great big faith, and witnesses freely and winsomely. When she speaks of her faith, she usually closes her eyes, chooses her words carefully, and tells a little story. Once she gets that motor going, there's no stopping it.

She had fallen that morning and had broken her hip. She was in quite a bit of pain, and surgery couldn't be done until the following day. Meanwhile she was tethered to a machine that was monitoring her vitals. While I was there, she closed her eyes and gave thanks to the Lord for the care she was receiving there at the hospital. She spoke of her faith also to an orderly, and finally to the orthopedic surgeon. I noticed a pattern; whenever she spoke of her faith, alarms went off on the monitor. Numbers started blinking. I tried to quiet her by doing more of the talking, but all that did was fan the flame, and the alarms continued chiming. Finally, I said, "Shirley, you have surgery tomorrow, so let's celebrate the Lord's Supper today." As we went through the brief liturgy, one by one the alarms fell silent. And the room was completely silent by the time we got to, "The blood of Christ, shed for you, for the forgiveness of your sins." Shirley no longer

felt the need to give, the need to witness, the need to be a light; it was time just to receive. It was time just to be still and know that he is the Lord. It was time to hold fast to him. In spite of her broken hip and her discomfort, it was a moment of wellness and peace. In the Large Catechism, Luther called the Lord's Supper "a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine which aids and quickens us in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed, the body has benefited also" (FC, 454).

Things are not quite right with us much of the time. We hear the alarms chiming. There is pain and suffering in our lives. We need the Lord's forgiveness too, not because we're going through surgery tomorrow, not as a precaution against sudden death, but as a soothing medicine which quickens us, vivifies us, makes us alive in both soul and body, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

So, people of God, "Hold fast to the LORD, he is your life." At the beginning of the day, at the end of the day, hold fast to him. In the middle of the week, the middle of the night, hold fast to him. In the kitchen, the office, in the gym: hold fast to him. When the time of temptation comes, hold fast to him. In the wake of sin, hold fast to him. In the hour of fear, the hour of doubt, the time of grief, hold fast to him. Among the myriad changes of life: hold fast to him. And finally, when death draws near, hold fast to him; he is your life. Amen.

