

Thirteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Choose Life!"
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33
September 7-8, 2019
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Reading headlines and watching news stories about mass shootings, some sadly conclude, "Life is cheap." But we draw the opposite conclusion: "Life is precious." Unspeakably precious. Maybe you saw the sea of purple flags on the front lawn of Mary, Star of the Sea Chapel down at the beach here in Manasquan or in front of the Wall Municipal Complex. Each of the 1,387 flags at each location is inscribed with the name of someone whose life was lost to opioid overdose in New Jersey so far this year. Reflecting on this epidemic some conclude, "Life is cheap." We come to a different conclusion: "Life is precious." Unspeakably precious.

That was underscored last weekend in yet another way when a riptide sucked fifteen-year-old Josiah Jeremiah Robinson under the waves at Spring Lake Beach. His grandmother kept vigil there scanning the ocean past dark each day until his body was recovered. Sometimes it is untimely death that reminds us, "Life is precious." Unspeakably precious.

Who knows how long it will be till there is a reliable death toll from Dorian's devastating, island-hopping tour of the Bahamas? There was a front-page story about a blind man who carried his 24-year-old disabled son through chest-high water to safety, and of a dog who discovered a woman trapped under debris. Maybe it's when death looms large and hovers closest that we see most clearly: "Life is precious." Unspeakably precious.

In her poem "The Summer Day" Mary Oliver asks us:

"Tell me – what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

We find God's answer for us in the first lesson from Deuteronomy: "Choose life."

“Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; that means life to you and length of days....”
(Deuteronomy 30:19b-20b)

In this passage and so many others the Lord powerfully reminds us that **true life means stretching beyond love of self to love of God and love of neighbor.**

I read recently about “doomsday capitalists” who buy abandoned nuclear missile bunkers from the government and transform them into underground luxury condos for very wealthy people who want a place, a “pied a terre” to retreat to in case climate change or nuclear disaster renders the surface of the earth uninhabitable. In addition to necessities like food, water and oxygen, there are amenities: monitors that simulate windows looking out onto the natural world, wood-burning fireplaces, underground swimming pools, even dog parks. One developer insists, “I am saving lives.”¹ I just don’t think that’s what the Lord has in mind....

We save lives, we choose life, by **not just hearing** but **really listening** to the Lord’s words:

*Look at what I’ve done for you today: I’ve placed in front of you
Life and Good
Death and Evil.*

And I command you today: Love GOD your God. Walk in his ways. Keep his commandments, regulations, and rules so that you will live, really live, live exuberantly, blessed by God...

...Choose life so that you and your children will live. And love GOD, your God, listening obediently to him, firmly embracing him. Oh yes, he is life itself....
(Deuteronomy 20:16, 19b-20a)

There’s a story about a famous professor who was talking with someone about a fellow who was very proud and almost boastful about being one of that professor’s students. The prof recognized the name all right, but didn’t give such a glowing review: “He may have attended my lectures, but he was not one of my students.”²

In Sunday School, in Confirmation Connection, in adult study groups, in the Scripture read and the sermon preached, we want to listen, really listen; we want to learn lessons of love; we want to learn how to choose life. We want to be students of the Most High, not just bodies at lectures.

Pastor Joe is giving a workshop on “Raising Resilient Teens” at 1st Baptist (Sept. 23, 7:30 p.m.). He’ll speak about 10 qualities that help teens (and even younger youth) **choose life**, precious life, when faced with the many other choices the world offers. Among those life-saving assets are:

- Spirituality
- Community bonding

Our Sunday School, Confirmation Connection and youth ministry goals include not just **teaching about** our religion but **living out** faith-active-in-love, weaving the children and youth into the fabric of this faith family, and helping them develop their innate spirituality so they carry it throughout life. Psalm 1, included in our *Celebrate* this weekend, describes persons of faith:

*... like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;
everything they do shall prosper. (Psalm 1:3)*

For us Christians, thriving means making choices that are life-giving for **others** as well as ourselves, that allow **others** to prosper, as well as ourselves. As you heard today’s Scripture lessons you may have wondered about the apparent contrast between Deuteronomy’s message, “Choose life!” and Jesus’ message in the Gospel:

*“Whoever comes to me and does not **hate** father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and **even life itself**, cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26)*

How can we both choose life and hate life?? I think *The Message* paraphrase helps to clear that up:

“Simply put, if you’re not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it goodbye, you can’t be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26)

The Rule of St. Benedict puts it this way: *“Prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ.”* This is what we are taught in Scripture, in the Small Catechism. This is the life of faith we are called to live: loving God above all else and our neighbors as ourselves.

We choose life, precious life, unspeakably precious life, by the power of the Spirit and in the name of our Christ who suffered death and rose that we might live. We counter the world’s despair with resurrection hope. We enter into and address the world’s suffering, knowing that when we reach out in love to the least of these, who are members of His family, we do it to Him (Matthew 25:40), whether we’re collecting food at local supermarkets, hosting temporarily homeless families down the block, delivering furniture to disabled vets or the chronically ill and unemployed, sending money for Hurricane Dorian relief or advocating for the voiceless, powerless, hopeless by calling our legislators to enact laws that reflect Gospel compassion and kingdom justice.

“Tell me – what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

By God’s grace, may we always choose life! For ourselves, for our families, for all of God’s children and all of God’s creation. Amen

¹Julie Turkewitz, “For Sale: A Chance to Beat Doomsday, and It Has a Water Slide,” *NY Times* (August 14, 2019, pp. A1, A17), p. A17.

²William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (rev. ed.; Daily Study Bible Series, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 196.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham