

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 4, 2019 (Proper 18, Year C)
Deuteronomy 30:14-20
Luke 14:25-33

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.... Choose life" says Moses.

One of my favorite stories is about a man named Michael. Michael was the kind of guy you love to hate. He was ALWAYS in a good mood and always had something POSITIVE to say. (You know the type, they're SO ANNOYING.) When someone would ask him how he was doing, he would reply with something like "If I were any better, I'd be twins!" He was a natural motivator. If an employee was having a bad day, Michael was there telling the person how to look on the positive side of the situation.

One day, someone asked Michael, "I don't get it! You can't be positive ALL of the time. How do you do it?"

He replied, "Each morning I wake up and say to myself, you have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or ... you can choose to be in a bad mood. I choose to be in a good mood.

"Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or ... I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it.

"Every time someone comes to me complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or ... I can point out the positive side of life. I choose the positive side of life."

"Yeah, right, it's not that easy," the man protested.

"Yes, it is," Michael said. "Life is all about CHOICES. When you cut away all the junk, EVERY situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people affect your mood. You choose to be in a good mood or bad mood. The bottom line: It's YOUR choice how you live your life."

Several years later, Michael was involved in a serious accident, falling some 60 feet from a communications tower. After 18 hours of surgery and weeks of intensive care, Michael was released from the hospital with rods in his back.

About six months after the accident, the same person saw Michael again and asked him how he was. He replied. "If I were any better, I'd be twins. Wanna see my scars?" The man DECLINED to see his scars, but he DID ask what had gone through his MIND during the accident.

"The first thing that went through my mind was my soon to be born daughter," Michael replied. "Then, as I lay on the ground, I remembered that I had two choices: I could choose to live or ... I could choose to die. I chose to live."

"Weren't you scared?" the man asked.

Michael continued, "...the paramedics were great. They kept telling me I was going to be fine. But when they wheeled me into the ER and I saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses, I got really scared. In their eyes, I read 'he's a dead man.' I knew I needed to do something."

"What did you do?" The man asked.

"Well, there was a big, burly nurse shouting questions at me. She asked if I was allergic to anything. 'Well, yes,' I said. 'Gravity.' The doctors and nurses laughed and the tension in the room lifted a little and then I told them, "I am choosing to LIVE. Operate on me as if I am ALIVE, not dead."

Michael lived, thanks to the skill of his doctors, but also because of his amazing ATTITUDE. Every day we have the choice to not only LIVE, but live FULLY. Attitude is everything.

You have a choice. Life is MADE of choices. Every decision we MAKE is a CHOICE, every ACTION, big and small.

I've seen people, dying in the hospital, seem to WILL themselves to live a little longer, sometimes JUST long enough for someone special to GET there to say goodbye, sometimes just long enough to get to ONE LAST Christmas or Easter. Of course, it's not always possible, but I've seen it TOO many times for it to be only a coincidence. On the other hand, I've seen completely HEALTHY widowers DIE just WEEKS after their WIVES die. The body, the mind, and the spirit go together, and with their wives went their spirit. They lost their WILL to LIVE, their REASON to live. I'm sure they don't CONSCIOUSLY decide to die, but their healthy bodies fall apart for a reason. (It only seems to happen with the men, though. The women seem to do just FINE without their HUSBANDS. Curious.)

ANYWAY, most of our choices AREN'T life or death; they're small ones. We make COUNTLESS choices, every day, most without our even REALIZING it. Getting out of bed in the morning is a choice. They say there are two kinds of people: The ones who wake up in the morning and say, "Good morning, Lord!" and the ones who say, "Good Lord, it's morning!" That's a choice.

We can't CONTROL what happens to us in life, but we CAN control how we RESPOND to it. Are we going to let it DESTROY us, or are we going to LEARN from it? Are we going to get DISCOURAGED by something someone says, or are we going to keep on working? When somebody says something RUDE to us, are we going to say something rude BACK, get into an argument, get mad and hold a grudge for the rest of our lives; or are we going to respond with love? These are CHOICES.

The world calls this "the power of positive thinking," but, when the BIBLE talks about choices, it goes further. It means much MORE. In our reading from Deuteronomy, Moses calls it a choice between the way of LIFE and the way of DEATH.

There's this idea out there among religious people, people that I think are TRULY SEEKING, that IF you believe in God, if you just have ENOUGH faith, THEN God will bless you. We pastors DEROGATIVELY call it "the prosperity gospel." I actually once heard a "so-called" pastor say, "God wants to make you rich. You just need to remove the obstacles that KEEP God from making you rich." It's a POPULAR message. People flock by the THOUSANDS to hear messages like this, because it's exactly what they WANT to hear.

But it's a LIE. It's NOT true. Jesus even goes so far as to say that we must give UP everything in order to follow him.

The truth is that God HAS BLESSED us, ALREADY, in SO many ways. Our CHOICE is whether to SEE the blessing, and LIVE the blessing, or to see short-comings, scarcity, deficiency and wish for something ELSE.

Consider our friend Michael. He COULD have been MISERABLE, and who could BLAME him? His positive outlook didn't change his circumstances. It didn't take away his pain, and it CERTAINLY didn't remove those rods from his back. But he CHOSE to see the BLESSING of his life. He chose to be HAPPY.

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.... Choose LIFE." Michael did.

Consider WHEN Moses spoke those words. He was standing on the edge of the promised land, promised to Israel's ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God had heard their cries in Egypt, rescued them from Pharaoh's army, led them in the wilderness, provided for their needs, endured their endless whining and idolatry, and given them the covenant of the 10 Commandments. EVERYTHING about this moment was infused with a sense of blessing. And Moses says, "You have been blessed. You can either RECEIVE the blessing, and live like a BLESSED people, or you can turn away, and whine about the food, and be MISERABLE like a CURSED people. I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity. Choose life."

Jesus turns to the crowd following HIM and says, "If you want to live, you have got to GIVE UP this lie. You can't keep carrying all these BURDENS and still follow me. You can only carry ONE thing. Take up the cross."

Now, we don't need to LOOK for crosses to carry. We're already MARKED with one, the cross on our foreheads that we were given in baptism.

And the cross has a way of putting everything ELSE in its place. The CROSS comes FIRST. Everything ELSE comes SECOND. But when we look to the cross FIRST, did Jesus CARRY that cross and die for our sins...to give us a BURDEN? Like when we say, "It's just my cross to bear"? Is it MEANT to be a BURDEN? Or did Jesus give his LIFE for us...as a GIFT?

And if we START THERE, seeing the cross as a GIFT, and seeing our LIVES THROUGH that gift, in the LIGHT of the cross, it CHANGES EVERYTHING.

For example, many people treat MARRIAGE like a BURDEN, like it just means less time for THEMSELVES and their FREE time. A ball and chain. But was it always so? Isn't your marriage MEANT to be a GIFT of JOY? To SHARE your life with someone you can't imagine living without, isn't that a GIFT?

Many people treat having KIDS like a burden, like it means their life is over – the sacrifice of time, and SLEEP and money is just too much. But is that ALL our children are? Aren't our children a GIFT of JOY? To watch them grow and see the life you created blossom into beautiful reflections of yourself, and yet become unique and SURPRISING personalities, isn't that a GIFT?

Many people treat their WORK like a burden, like a waste of time, something to just SLOG through to pay the bills. But is that what you were CREATED for? Isn't our work meant to be a GIFT of JOY? To USE the gifts you've been given to glorify God, in WHATEVER you do, to serve God, and then to use the REWARDS you gain as RESOURCES for SERVICE, isn't that a GIFT?

And this is true for ALL aspects of life. Is it a burden? Or is it a gift? YOU decide.

God has BLESSED you, in SO many ways. It's YOUR CHOICE what you're going to DO with those blessings. "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.... CHOOSE LIFE."

Me, "if I were any happier, I'd be twins!" Amen.