

WHAT INSPIRES YOUR LIFE CHOICES?

Deuteronomy 30: 11-20; Mark 12: 28-31

We have just witnessed a baptism. Ayla has been welcomed into a family called church, a family that names Christ as inspiration and Lord. Christ is now the foundation for all the important life choices, choices that have to do with principles and values, choices that are grounded in love, choices that will lead to commitments to do the right thing even when it's inconvenient, risky or difficult... So how will such inspiration be inscribed into Ayla as she grows?

Well, it all begins with love – love from her parents, love from her family, love from the body of Christ – the church, love from teachers and mentors... Ayla needs to be taught through love to make good choices. And this will not always be easy. Many times Ayla will prefer not to listen. It will be a challenge to do what she's told, even when she knows it's the right thing, even when she trusts that those who are teaching her, love her... And sometimes, it will take some discipline and even some threat of consequences from her parents to get Ayla to do the right thing...

And this, in some ways, is very much the experience Moses has had with his people in our scripture reading. Even as they have come through so much together – from slavery to freedom, from challenge after challenge; and even though they have received the law of God as the basis of a relationship of love between God and them, Moses still has to use the threat of consequences to get them to make good choices going forward: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments... then you shall be blessed... But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray... I declare to you today that you shall perish... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him; for that means life to you...”

In theological language, we call this stage of moral development: heteronomy. *Hetero* means external to me or different than me, and *Nomos* means law. The law is external to me. I listen and learn it and I obey it because I trust that it is good for me. But I haven't yet internalized it. I haven't yet fully made it my own. Our hope and prayer for Ayla as she grows is that all she is taught from others will become internalized and that she will make it her own. This is also what Moses hopes and prays for his people: “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away... No, the

word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart to observe.” In other words, it must become internalized. You must make it your own. It can’t be about threats of bad consequences if you disobey or promises of reward if you do. It has to live in your heart.

And this is exactly what Jesus teaches must happen with the law of love. To claim we love anyone, from God to our neighbour, has to be something from our hearts to be authentic and real. If we’re just doing what we’re doing because we are told to do it or because we fear the consequences if we don’t, or because we think we might get some reward for doing it or please the right people... if this is our motivation, then we can’t call it love. Love has to live in our heart and be inspired and motivated from our hearts to be real love.

OK, but here’s the thing. To make the law of love our own as Christ teaches, is a two part process. As Ayla grows, and as she differentiates who she is from her parents and those who teach her, she will develop her own sense of self and her own choices. We call this: autonomy. From heteronomy, where she is being told what choices she must make, she moves into autonomy: making her own choices for herself. In our modern North American culture, autonomy is the final destination. You and you alone are the author and god over your own choices and your own life. You may listen to all kinds of other voices, but ultimately you and you alone decide what is right, good and true.

Now some of us here may be thinking: ‘Ok, preacher, so what’s wrong with that? Surely, being autonomous is so much better, so much more genuine and authentic than being heteronomous. Making our own choices because they’re ours is so much better than just being dictated choices we should make by someone else, even if they claim to be the voice of God.’ OK. yes, autonomy is a step toward moral maturity. But it’s a step, not the final destination. Too many of us in this society of ours, never get past heteronomy or autonomy. Either we’re doing things like children because we follow some higher authority in our minds or we resist any claim to higher authority than our own voice because it’s our authority and our voice that counts in the end.

But you know, neither heteronomy or autonomy will lead us to love. If the love of Christ must become the inspiration for our best life choices, neither choosing because we’re told what’s right and neither choosing because we alone determine what’s right will do. Something much greater is required. What is that? Let me tell a story.

On September 16, 2001, eight high school students in the U.S, part of a cross country team, were killed when another truck ploughed into their vehicle. It was the worst loss-of-life accident in the history of Wyoming. Now, if this wasn’t horrible enough, the driver of the truck that ploughed into the students’ vehicle was another fellow student who happened to be driving that evening. He survived. His name is Clint Haskins. Clint had drunk so much, he didn’t even remember what happened. He was charged, tried and sentenced to prison, for

20 years. But you know, many of the parents of the dead young people felt this sentence was too lenient. Clint would get out of prison one day and still have a life to live. Their children were dead. But then, there was one parent - Debbie McLeland, who felt quite differently than the other parents. Her son, Morgan, was also among the dead. Even though she was totally devastated and angry too, something else, something higher, worked its way in and through her heart. Here's how Debbie describes it: "On the day of Morgan's funeral I asked the bishop to be sure to make it a day of celebration – not a day to get even. I was already aware that I mustn't get stuck in revenge. I'm not saintly; I was mad and angry too like the other parents, but I never hated Clint. Hate is a large burden to carry in your heart. It crowds out other things."

After the sentencing, each family was invited to read out a victim impact statement, with Clint there to hear it. Each family told him how terrible it was what he did and how he had destroyed them. When it was Debbie's turn, she said something different. She asked Clint whether he would be willing to come with her to talk to young people about the dangers of drunk-driving. When he had a chance to respond, Clint said yes, he would like to do that. So Debbie began a process of working with the authorities to get Clint some leave to go and speak with her to various groups of high school students. When she first got to meet Clint up close and personal, it was highly emotional. They both cried. But after the crying, Debbie went over to Clint and hugged him. They then talked about what they would do together to help people make better choices about drinking and driving. Other families didn't like Debbie's choices. They were angry with her. They wanted to hold on to their anger at Clint. But Debbie was opening her heart to a higher law and a higher authority than her feelings of anger and loss and wanting to shut out anything else.

The law of love is not something I choose because someone tells me I have to. It has to live in my heart. But it's also not something I decide or determine myself either. It's bigger than me. The law of love as Christ reveals and embodies it, calls me from a higher place, calls me past all the negativity that can grab hold of me and live inside me. The law of love of God and neighbour calls me to choose from my own heart so that I discover who I am truly made to be and who I am truly in all my potential to become. We call this: Theonomy. *Nomos* is law, and *Theos* is God. The alternative to heteronomy or autonomy is Theonomy. It's not others who dictate my life choices, and it's not me who simply determines what they must be. It's a higher power who calls me to discover who I truly am past a distortion of my true self I can easily become when pain and hurt wrap themselves around me. God's law of love is my true heart's desire when I get past all the other emotions and feelings. Debbie chose the way of love in the face of terrible loss. But it wasn't just something she decided to do. Something higher called her to dig deep inside herself to discover her own higher self. That's Theonomy – God's law, the law of love.

Our job in this community of faith is to inspire that higher law of God's love as the ground, inspiration and motivation for all our life choices – for Ayla and for the rest of us. And like Debbie McLeland, sometimes that law of love has a hard job finding our hearts when we are possessed by anger, bitterness, fear or hate... We need to find our inspiration again and again as we mature and grow.

May we, each and every one of us here, open ourselves to listen for this higher voice of divine love, above us, inside us... and may we pray for the courage, the tenacity and the commitment to listen and follow...

Amen.