

A Sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT. September 7, 2025,
 13th Pentecost, Proper 18-C, by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton
 Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Psalm 1 Philemon 1-21. Luke 14: 25-33

Today's Scripture readings point out the tension that exists between the way God created and commanded people to live on this planet...and the values or priorities of most human societies. Moses and Jesus desire to help us live faithfully with this inevitable tension.

In today's reading from Deuteronomy, Moses is an old man addressing his last words to the people of Israel before his death. Moses said, for the last 40 years God has led us through the wilderness, protecting us, providing for our needs, and showing us the direction in which God wanted us to move. Now I am leaving you and God's presence will continue to be with you. As you enter this new land, you will face many temptations to stray from God's commandments. The societies surrounding you have different gods, different values and priorities which shape their lives.

So, I am warning you that you will have to make some difficult choices. You will often need to choose between living God's way that leads to life and prosperity, or the way that leads to 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 God's ways, and observing God's commandments," by centering your lives around loving God and all your neighbors and the earth and animals God has given to you, "...then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the **land** that you are entering to possess." (Notice God's blessing is connected to the land, to Creation which God provides to sustain people.). "But if your heart turns away and you... are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them", making their values and norms the priorities around which you center your lives, "I declare to you today that you shall certainly perish; you shall not live long in the **land** that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess."

Next Moses uses a profound image: "I call **heaven and earth** to witness against you today." In other words, Moses says, the earth, the sun, moon and stars, the rocks, trees, waters and animals are listening to what I am saying to you. They will know and witness to your Creator whether or not you will follow the path of life and blessings or the path of death and curses that I set before you. So, with his final loving words he urges them: "**Choose life** so that you and your descendants may live." **Choose Life** by "loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days... in the **land** that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors."

Just as Moses was speaking at a time of major transition for the emerging nation of Israel, so we are living in a time of major transition in our Nation, and in the ways all peoples and nations will live together on this planet. It is certainly a time of major transition and vulnerability for the earth, the animals, the plants and trees. At this time of transition God says to us through Moses: **Choose Life, not death**. Every day this coming week, I hope you will remind yourself often that God is saying to our nation and world, and to you, with each decision we make, each word we say, each thought we have: **Choose Life, not death**.

In today's Gospel, Jesus was also in a time of transition, on his way to Jerusalem where he knew he would be crucified. In this context, Jesus began to teach, not his committed disciples, but the large crowd that was traveling with him, something like the big crowds that come to listen to Taylor Swift or other famous musicians. These are groupies, wanting to be around popular figures. They prop up their egos by saying, I went to hear Jesus speak five times! I saw him heal so many people! You could feel the amazing energy! See, I'm important because I'm a Jesus groupie!

Anyone who was around Jesus very long heard him talk about God's desire that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love all neighbors as we love ourselves, including our enemies and God's creation. This was his theme song, rooted in his Jewish tradition. Jesus spoke about this in the Gospels more than any other topic.

So, imagine the shock the crowd must have felt when Jesus said, "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." When Jesus said these outrageous words, which he often did, frequently people walked away thinking, I can't follow anyone who makes such unrealistic demands! Even now, when people read these words, some people dismiss them as impossible. Others just ignore them as words Jesus said for his time, that have no relevance for us now.

If you read words of Jesus that shock you, I invite you, not to walk away or ignore them, but to go deeper and ask, what is Jesus really trying to say here that I don't yet understand?

In our English language, when we speak of hating a person, it can mean, I detest that person, I'm am furious with that person and don't want to have anything to do with them. By looking deeper, we discover that in the Semitic language Jesus spoke, the word hate meant, to be detached from, or turn away from someone or something **so that** one can focus on a greater priority. What Jesus was trying jolt people into realizing is that when anyone seeks to be his disciples, they will find that loyalty to Christ can and will create tensions within themselves and in relationships with their family and the society in which people live. Jesus wants us to **choose life** by being clear that our primary allegiance is to God. By choosing love for God as our highest priority, God will show us how best to love our families and to keep the other priorities in our lives in proper perspective. If we make any other person or task or possession our highest priority, then God becomes a lesser priority and, whether we recognize it or not, we are actually worshiping and serving whatever is our greatest, most consuming priority.

This past week, at the wake for our beloved former priest, Darryl Burke, a person told a story about having Mr. Burke as her English teacher in her freshman year at Weaver High School. It seemed like every paper she wrote for him came back with the comment, you can do better. She said she hated him for this. And she felt that he hated her. So, with anger, she worked even harder to write better.

Fast forward, when she went to college, she found that, as a person growing up in the North End of Hartford, she was able to write as well or better than some of her classmates who grew up in wealthy families with many more advantages than she had growing up in the North End. It was then that she was able to thank Mr. Burke for caring enough for her to push her to do better.

Perhaps Jesus was trying to jolt the crowd into the awareness that they were only superficial followers of him. They could be and do much better if they chose loving God as their highest priority, above everything and everyone else. I wonder if that is the same message Jesus wants us to hear this morning?

Jesus ends his teaching with another radical statement: "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." Ouch! What do you mean, Jesus? This is far from the only time Jesus makes this kind of statement. In Matthew 6:24 Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters, for a servant will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

Preachers often avoid talking about what Jesus says about material possessions, because it makes all of us feel uncomfortable. Yet the second most common topic Jesus talked about in the Gospels was

money and material possessions. Why? Perhaps because he knew that the greatest temptations we human beings face involve making money, possessions, work, control over our lives our highest practical priorities. When that happens, our relationship with God slips much further down the list of priorities that shape our thoughts, words, and actions each day.

How are we to keep a proper relationship with both God and our material possessions? Each of us need to talk and wrestle with Jesus about how he wants us to live with this tension. I've wrestled with this question all my life, including this week. It often helps to talk and pray about this with friends who also recognize this tension and genuinely want God to help them discern what God is calling them to be and do. Down through history, many people, like Francis of Assisi have heard this Gospel read in church and felt a deep sense that God was literally calling them to give away everything they had to the poor and invest their lives in following Jesus through the practice of poverty.

Francis came to love poverty because it freed him from being a slave of the competitive social climbing and destructive arrogance and greed of his society. The joy and fulfillment he discovered through his poverty was a total, intimate dependence on God for his daily bread, and that total dependence opened him up to experience a richer relationship of love with God and a deeper love and solidarity with the poor who lived around him and with the beauty of God's creation and friendship with all God's creatures.

But Francis did not insist that every Christian had to literally give away all their possessions and embrace poverty in the way he felt God had called him. When some married couples came to Francis and said, we really want to follow Jesus with the same radical commitment that you have, but we have to care for our families. How can we follow the Jesus way of poverty and also carry out our responsibilities to our families? Francis wrote a Rule of Life for them which called for simplicity, instead of poverty. They needed to live on less, simplify their lives, so they could be more dependent on God and more generous in their care for the poor around them, as well as caring for their families.

Down through the centuries there are countless examples of both individuals and groups who have chosen to live more simply so they could give more of their resources away to help their neighbors in need. I know that some in this parish are quietly making this choice. As the levels of poverty, hunger, homelessness, and sickness keep increasing significantly in Connecticut, in our nation and in every nation around the world, God may be calling more of us to live more simply so we can be more generous in caring for the needs of our neighbors and of our suffering planet.

It is important that we not leave this morning thinking that Jesus is wagging a critical finger at us and telling us we are bad and he is out to punish us. Instead, let's imagine Jesus loving and caring for us, like Mr. Burke cared for his student, and saying to us, you are on the right track, and you can do better. We grow deeper in our relationship of love with God and our neighbors and money when we begin, not with guilt or ought or should, but when, out of love, we admit that we can't change our ways or increase our love for God and neighbor unless God helps us. So we keep asking the Holy Spirit to teach us, in practical ways, how we can grow in love for God and our neighbors. We can't by will power alone, but God can, as we rely on God to help us grow in love.

In today's Scriptures, Moses and Jesus remind us of the tensions and temptations we all face between living as God's faithful people, and simply conforming to the dominant values and priorities of our society. They beg us to choose life, not death. So let's close our eyes for a moment, and in the stillness ask God to help us respond to today's Scripture.

First, let's thank God for loving us all and for God's eagerness to help us be the best selves God created us to become at this time in our lives...

Now let's ask Jesus to help us see how we might have become lax in our commitment to making loving God the highest priority in our daily life... How might Jesus be inviting us to increase our Love for God this week?

In what areas may you and I have allowed our societies' values and expectations to shape our relationships and financial attitudes and actions, more than the love God calls us to practice for neighbors and creation?... What little change might Jesus be inviting us to make in our relationships with people and creation and financial choices this week?

O good and loving God, since without your help, we cannot choose life and live the way your created us to live, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and guide our relationships and priorities this week, so that we grow in our capacity to choose your life giving way of love, through the power of Jesus Christ at work within us, AMEN