

There is an old story about a millionaire - it would probably need to be a BILLIONAIRE today - who died, and whose will instructed that he be buried sitting in his gold-plated Mercedes (with the air conditioning running), with an expensive cigar in his mouth and a Scotch and soda in his hand. This somewhat bizarre wish was carried out. As the funeral party left the graveside, one of the gravediggers looked down and said, "Man, that's really living!" (A. Philip Parham, *Letting God*)

Sometimes we seem to get ourselves all turned around when it comes to what is really living! Several young people were asked, "What do you want to accomplish in your life?" ... The very young ones said things like: "I want to be a scientist, I want to be an astronaut, I want to be a movie star..." Older ones gave a variety: "I just want to move out of my parents' home. I want to stop pollution. I hope to find a cure for all diseases." Recent college graduates were then asked what THEY hoped to accomplish in life. The answers became more self-centered: "I want to make \$100,000 a year. I want to run a company. I want to be able to have a Porsche and a mansion. I want to make it big in the entertainment field. I want to get rich as a lawyer."

Way back in the book of Deuteronomy, God spoke to God's people through Moses and put before them a choice: Life or Death. Life was not defined economically, but in terms of the people's response to GOD. It is no different today.

We make choices every day. The choice we make may be whether or not to throw trash from a car window; or withdraw a relative's life-support. It may be something like a decision to accept a position with more prestige and better pay in spite of possible detrimental effects on one's health or relationships. It may be deciding whether or not to have one more drink. It may be choosing a piece of clothing, choosing a spouse, or choosing between what is moral and what is expedient. Should I eat what is healthy, or what I want? Should I take time out of my already-overburdened schedule to try to be a friend to someone I can sense is lonely, or should I go on as though I have not noticed that person's pain? We make choices.

Each day, we make a bottom-line choice, a choice which actually determines every other choice we make. This choice is whether or not we believe that God is really God, and whether or not we believe that God really wants us to BE God's people. If God doesn't, then we might as well go home and not come back to church, for it is all play-acting or wishful thinking. If God isn't interested in us, we would be well-advised to simply live each day for what we can wrestle out of it and forget trying to care for others. If God isn't part of our story, then we might as well grab what we can out of life because there won't be anything more than whatever we can experience and whatever memories other folks have of us later on.... We will create our own legacies, and then we will die.

These teachings hit us right at our living-line. They ask us to get underneath our actions, to the deepest places of our hearts - our angers, our passions, - and turn THEM over to God.

A sermon on choices is difficult enough even without today's Gospel lesson. Jesus' teachings are really quite hard, TOO challenging. Preacher/professor/retired Bishop William Willimon wrote an insightful comment about it: "We are accustomed to coming to church and, if we should stumble over a difficult passage like this one, it usually takes no more than twenty minutes for a skillful preacher, using the skills of historical criticism and pop psychology, to explain it away, reassuring you that a nice person like Jesus would have never said something tough like this. The problem is, I know of no way to do that with this text. In fact, it's as though Jesus is saying: 'You think I've come to help you weasel out of the law? Forget it. I've come to intensify, exceed, deepen the frontal assault of the law.' And all our sweet Jesus sentimentality and gushy grace just crumble before these searing commands." (*Pulpit Resource*, vol 24, no. 1, p. 25)

Choose life. Are we even ABLE to choose life? "You know you are forbidden to kill your brother. I forbid you even to be angry with your brother. Call him a fool, and you will go to hell!" There is no one here who has completely escaped the indictment of this statement.

These sayings of Jesus make us realize, perhaps more than any others, that there is NO WAY we can be acceptable to God. Even if we might be able to feel satisfied with ourselves when considering the Ten Commandments, it hits hard when Jesus' statements about keeping the Law are heard. No way.

Today's scriptures, with Moses challenging all who hear to CHOOSE life and with Jesus defining those choices in what seem to many as "unlivable" terms, convict us all.

Some fifteen chapters later in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 19:16-22), we are given the story of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler. The man approaches Jesus with a question, "Good teacher, what must I do to get eternal life?"

Willimon offers an interesting approach to this: "The successful yuppie has been so successful at getting everything he wanted in life, he now wants to get what Jesus is selling... Jesus tells him, 'You know what the Good Book says. Obey the commands of God, all of them, and you will have eternal life.'

"Now, in telling the young man this, Jesus may have hoped that the smart young man would say something like, 'Gosh, Jesus! I guess I haven't been such a success after all, when you put it like that. Why should I be going around looking for even more rules to break when I haven't kept the rules that God has given already!' But this young man was a hard-core success. So he told Jesus, 'No problem! I've kept all those commands since I was a kid. Never have I cursed, stolen, fornicated, coveted, blasphemed, lied, killed, talked back to Mom. How 'bout giving me some REAL commands, something a morally successful person like me can really sink his teeth into.'

"So Jesus, in one of the greatest understatements in all of the gospel, said, 'OK. You want to

be good? All you must do is one.. little thing. Go. Sell all that you have and give it to the poor.' Matthew tells us that the young man slumped away, unable to do what Jesus had asked." (from William Willimon's sermon)

The disciples were disturbed, and asked Jesus the question today's lesson would have US ask him: "Lord, who CAN be saved?" Jesus' answer is Good News for us: 'With you, it is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.'

The way of following Jesus Christ is a difficult one. The rules are tough, demanding, challenging, even impossible as we struggle with the various situations and decisions of our lives. But we must not turn our backs on these rules. We must let them be our standards. We must strive to be faithful to them, and we must remember that, since we cannot always be "successful" in being faithful, we absolutely need the strength and mercy of God. The Gospel of Matthew would make sure that we realize that Jesus' very love for us is also an indictment of us. If we try to live outside of God's grace, we will choose death.

Every day, we have a choice: follow Jesus and take his teachings seriously, or not. Each morning when we awaken, we have a choice: "O God, it's morning!" or "Dear God, thank you for another day!" With each encounter, we have a choice: Love God and the other person, or not. Every minute, we have a choice, especially when it seems impossible to find love within ourselves, and that choice is to ask God for help: "Help me, God, I am not doing such a good job of living." God who is with us always - in life and in death - *will* help us. With God, nothing is impossible.

Years ago there was a revival. A seminary student attended, because she was doing a report on religious experiences in America. The speaker was loud and articulate, and the people seemed quite responsive, shouting "Amen" and "Yes, Lord," and "Halleluia!" all through the evening. The young woman felt herself stirred inside, but found that her cynicism was also stirred up. She walked out with the crowd afterwards, and was not surprised to see folks light up their cigarettes in the parking lot. In fact, she noticed that they very quickly seemed to drop their religious attitudes. She heard arguments starting and all sorts of words issuing forth from previously "holy" mouths. She started planning her report about the evening, how it seemed to have been totally superficial, how nobody seemed to take the challenging message they had heard that evening seriously. She got into her car and was about to start it when she heard a new sound, the sound of someone crying. Turning toward the sound, she saw a man kneeling in the grass of the church playground, crying, "Lord, I am a sinner. Help me, Lord, to LIVE. Please show me how to turn my life around." The young woman stayed in the car, but when she left, she left believing that SOMEBODY had been changed, somebody had made a choice that night which would last longer than the evening. Perhaps the man who was crying, but certainly the young woman who had witnessed his tears and discovered her OWN cry in his. HER life, her choices, her needs, were important to God.

Right now, we have a choice: life and death, blessing and curse. "Choose life," which means, "love the Lord your God, obey him, and hold fast to him..." Nothing else is really living. Amen.

Let us pray:

O God, we know so little about life that our questions and struggles must seem ridiculous. Save us, we pray, from thinking that we don't need you. Turn us from a religion which makes us think that we have it made. Lift our eyes beyond the limits of this life, and help us to see YOUR horizon, your commands, your will. When we are bogged down in the circumstances of our lives, Lord, help us to trust you, and to remember Jesus' promise to be with us always, even to the end. By your grace, may we trust you and serve you; may we choose Life. Amen.