

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
All Saints' Church

February 12, 2017
Year A

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 119:1-8

I Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

About 12 years ago, one of my students, while I was teaching at Exeter, had an amazing summer. When he was travelling in Peru with a backpack and a map and his two feet, he wandered into a village and was adopted by Edwin Sulca the village weaver and his family. He lived with them for almost three months and when he returned to school in the fall, he went about galvanizing our community to invite this artist to come to Exeter and show his weavings in our art gallery.

Edwin Sulca had never left his home in the Andean highlands of southern Peru; and these were the days before easy cell phone access, but this student was motivated and before I knew it shipments of 4'x 5' tapestries were arriving, and I was driving to Logan with my student to pick up Edwin.

We arrived on campus, and as we walked into one of the dining halls on campus, Edwin, within a few minutes, started spinning, swooning, collapsing into a chair. We rushed to get him water, assuming he was dehydrated from the long trip. But actually, he was sick to his stomach. He began gesturing and talking really fast. He had never seen so much food before, so many choices, so many different smells, so much waste, so many options. He told my student that it was "obsceno"..... obscene. He had turned white, was shaking, sweating, and was afraid. It was just too much. In that moment, I became aware of the wide gulf of our life experiences.... Something I took for granted as a gift- as a way to provide so many choices to our students was seen by this man as oppressive and threatening.

Edwin wanted to go home. Right then and there. I learned later it was because he had fought most of his life to protect his village from corrupt politicians and warlords, and he had found security and hope in *not having too many choices*. The luxury of too many choices invited chaos and bedlam and the possibilities of evil principalities and powers taking over. When we think of choices, we think of the freedom to choose. When Edwin saw the numerous amount of choices, he saw idolatry, greed, chaos..... and death.

He had made one choice.... in following a calling, a commitment, a life or death decision, he became a part of the Ayacucho Weavers' fight against the political forces that wanted to submit farmers and artists and families to lives of indentured servitude. Here was a man of the Revolution of his country. We had no idea. (though I think my student knew!)

We got him out of the dining hall and listened to his fear and his passion as we walked over to the art gallery where all his beautiful weavings were hung (they all sold on opening night- I have two hanging in the rectory).

A relationship was struck that extended over many years, especially by helping Edwin to form a non-profit organization so that the proceeds of the sales of the weavings would support the villages of his region. So many lives were changed by this one bond between artist and student.

I evoke this memory of Edwin because he is like a Moses character for me.

The Book of Deuteronomy is basically Moses' farewell speech.... a sermon of sorts that lasts for almost 30 chapters, hours upon hours. At this point in the sermon, (near the end) Moses' people are in Moab in the Jordan valley, south of the Dead Sea, at the crossing waters of the Jordan River. They have left Egypt, wandered in the desert for 40 years and now, as Moses is preparing for his own death, he is also preparing his people to enter into the Promised Land.

And he gives them one choice, not even a choice, which reads like a requirement, as it is written in the imperative. And this man, who is about to die, says:

Choose Life.

Life is centered on one thing- right relationship with God, right relationship with one another and right relationship with the stranger, the sojourner, because you, too, were sojourners. Remember, Moses has been preaching up a storm in Deuteronomy: cancel the debts of the poor; challenge governments to guard against excessive wealth; limit punishment to protect human dignity; restrict those who can be drafted to war; offer hospitality to runaways and sojourners; pay employees fairly; leave part of the harvest for those who need it.¹ How can anyone think that the Bible isn't relevant?

And Moses ends the sermon of his life by saying, in all ways, please God- love God with your heart, your mind and your soul. And this is where you will find life, life abundant.

Edwin reiterated this sentiment: To love God with your heart and mind and soul means to fight for justice, to give to the poor, to care for the hurting, to treat each other fairly, and to share food with the hungry. It's this simple. Everything else is just commentary. Too many choices draw you away from what matters. He told me once to think of restrictions as freedom... like a nozzle on the hose... without it, you can't drink from the Living Waters.

¹ David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, *Feasting on the Word* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 341.

Edwin is like a Jesus figure as well. Laws and commandments are the backdrop, no doubt, of course, yet there are plenty of cruel dictators that follow the law. Amidst all the contentious issues of Jesus' day- anger, adultery, divorce, murder, the taking of oaths, what mattered? The intentions of your heart. Jesus is teaching us to live Torah in a fuller way, not as a law that protects against the danger of sin, but rather as a way of living that expresses the abundance of God's kingdom. God is doing a new thing in your heart right now. And it starts with being honest about your intentions. Be an open book.

I think this is what Jesus means when he says that to follow him is to walk through the narrow gate. Jesus is not talking about excluding anyone...he's not saying that there's the "saved" and the "unsaved." No. That's avoiding the real topic, using religion as a way to deny love. Jesus is saying that to choose for Life is not easy... it's to walk the way of God's grace:

And to do that you have to accept restrictions. You narrow life down to a few intentions:

You have to lose your life to gain it, trust that the least is the greatest, the blessed are those who mourn, and that to surrender is to win. You have to give up the delusion and the burden that you possess your life. You don't. Rather you channel God's grace; you have died with Christ and you are raised with him. You are like the nozzle on the hose, letting living waters flow through you. This is living.

As Paul says we are not the author, nor the finisher of life. We are a steward, a player, a participant, an ambassador, a traveler, a child, a king, a poet, a servant, an artist, on loan all of us, maybe short term, maybe long, who knows. The only thing that matters is to give it your all, and you will be given all you need.²

What an amazing time to be in the Church. What an amazing time to be Christians in this way. I've had people ask me- "Why are you in the Church; it's dying?" Maybe, maybe not. If it is dying, we believe in the Resurrection- the church is being raised up anew. I am so excited to be with you in this time, in this place, with this blessed opportunity to discern together how we as All Saints are choosing Life, choosing the Kingdom of God, in the here and now. It all matters, more than ever.

AMEN.

² Insight from sermon, preached by Curtis Almquist, SSJE